

FBLA...from Page 1A

Bauer in Sales Presentation; Taralee Arrowood in Business Law; Brody Graper in Economics; Kyra Tallent and Sara Beth Hobbs in Healthcare Administration; Chase Rogers in Intro to Business Communications; Wesley Calhoun in Intro to Parliamentary Procedures; Nick Bradley, Chase Crawford and Jessica Taylor in Intro to Financial Math; Emma Kate Ledford in Public Speaking II; and Caden Pyrluk and Evan

Berrong in Journalism. Towns County High School and Georgia FBLA will be represented favorably at the National level as eight TCHS students prepare to compete this summer against other finalists from across the nation, DODDSEur, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Canal Zone. The following students will represent Georgia FBLA at the 2017 FBLA National Leadership Conference in

Police...from Page 1A

on the path that we've been on," said Smith following his appointment. "It's going to be the same - going after drugs and remaining vigilant."

According to Smith, Chief Walls has been mentoring him since Walls assumed the role of acting, then full-fledged police chief following the death of longtime Hiwassee Police Chief Jimmy Wright in December of 2015.

And Acting Chief Smith said he's ready for the job.

"Arvel and I have been trying to share as many responsibilities as we could so that I would be prepared when he decided to retire," said Smith. "So, we've been kind of building up to this."

Smith graduated Towns County High School in 2003, and went on to study criminal justice at Kennesaw State University.

While in Kennesaw, he joined the Cobb County Police Department in 2006, finishing top of his class at the police academy there.

He stayed with Cobb

County for three years before moving back to Towns County in 2009 to be closer to home, since he was looking to start a family.

It was in 2009 that Smith went to work as a deputy sheriff at the Towns County Sheriff's Office, though Chief Wright hired him in 2010 to work for Hiwassee Police, where he's been ever since.

Over the last seven years, Smith has moved up in rank several times, first under Chief Wright, who promoted him from officer to corporal, then sergeant, and then under Chief Walls, who promoted him to lieutenant.

Now, as acting police chief, Smith has vowed to continue the work of his predecessors, at least until Chief Walls returns.

Hiwassee PD has directly benefited from its hard work of late, having been granted court-ordered forfeitures following felony drug arrests, such as a 2000 Ford Ranger and more than \$350 in cash.

Anaheim: Chase Williams in Database Design and Applications; Kendall Floyd in Word Processing; Makenzie Carroll in Word Processing; Jackson Taylor in Computer Applications; the team of Emily Williams and Taylor Cornett in Business Presentation; and the team of Will Devries and Nick Shook in Entrepreneurship. Congratulation to Towns County FBLA, and good luck at national competitions in California!

The police department has made 11 felony drug arrests just this March, with 19 felony drug arrests year to date.

At this point last year, there had only been two felony drug arrests all together.

Acting Chief Smith said that it's not so much that crime is up, but that he and his fellow officers have made it a priority to go after drugs this year.

Sgt. Tracy James and Officer Jordan Guffey round out the Hiwassee Police Department.

The department has other officers who work part-time for the city, and a full-time position has just come open for applicants.

"We wish Arvel a speedy recovery," said Hiwassee Mayor Pro Tem Liz Ordiales. "We're very happy to have Paul step in his shoes without much transition. We look forward to continuing our efforts to have drug enforcement in our area."

According to Ordiales, the city is also hiring to fill the positions of a Code Enforcement Officer and a Water Plant Operator.

GDOT...from Page 1A

Home Depot, and running all the way to Timberline Drive in Young Harris, just before the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC headquarters, according to GDOT.

Furthermore, the project includes a two-lane City of Young Harris bypass beginning at Brasstown Creek Road, just past the Dollar General, and ending at Timberline Drive, with roundabouts featured at each end of the bypass, according to GDOT.

The project underwent preliminary engineering in 1999, then again in 2014, and is expected to undergo Right-of-Way Authorization this year to the tune of \$26,585,000, according to GDOT.

Construction is slated to begin in three years, and will cost right around \$63 million to complete, according to GDOT.

"The project will widen and reconstruct the existing two-lane with intermittent passing lanes roadway to primarily a four-lane divided highway," according to the latest available GDOT plans.

"The proposed project involves work along an 8.5-mile section of SR 515/US 76 beginning east of Blairsville from Young Harris Street to just east of Timberline Drive in Young Harris.

"The new roadway consists primarily of a four-lane divided roadway (two lanes in each direction) with 32-foot median and 6.5-foot outside shoulders to accommodate bicycles.

"The project also includes a bypass around the City of Young Harris that consists of a two-lane roadway with roundabouts at each end.

"The right-of-way varies from 130 feet to 250 feet along the SR 515/US 76 mainline, and a right-of-way along the Young Harris bypass of between 80

feet and 100 feet."

According to GDOT documents, the major performance goal of the project "is to provide an acceptable LOS (Level of Service) for the future traffic demands along the corridor. The secondary benefits include the reduction of traffic accident frequency and severity, as well as provide better mobility through the addition of bike lanes and a bypass around Young Harris."

