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Fireworks light up sky on New Year's Eve

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

People from across the mountains and beyond celebrated the arrival of the New Year at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, with free music and beautiful fireworks helping hundreds of families to ring in 2025 with the best view around the night of Dec. 31.

"We've got more people than I thought we were going to have," Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason said early in the evening. "A lot of places canceled the celebrations they were going to have due to the high winds, so we've got a huge crowd, and they're still coming in."

"We'll be shooting fireworks off down at the ballfield. We have several sponsors who help, and we're asking for donations to help offset the cost of the fireworks, but we're holding our celebration as planned."

"We're looking for a great 2025! We've got a lot of shows already booked and a lot of special events planned. We plan to entertain even bigger (in the New Year). We've added some new events."

"We've got the Scottish Festival that's been in Blairsville for the last 20 years coming to Hiawassee this year. We're starting a new event called the Mimosa Festival that will be here Labor Day

Weekend.

"We'll be doing the Acoustic Sunsets again, and of course, the Rhododendron Festival. We just keep adding things all the time."

Of the many people in attendance, Kirsten Teems and her family drove over from Blue Ridge to enjoy the fireworks display.

"Our friends invited us out and we decided to join them and do something different," Teems said. "Usually, we just stay in the house. This is really nice. We've really enjoyed it. Our hope for the new year is that everyone be happy and healthy."

As far as resolutions, attendee Jorge Gomez said he

will be aiming for more "vacation time" in 2025: "Going places and seeing things like this. This is beautiful. It's our first time. We're from West Palm Beach."

Others shared similar sentiments, like guest Leo Gonzalez, who wants "great health and more family time" this year.

Likewise, Lisa Phillips hopes for a healthy grandbaby, and her husband Brian is looking for more time off as well. And donuts. The donuts on offer during the fairgrounds' festivities smelled delicious and were a big hit.

Steven Newell from Jupiter, Florida, said he hoped to
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The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds welcomed New Year's revelers for free fireworks on Dec. 31. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

County elected officials ready for '25 and beyond



Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, Superior Court Clerk Eric Barrett and Probate Judge David Rogers on Dec. 19. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Towns County elected officials swore into new year terms of office throughout the month of December, effective Jan. 1, 2025.

Swearing in were incumbents Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, Sheriff Ken Henderson, Probate-Magistrate Judge David Rogers, Coroner Tamela Cooper, Tax Commissioner Michael Anderson, School Board Member Brandon Grimsley, School Board Member Caroleen Woods and public office newcomers Superior Court Clerk Eric Barrett and School Board Member Roy Perren.

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Towns County Fire saves condos in fireplace blaze

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Hawks Harbor Condos on US 76 was the site of the county's first structure fire of 2025, and Towns County Fire & Rescue responded quickly to knock down the flames.

Fortunately, no one was injured in the fire.

E-911 Dispatch toned

the emergency out at 9:52 a.m. on Friday, Jan. 3, and multiple career and volunteer firefighters arrived shortly thereafter. They evacuated the building and had the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC cut the power to the smoking building as they worked to address the fire.

The condo buildings are three stories tall, including basement garages and separate

living quarters on the second and third floors. The fire broke out in the gas-log fireplace of a second-floor condo, moving into the walls of the building to impact the condo above it.

Firefighters tore out the wall around the ignition source rock fireplace to apply water to the fire. Fire Chief Harold Copeland went to the condo
See *Hawks Harbor Fire*, Page 7



Towns County Ladder Truck 6 proved instrumental in making sure fire had not spread to the attic of this condo building inside Hawks Harbor on Jan. 3. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

GA 515 traffic pattern change coming this week



The Vertical Earth construction company is aiming to keep commuters happy as crews work to finish Phase II of GA 515 reconstruction as quickly as possible. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Heads up, cross-county commuters – on Thursday, Jan. 9, the traffic pattern on Georgia 515 will be changing between Trackrock Gap Road in Union County and Old Union Church Road in Towns County to accommodate ongoing reconstruction of the highway.

That 1.3-mile stretch near the county line is currently three lanes: two lanes of travel

and a center turn lane. By the end of the project, that area will be expanded to four travel lanes, but starting this week, one of the three lanes will be closed to make it a strictly two-lane section of road.

