

Fire...from Page 1A

fire, Chief Copeland and his firefighters responded to a fire on Glassy Mountain Road in Bald Mountain Park at around 3:30 a.m. on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 23.

"Engine 1, Tanker 1 and Engine 4 responded," said Chief Copeland. "Upon arrival, the fire was through the roof and some windows on the right side of the home. We were able to make a quick knockdown on the fire.

"We did a transitional attack. We started hitting it from the outside until we got some more people on the scene. Lt. Blake Taylor and Lt. Justin Ledford made entry inside, followed by Lt. Wayne Canterbury and firefighter Robert Lownie, and we were able to get a knockdown on the fire."

After further investigation involving the Towns County Sheriff's Office, it was determined that the Thanksgiving Day structure fire was a criminal act, and Austin James Shook of Hiawassee, who lived nearby, was arrested for arson and burglary.

The chief would like to thank Towns County Sheriff's Deputy Jason Ellis for helping his firefighters deploy their attack lines ahead of others arriving, and he commends Sheriff's Investigators Aaron Deyton and Langdon Beard for their work investigating the Glassy Mountain Road fire.

"Our next fire was Dec. 4, it was called in at approximately 8:30 p.m. by a person coming down Big Sky Drive," said Chief Copeland. "The home at 270 Main Street was under renovation by the homeowners, and a subject leaving his work saw smoke billowing from the house."

Continued Chief Copeland: "The house was



The fire department was able to save the family photos and belongings of this home on King Cove Road.



An alleged arsonist set this Bald Mountain Park home on fire the morning of Thanksgiving. Fortunately, the homeowners were not in town.

under renovation, and we're thinking there were some electrical issues close to the floor. We were able to get in and get it knocked down, and save all the belongings in the home. The fire was contained at the point of origin."

Chief Copeland has expressed appreciation for the Hiawassee Police Department for their assistance with the structure fire on Main Street, and as always, he commends the efforts of his own men.

"I could not be prouder of the efforts, performance and results achieved by this department during this period," said Chief Copeland. "I want citizens to understand that all areas of public safety in Towns County—fire, EMS, Hiawassee and Young Harris College police, the sheriff's office—are second to none. There is a great working relationship between all parties."

Fairgrounds...from Page 1A

Commissioner Bill Kendall. And this year, Thomason decided to continue this tradition to say, "thank you" for all that the community does throughout the year to show support for the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

"It was a really good turnout on the Towns County Citizens Night," said Thomason. "We had probably 500 people that went through the gate and then we had another couple hundred in paid attendance.

"Everyone really seemed to enjoy themselves and have a good time, which is what we wanted."

Along with the free admission, all those who came out to the light show on Thursday night were treated to plenty of free snacks and treats along the way as they walked through the Pioneer Village. Many local businesses that decorated booths at the show this year decided to show some community support and appreciation for locals as well by giving back by way of free homemade sweets.

One such local business, Lynn Buck with Woodmen Life, brought out all the stops with homemade chocolate chip cookies for anyone who wanted to snag a bite to eat, and maybe a quick warm up by her make-shift fireplace, on their walk through the beautifully lit holiday wonderland.

"I think this is a great way to show support for the community," said Buck. "We really are so blessed to live in an area where people are really there for each other and support each other. I love it."

Last Thursday is not the only exclusive day that the Fairgrounds will be hosting for the duration of the light show.

On Tuesday, Dec. 19, the Fairgrounds will be offering



The lights were opened with free admission to residents of Towns County on Thursday, Dec. 14. Photo/Lily Avery



Once again, the Fairgrounds offers the mountain community something fun to do for the whole family. Photo/Lily Avery

another special day for patrons who would prefer a drive through of the light show, rather than the regular walking tour.

Patrons can pay by the car and those who may have previously been unable to attend due to the terrain of the walk will now have the opportunity to see the gorgeous displays.

"This is a drive through for the nursing homes and the hospice and retirement homes and anyone who is not able to get out and walk or get on the golf carts," said Thomason.