GDOT defines "Level of Service" as being "measured in terms of a number of factors, such as operating speed, travel time, traffic interruptions, freedom to maneuver and pass, driving safety, comfort and convenience."

GDOT has had to work around many considerations during the planning of this project.

"There are several issues of concern along the project corridor," according to GDOT documents. "These include the presence of warm water streams, cold water trout streams, wetlands, US National Forest property, historic properties, historic cemeteries, state-listed plant populations, and archaeologically-sensitive areas.

"The issues of concern are going to be addressed by this project in several ways, including the addition of landscaping and signing for Young Harris College inside both roundabouts, water quality measures for insects on which the endangered bats forage, as well as rare plant relocation of pink lady slipper orchids."

Continued the GDOT documents: "The issue most likely to affect the construction schedule is the potential presence of endangered Indiana or Long-Eared bats. This will limit land clearing activities to

certain times of year. However, the most recent bat survey in the summer of 2015 did not find any endangered bats inside the project corridor."

GDOT officials will be holding an identical meeting at the same time in Blairsville, at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center also on Thursday, April 6, from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. The civic center is located at 165 Wellborn Street in Blairsville.

"The purpose of these Location and Design Public Hearing Open House meetings is to provide the public with an opportunity to view the project, ask questions and comment on the project," according to a GDOT notice. "Relocation assistance will be discussed at the Open House meetings. The information presented at each meeting will be identical. The Public is welcome to attend at either meeting location. Attendance at both locations is not required for the public to provide input on the proposed project."

Continued the notice: "The meetings will be informal, and the public is invited to attend anytime during these hours. There will be no formal presentation. A court reporter will be available to allow the public an opportunity to make verbal comments about the project."

The meeting sites are accessible to persons with disabilities, according to the notice, and accommodations for people with disabilities can be arranged with advance notice by calling GDOT's Kim Coley at (770) 531-5748.

Written statements will be accepted concerning this project until Thursday, April 20, 2017, and may be submitted to: Mr. Eric Duff, State Environmental Administrator, Georgia Department of Transportation, 600 West Peachtree Street, NW - 16th Floor, Atlanta, Georgia 30308.

Accident...from Page 1A



Photo/Frank Uhle

to travel back into the right westbound lane of SR 515.

"The vehicle began to overturn multiple times. Mr. Drow was ejected from the vehicle causing serious injuries. The vehicle Mr. Drow was driving came to a final rest on the shoulder of SR 515 down an embankment,"

Hedden said.

Drow, 28, was not wearing a seatbelt at the time of the crash, Hedden said.

His family was following behind him at the time of the crash, Hedden said.

Drow was airlifted to Northeast Georgia Medical Center for treatment. He

died while receiving that treatment.

Funeral arrangements for Drow were incomplete at press time.

No other vehicles were involved in the crash, and no other persons were involved in the crash.

Vliet...from Page 1A

in January.

"Last year, I invited some of our stronger students to engage in research on behalf of Towns County," said Van Vliet. "We do this each semester. Last semester's product is a product about economic development in Towns County."

"During the campaign last year for commissioner, a lot of people were talking about economic development. It was one of the key topics of conversation at political events."

"Our first thought was to find out what happens in economic development offices in general. So, we're taking a look at economic development offices throughout Appalachia."

"The other part of the study was a survey conducted by two of our seniors. They went to leaders in Towns County in order to find out from them what they saw as obstacles to economic growth in Towns County."

Hollis Townsend, a YHC senior who worked on a study concerning economic development in 27 counties throughout the North Georgia region, shared the positive impacts of economic development offices found in these counties.

"I researched how Appalachia Georgia did economic development and how they utilized it as a tool," said Townsend. "Out of 27 counties, there were 27 answers. Standards are not something that can really be applied, because we may have counties that are similar in size, but their resources are different."

Townsend went on to explain an interesting structure he found during his research, a structure called joint development authorities, or JDAs.

Essentially, JDAs are economic development offices that are spread across a region, for example, multiple counties



Hollis Townsend, senior in the Young Harris College Institute for Leadership, Business and Public Policy

working together toward a common goal for regional growth.

"One of the things that it benefits to work with other entities in a joint development authority, if you're working on a large project, it's easier to get grant money because you're affecting a larger area and more people," said Townsend. "This would be very beneficial because when an employer comes into an area, they're not only looking at Towns County's workforce. They're looking at the workforce within the 50 to 100-mile radius of the area as well."

While Townsend's study suggested an economic development office or even a JDA would be a positive next step for the county, the survey conducted by Ostrowski and Varnhorn focused on the hardships that would be faced if such an office were to be assembled.

According to the survey, the primary obstacles for economic growth and development in Towns County include long-held guiding philosophies of local government, the tax structure, the current alcohol policy, the lack of a skilled workforce, the zoning laws and the physical appearance of urban areas within

the county.