Additionally, the speed limit there will likely be dropping from 55 mph to 45 mph. These changes will impact driving times, but hopefully not by much since the affected area is a relatively short distance of the highway.

Two of the three phases

for the Georgia 515/US 76 widening and relocation project in Union and Towns counties are well underway, with a total project completion estimate of 2028, according to the Georgia Department of Transportation.

The project has been on the books since 1999, initially consisting of a single construction phase to straighten and widen to four lanes roughly 8.5 miles of the highway between Blairsville and Young
See *Traffic Pattern Change*, Page 6

Hiawassee honors Chanukah with annual Menorah Lighting

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

On Dec. 30, Chabad of Rural Georgia hosted the third annual Public Menorah Lighting on the Hiawassee Town Square. Traditional Jewish music accompanied the event as celebrants feasted on latkes and donuts and generally enjoyed a beautiful evening of camaraderie.

Rabbi Chaim Markovits, co-founder and director of Chabad of Rural Georgia, explained the meaning behind the festivity, which was attended by residents of various faiths as well as local officials like Acting Mayor Jay Chastain Jr.

"Tonight, we're celebrating the sixth night of Chanukah, and it's a community event that everyone is welcome to come and enjoy," Rabbi Markovits said. "The message of Chanukah is to add in goodness, add in light. Every day we add another candle."

"When it is so dark outside, with anything that might be happening in a person's world or in the global world, a person's mission is to be a light. Light my own space and light up everyone else's space."

Included in the festivities was a giant dreidel, where



Local volunteers lighting the giant Menorah on the Hiawassee Town Square Dec. 30. Photo by Shelly Knight

contestants were asked to guess the correct number of tiny dreidels inside to win a prize. And then there were the delicious fried latkes and donuts, symbolizing the importance of oil to the occasion.

"The holiday is about oil," Markovits said. "We are celebrating G-d's miracle in the Temple. When enemies tried to ruin the holiday by defiling the supply of holy oil, G-d made the one vial of holy oil last for eight days. When we can't work it out ourselves, G-d supplies."

For her part, community

member Rev. Blythe Ethridge was glad to see the celebration in full swing for another year running.

"It's important for us to celebrate this holiday publicly," Ethridge said. "When you light the Menorah, you want the whole world to see it, because it's showing the light of God. It is a remembrance of the amazing miracle."

"Over 2,000 years ago there was a war, and 6,000 Jewish soldiers held off 120,000 Greeks. Then, with only one vial of oil they rebuilt
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Elected Officials...from Page 1

Judge Rogers was sworn in first by an Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court Judge. In turn, Rogers administered the oaths of office to the remaining county officials inside the Towns County Courthouse last month, wrapping up with Sheriff Henderson on New Year's Eve.

Each of the above officials ran unopposed in the Nov. 5 General Election, apart from the School Board members, who ran unopposed in the May 21 Nonpartisan General Election.

Outgoing Superior Court Clerk Cecil Dye – in office for 10 consecutive terms – and his retiring office staff Janie Walls and Jo Davis joined Barrett's family and friends for the new clerk's swearing in on Dec. 19.



Sheriff Ken Henderson being sworn in by Probate Judge David Rogers on Dec. 31. Photo/Facebook

Menorah Lighting...from Page 1

their Menorah and eventually the Temple. If the Greeks had won, there wouldn't be any Jewish people today.

"Any rabbi will tell you all Jewish holidays have the same theme. They were many, we were few. They were strong, we were weak. They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat!"

Chabad of Rural Georgia Co-Founder Chayala Markovits told the audience that she and her husband travel all over the state to visit Jewish people in their "mitsvah mobile."

"We visit little villages and towns where there are

Jewish people who don't have any Jewish infrastructure in their area," she said. "Our goal is to bring the light, joy and warmth and soul of Judaism to those areas."

"We offer home visits, Torah classes, recipes. If you are looking for a way to connect to your soul, we would like to help any way we can."

Adding to the significance of the event, area-based Rabbi Yonatan Hambourger of Chabad of Rural Georgia told the story of an iconic photograph taken during Chanukah 1931.