"It's just a drive through only that day. It's not open to the public that day for a walk through. But we'll start the drive through at 6 p.m."

Mountain Country Christmas in Lights will continue for two more weekends and run for its last weekend, beginning on Thursday, Dec. 29, until Saturday, Dec. 30, from 6 p.m. until 9 p.m. The show will not be open on New Year's Day. Tickets are \$5 per person and children 12 years old and younger get in for free.

and one count of arson in the first degree.

In a separate incident, Towns County sheriff's deputies responded to the Dollar General in Young Harris on Wednesday, Dec. 13, about a reported incident involving an act of public indecency at the store.

Upon arrival, deputies located the suspect in the store.

Sheriff's deputies arrested Darwin Pena Diaz, 31, of Young Harris, charging him with one count public indecency, one count of theft by taking - shoplifting, and one count obstruction of an officer.

investigation, it was determined that the residence was burglarized prior to the start of the fire.

Sheriff's Investigators executed a search warrant on a suspect's residence located near the scene of the fire and burglary, recovering evidence related to the crime.

At the time, investigators arrested Austin James Shook, 19, of Hiawassee, charging him with two counts of burglary in the first degree, one count of possession of burglary tools,

awesome community. I work for an awesome department, we're like family.

"It's touched me," continued James, referring to community support following his accident. "It's awesome how many people have called

and sent their prayers. This has been awesome. I really appreciate it."

James makes his home in Towns County.

BRMEMC...from Page 1A

website, members can find the attendance form - as well as the attendance policy itself - beneath the meeting schedule. The form is called the "Member Notice of Intent to Attend a Board Meeting."

Members wishing to address the board during a meeting will need to fill out an additional form, located in the same place on the website, called the "Member Petition to Present at Board Meeting."

The forms will need to be printed and filled in, though the EMC has said an electronic version is in the works for spring 2018. The easiest way to submit the completed form is to scan it and email it to boardmeetings@brmemc.com, or fax the printed form to (706) 379-4834.

Up next is the Jan. 9 board meeting at 6 p.m., and members wanting to attend will need to have their forms submitted to the EMC no later

than Jan. 7 before 6 p.m.

Also in the Dec. 12 board meeting, the directors welcomed the president and CEO of Federated Rural Electric Insurance Exchange, who gave an informational presentation for the board - the EMC changed its insurance to Federated over the summer.

The board spent quite a bit of time talking about IT infrastructure that Tuesday, going over plans to upgrade the EMC's phone system and certain hardware, "to ensure that we're able to meet our cyber and data needs into the future," said Nelms.

EMC Director Danny Henson was one of the four directors to vote no in October to opening the monthly board meetings to members, though he now has a more favorable view of the process.

"It has not impacted the way that we do business, period, which was the fear

I had," said Henson, adding that he believes everything has gone really well.

Board President Cummings said the board is still looking for feedback on its member attendance policy.

"If anybody has any constructive criticism or comments, and you want me to let the board know about it, I want to hear from you," said Cummings. "Or, if you're somewhere else, you can tell one of the other board members, it doesn't matter."

"We just need that information so that we can make the open meetings as good for our members and our board members as possible. I think things are going well, and I just want them to keep going well. And I want people to be able to feel that they can come if they want to."

Email addresses for the board members are available on the EMC website, and Nelms said folks are more than welcome to call the EMC and ask to speak with him.

BOE...from Page 1A

to be enrolled in any Towns County school. While this may not seem like an issue, it could potentially cause problems if a student is living with and/or under the care of a family member that has not been named the child's legal guardian.

Now, the BOE has decided to change this requirement to permit admittance to the school without the need of present legal guardianship.

"This first policy, the school admissions, now says that a kinship caregiver can enroll a child at our school, as long as they have a written permission from the actual guardian," said Dr. Darren Berrong, Towns County Schools Superintendent. "So, no longer does someone have to have a court-ordered guardian to enroll a child in school. They can pretty much do it as long as there is verbal communication from the actual guardian, so now that policy has been updated."