Per information provided by the survey, the idea that everything should remain as it always has is the primary obstacle standing between the county's current economic situation and future growth.

This idea was found to be reflected in the tax structure of the area as well, according to the study, where tax breaks are given to local establishments while those same breaks are not given to outsiders and corporations that bring business into the area.

According to the survey, both ideals create a barrier that does not give businesses an incentive to come to the area.

With the current alcohol policy, the study found that the prohibition of liquor sales causes a significant loss of tax revenue. In addition, this policy diminishes competitive advantages, creating competitive assets for resorts that sell liquor.

Also according to the survey, there is a high employee turnover rate in Towns County, which is not promising for employers who are seeking to start up a business in the area.

This similar notion was also reflected in the overall outlook on zoning laws, which can be severely limiting for big businesses that wish to invest money in purchasing property but have restricted control with construction on the property.

Finally, the survey found that a more inviting image should be pursued to attract more investors and tourists.

As an example, the study suggested areas of Downtown Hiwassee that could be updated and renovated, such as the Towns County Courthouse.

Although these barriers could potentially prevent growth, Van Vliet feels that an economic development office would certainly bring these issues to light and increase the potential for growth within the county, and he hopes to continue research on this topic in the future.

EMC...from Page 1A

Pledge of Allegiance led by Director Larry Williams.

"We appreciate everybody being here tonight," said EMC Board President Mickey Cummings. "I'm really excited about this year and the things that are going on."

Cummings used his welcome as an opportunity to highlight the quality of workers employed by the EMC, noting some time he'd spent out in the field with an underground cable crew recently.

"The thing that I really want to emphasize to you is the important of our employees and what they do for us," said Cummings. "Those guys and gals do a lot of hard work for us each and every day, and it makes our job exciting seeing what they're doing in the community."

Board Vice President Steven Phillips took to the microphone next to tell members about his work on the Policy Committee, but not before asking that the veterans in attendance stand and be recognized.

Briefly, Phillips touched on past policy changes, such as removing board access to costly insurance and the establishment of a conflict of interest policy.

More recent policy changes include updating how social media is used by EMC employees, how much money the EMC can donate before going before the board - now, anything over \$2,500 - and Phillips announced that the board is close to establishing a Code of Ethics.

Both Phillips and Board Attorney Larry Ford spoke on the creation of Operation Round Up, which is currently in the works.

Operation Round Up is a charitable giving program that residents will soon be able to opt in to, meaning that they will not be included in the program unless they specifically ask to be.

As the name suggests, the program works by rounding up to the next dollar the EMC bill of a person who has opted in to Operation Round Up.

For example, if a person's bill is \$150.49, and if that person has opted in to give to Operation Round Up, then their bill will be rounded up to \$151, and they will be donating 51 cents to the nonprofit.

Operation Round Up will be governed by a 501c3 nonprofit entity independent from the board of directors, and though it's still in its early stages, the board is soliciting feedback on where to implement the charitable donations.

Director Chris Logan gave some updates on the EMC's financials, including its debt, which is majority long-term for the 6,000 miles



Board Vice President Phillips showing off the bulky policy manual that he and his committee are working to update.

of BRMEMC powerlines and infrastructure.

Since 2015, the debt has gone from \$119,364,316 to \$116,721,577 year to date. That's nearly \$3 million in decreased debt in under two years, and Logan gave a lot of credit to the leadership of the EMC's new general manager, Jeremy Nelms.

One member asked about open board meetings, and the board said that it was working on a policy based on what other EMCs have done, including having members sign up if they wish to attend a board meeting.

As far as fiber-optic internet is concerned, Nelms reiterated the direction he's decided to take, aimed at taking advantage of the 1,100 miles of fiber that's already been installed.

According to Nelms, only about 30 percent of the homes that currently have access to fiber have signed up for the service, coming to about 6,000 homes in 20,000.

Instead of installing new fiber and going further into debt, Nelms said that he plans to work on increasing marketing efforts to homes that currently have access but have yet to sign up, with a goal of upping the take rate beyond 30 percent.

Increasing the take rate

will allow the EMC to generate more money to expand its fiber-optic capabilities in the future, according to Nelms.

When asked about personal use of EMC vehicles, Nelms answered that the company has trimmed that down to about six personnel with take-home vehicles.

He said that those employees, himself included, were expected to be able to respond to situations at a moment's notice, day or night and therefore needed their company vehicles to be able to do so in the five-county region of the BRMEMC.

That evening, the board encouraged the membership to reach out at any time with questions or comments. Those looking to contact Nelms and the board can find contact information at brmemc.com.

"I'm just so proud to be here," said Nelms. "I've really learned to embrace the area. I've tried to meet as many members as possible, and sometimes when the members call me, that's when they're most frustrated, because they wouldn't call me otherwise."

"But I'm here for you all, because you all help to pay my salary, and I certainly do appreciate that and my family does to. And it's not lost on me."