"In the small town of Kiel, Germany, Rachel Posner



Rabbi Yonatan Hambourger delivered a special Chanukah message to guests of the Public Menorah Lighting last week. Photo by Shelly Knight

snapped a shot of the Menorah in her window," Hambourger said. "It was the eighth night of Chanukah, and it was nighttime. She was unaware that directly across the street was a Nazi Headquarters with the dreaded flag in the window."

"When she got the film back and saw what she had photographed, she wrote on the back of the photo these words: "'Death to Judea,' so the flag says. 'Judea will last forever,' so the light answers."

"She and her entire family survived Auschwitz and saved that Menorah and that photo. So, my friends, whether you are Jewish or Christians, Chanukah is a celebration for everyone. We are all made in the image of G-d, and we all share the light."

New Year's Eve...from Page 1

see a better version of himself this year, announcing his intention "to become a firefighter like my dad."

"My goal in 2025 is to finish high school and go to the plants and make money," Nate Kumfer shared. "Me and my family are on a family vacation to see mountains. I'm from Louisiana, and it's pretty flat there."

"I live in Jasper, Georgia, but I used to live in Hayesville, and my goal is to get back here," Michael Mason said. "I'm a landscaper, and I love it up here."

Michael Rodriguez from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, said he was feeling very optimistic

about 2025.

"We have a new man in office, and we will be seeing more positive things happening around the country this year," he said. "I think people are really feeling up right now. I'm hoping for business to explode like it should and to have success in my growing family – make a good living for my family."

Every new year is a new beginning, a chance for a fresh start and an opportunity to add new pages to a life story. And that seemed to be exactly what the people celebrating at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds were thinking in the run-up to 2025.

Traffic Pattern Change...from Page 1



Construction of the new bridge over Brasstown Creek at the county line continues apace as part of the GA 515 project. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Harris city limits.

After bids came back too high in 2023, GDOT divided the project into three phases to bid out separately, with the same ultimate goal for the roadway, that is, to future-proof the corridor by reducing both traffic congestion and crash frequency.

Phase I consists of a two-lane rural bypass that is 1.25 miles in length running around the west side of Downtown Young Harris, beginning with a roundabout at Brasstown Creek Road and ending with a second roundabout at Timberline Drive.

This phase received its construction notice to proceed on Oct. 26, 2023, and while the bypass remains under construction at 46.35% complete, a trout stream restoration project attached to this phase has been finished.

GDOT has estimated the bypass should be done by September 2026, however, the project was put on hold last summer due to Native American petroglyphs being disturbed during construction after an apparent miscommunication about the presence of the ancient stone carvings.

The state has been waiting to hear back from the appropriate tribal authorities on how to resolve the issue of the disturbed petroglyphs

before bypass construction can resume.

Also in this phase last summer, the state's subcontractor, C.W. Matthews Contracting Co., damaged two water lines belonging to Young Harris, Mayor Andrea Gibby said, and the city is still waiting for GDOT to pay \$2,493 in costs associated with repairs and water loss.

Gibby said the state has claimed that "the insured is not the proximate cause of this accident or loss" – a contention disputed by the city.

Listed by GDOT as 6.16% complete, the separate Phase II of the project encompasses the 3.2 miles of Georgia 515 between Earl Shelton Road in Union County and Sampson Road in Young Harris.

Phase II received a green light for construction by Vertical Earth Inc. last May but had to wait until the fall to begin roadside clearing because of federal regulations around protected bat species that could possibly be roosting in the trees.

This phase contains the traffic pattern change that is scheduled to occur this week.

Estimated to be done by August 2027, Phase II will feature straightening and widening of 515 to a four-

lane divided highway with a 32-foot depressed median and 10-foot shoulder, to include a 6-foot paved shoulder to accommodate bikes from both directions.

A new bridge is being built across Brasstown Creek at the county line, parallel to the existing bridge. Traffic will eventually be diverted onto the new bridge, at which point the old bridge will be demolished and replaced with another new bridge to form twin bridges over the creek.

As Phase II gets further along, GDOT will implement eight detours to tie sideroads back into the highway.