Along with changing school admissions requirements, the board also discussed the JBCCA (2) Unsafe School Choice Option. Under this policy, a child would be permitted to change schools, even into another school district, should they be violently attacked while attending a Towns County school.

"This means that if a student is violently attacked at your school, they have the option of transferring to another school," said Dr. Berrong. "Or if your school is identified as a persistently dangerous school, within 10 days of that notification, we have to send out a notification explaining the



Towns County Board of Education Member Jerry Taylor. Photo/Lily Avery

process of requesting a transfer to a safe public school."

According to Dr. Berrong, an "unsafe school" is assigned as such based on the number of fights, violent outbursts or instances that are experienced within a school year and if that number is unusually high.

"I don't think that Towns County will ever have to worry about this," said Dr. Berrong. "But, there are some schools that do have to worry about this. So, if that does occur here or at any other school, there now is an option for students to transfer out of an unsafe school."

This unsafe school option has been introduced to school systems all across the state, and is a new policy that BOEs can now choose to adopt.

Also during the board meeting, Dr. Berrong discussed the recent school closures due to the snow, and the reasons as to why he decided to proceed with those cancellations.

"If there's one thing I hate about my job, it is

snow," said Dr. Berrong. "These discussions are never easy, whether you're having school, delaying school or canceling school. It's very stressful and you never know if you're making the right decision. I'm glad that we did cancel those days because the road conditions were not good enough to drive on, especially for our young drivers."

Dr. Berrong went on to thank the county, as well as the state, for all the efforts to keep the roads as safe as possible during the dangerous conditions.

"I would also like to take a moment to thank our county and state," said Dr. Berrong. "Our roads are probably better than I've seen them after any snow and this is the most snow we've had since 1993. A shout out to those guys, I know they worked for hours every day as well as the EMC trying to keep everyone's power on."

Towns County Schools will be out for the Christmas holiday from Wednesday, Dec. 20 through Jan. 2.

Historical Society...from Page 1A

ticket will get to come up here and pick a present from under the tree. You can pick any gift you want.

"That present is yours, unless someone steals it from you. But the next number we draw can either come and get an unopened gift from under the tree, or they can take yours. That's what makes it fun."

Each gift could only be stolen one time, so the lucky person who took the gift was then able to take it home with them that night. While many were thankful to keep their gifts, or to open new ones from under the tree, others still were ready to play the game to the fullest, snatching what they thought to be the best present.

Of the many gifts beautifully wrapped and placed under the society's Christmas Tree, there were a few that caught the eyes of many present last Monday night, such as a big jar of Appalachian sorghum syrup, homemade jellies and jams and fresh local honey.

But the biggest gift of them all, both literally and figuratively, was an exquisite, handcrafted wooden birdhouse that caught the attention of the entire room, and was eventually stolen in good-hearted fun from its first owner, Society President Sandra Green.

After the fun and excitement of the gift games had come and gone, the members packed up their presents and piled up their plates with delicious homemade holiday treats, relaxing and spending the rest of the evening with friends and reveling in the Christmas spirit.

"I want to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays," said Green.

Next month's program, the first of the New Year, will feature guest speaker and Hamilton Gardens' Grace Howard on Monday, Jan. 8, at 5:30 p.m.



Donna Howell opening a gift. Photo/Lily Avery



Dr. Lanier Nicholson got himself a nice new serving tray for Christmas. Photo/Lily Avery

Burglar...from Page 1A

of burglary and arson which occurred within Bald Mountain Park, and the new charges stemmed from two reported additional burglaries within Bald Mountain Park.

During the early morning hours of Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 23, a structure fire was reported at a residence located on Glassy Mountain Road in Bald Mountain Park.

The residence was not occupied at the time of the reported fire.

Upon further

James...from Page 1A

James attended Union County Sheriff Mack Mason's Christmas party on Thursday, Dec. 14, and enjoyed seeing everyone.

"I'm sore and everything, but I'm good to go," said James that evening. "We live in an