Phase III has been deferred until early this year, to ultimately consist of widening along 4 miles of Georgia 515 from just inside Blairsville city limits to Earl Shelton Road, all in Union County. This leg of construction is expected to take three years to complete.

The three phases of the project add up to quite the price tag: the original bid for Phase I was \$26,916,958, awarded to C.W. Matthews; the Phase II original bid was \$64,085,296, awarded to Vertical Earth Inc.; and Phase III is expected to be over \$100 million, according to GDOT.

As stated by GDOT in the past, the overall project timeline remains "very fluid."

Shop With a Hero enjoys another successful year

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – Students of Towns County Schools returned Monday from Christmas break, which kicked off with early release on Friday, Dec. 20 – the same day heroes of all stripes came together to help local kids have a bright Christmas.

Shop With a Hero took place at the Blairsville Walmart after a half-day of school leading into the holidays. Thanks to the school system's partner agency Towns County Family Connection, 42 students of varying ages were identified as candidates to go shopping.

According to Family Connection Coordinator Amy Rosser, many different organizations showed their support for the event.

The Hiwassee Police were a prominent presence along with Towns County Emergency Medical Services, and that's saying nothing of the retired officers from different districts, or those from the neighboring Blairsville Police Department.

There were also representatives from the growing Summer Heat planners, and veterans from the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars Post #7807.

Along with that, Georgia State Patrol officers, Towns County Firefighters, game wardens, Air Med pilots, Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce, Young Harris College staffers and even a handful of Mountain Movers and Shakers showed up to lend their time to making the holidays just a bit brighter for children in need.

With \$200 to spend per individual and a whole store at their disposal, well-deserving youngsters had a lot to choose from, but there were some rules and things to remember.

For one, every child was allowed to pick out a coat or hoodie and a pair of shoes that didn't count toward their allotted spending limit.

Second, weapons and violent video games were off-limits, but items such as Nerf



Towns County Family Connection Coordinator Amy Rosser and Hiwassee Police Chief Jeremy Parker at the 2024 Shop With a Hero for Christmas event for kids.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

guns were allowed. In fact, one boy was eager to purchase one that shot tennis balls so he could give the family dog a gift, too.

"Here's the whole toy section – have at it," said Hiwassee City Councilman Jonathan Wilson to his young charge when they reached their first destination. Like many other kids, the child Wilson chaperoned wasn't just interested in shopping for himself.

It's worth noting that just about all the students, no matter their age, had gifts in mind for family and friends. Some children, especially those whose siblings were also shoppers that day, hid toys and games under clothes to try and keep the gifts a surprise.

One student in particular spent a lot of time looking at art supplies. Union County volunteer firefighter Christie Brown was his hero for the day, and the pair had a handful of conversations, both meaningful and humorous.

When coming across a jar of decorative river rocks, Brown remarked she could make the same thing at home for cheap. Her charge was in fact interested in the purchase; the stones, he said, would pretty up his mother's garden.

The pair ended up picking out some bags that looked as if they were filled with gems, ensuring the child's mother would have one of the nicest yards in Towns County.

It was off to pick up some snacks next, and once again, several shoppers had the same idea.

Candy was, unsurprisingly, a pretty popular choice among kids of all ages. Others sought out different goodies for themselves; two good friends hung out around the cologne, seeking advice from their Georgia State Trooper buddy on what scents worked best.

"It was a success. It was a good way to kick off Christmas break," Rosser said with a smile as things started to wrap up when everyone hit the registers. This year was especially meaningful for her, considering this will be the final Shop With a Hero she organizes.

Rosser is set to retire from her position soon, and while her replacement has yet to be selected, she's confident the Shop With a Hero tradition will continue for many years to come.

"It's bittersweet, it really is, but (it's) comforting that someone else will carry on the legacy," Rosser said.



Shop With a Hero requires the efforts of many volunteers to put presents under kids' Christmas trees, with the big day this school year being Dec. 20 at the Blairsville Walmart. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Quilt of Valor awarded to Army Veteran Danny Arrowood

Appalachian Hospice was privileged to honor U.S. Army veteran Danny Arrowood a Quilt of Valor on December 9, 2024, at his home in Blairsville. He was encircled by approximately 30 members of his family, friends and hospice staff.

While in the Army, Mr. Arrowood was stationed in Fischbach, Germany, where he honorably served our country in the Vietnam War from 1972 through 1974. He was honorably discharged from the US Army in 1974 with the rank of E4. At his duty station in Germany, he stood guard over missiles. He received special training as a sharpshooter, grenade handling and marksmanship in rifle. Mr. Arrowood also served in the Army National Guard/Reservists.

Mr. Arrowood was born in Hiwassee, GA and currently resides in Blairsville, GA with his wife, Millie Arrowood. He has three daughters, Michelle Arrowood, Kimberly Patterson and Ashley Dockery.

The outstanding quilt was made by quilters in the Misty Mountain Quilters Guild, which is one of hundreds of quilting groups in the United States that make patriotic quilts for veterans who have been "touched by war" as they defended our country

at home and in many posts throughout the world. To date more than 408,727 quilts have been awarded. The Quilts of Valor Foundation



Millie and Danny Arrowood

(www.qovf.com) was founded in 2003 by Catherine Roberts to honor men and women serving in all branches of the military.

The tradition for presentation is to wrap the veteran in the quilt or lay it on them with a hug or a handshake. They also receive a certificate noting that the quilt is awarded as an "expression of gratitude from a grateful nation."

For more information about nominating a veteran

to receive a quilt, go to www.mistymountain-quiltguild.org/quilts-of-valor. Quilts Of Valor and Appalachian Hospice & Palliative Care honor Mr. Arrowood for his service and sacrifice. For more information about Appalachian Hospice or becoming a volunteer with hospice, please contact Cynthia Forsyth, Volunteer Coordinator, Appalachian Hospice 706-781-0924 or c.forsyth@appalachianhospice.com.

Hawks Harbor Fire...from Page 1

above and heard crackling near the corresponding fireplace; he peered into an electrical outlet there and could see fire behind the wall.

"We had a line on the main floor where the origin was, and we brought another line into the third floor and started doing the same thing internally," Copeland said.

While that was happening, firefighters had positioned the department's ladder truck on the highway and were extending a ladder to the roof to access the attic to make sure flames weren't spreading among the rafters.

"We cut about an 18-by-18 hole in the roof to give it a little air and make sure that we didn't have extensions into that area, and everything turned out good," Copeland said. "We went ahead and got people back in their homes and called the EMC to turn the power back on."

Two condos were damaged in the blaze, and Chief Copeland commended the owner of the complex for working in earnest to restore the properties immediately following the fire.

An elderly woman was displaced from her condo due to water damage, but the Fire Department contacted the American Red Cross to find her safe lodgings.

At press time, Chief Copeland said they were still investigating the exact cause of the unintentional fire, whether it was a propane line leak or wear and tear in the chimney



The Hawks Harbor fire started in the chimney chase of this fireplace, which had to be gutted to put out flames in the wall.

chase.

Responding to the scene were crews with Engine 1, Tanker 1, Engine 3 and Ladder 6. The Towns County Sheriff's Office worked traffic on US 76 to support the ladder truck, and the Clay County Fire Department provided mutual assistance out of North Carolina.

"All in all, at the end of the day, nobody was hurt," Copeland said. "All the equipment worked flawlessly, the crews worked flawlessly, and I couldn't be more proud as a fire chief."

Chief Copeland advises people to be particularly cautious this time of year, when home heating during the cold winter months increases the

chances of house fires. Residents should make sure to check that their smoke alarms are functioning properly.

"This has been a very active fire season so far for us," Copeland said. "We've had at least half a dozen structure fires already since Nov. 1. I'm not sure what's going on; it's looking like it's just going to be one of those years."

The timing of an active fire season is coinciding with upgrades coming to Towns County Fire, including a brand-new, SPLOST-funded 2,000-gallon pumper tank, plus the hiring of three new full-time firefighters to provide 24/7 manned station coverage for the first time in county history.



Local drone operator David Phillips captured this awesome aerial view of Towns County Firefighters tackling the Hawks Harbor condo fire Friday off US 76.