

# Towns County Herald

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## Early voting for Presidential Preference Primary, March 1

By Mason Mitcham  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Early voting began Monday, Feb. 8, for the Georgia Presidential Preference Primary, and it will continue for three weeks through Friday, Feb. 26.

Voting is taking place at the Old Rock Jail next to the Towns County Courthouse.

Hours to vote are 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday – closing for an hour each day for lunch between 12 p.m. and 1 p.m. – and voting will be open for one Saturday, on Feb. 20, from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m.

Mark Dehler, co-chair

of the Towns County Board of Elections, said that he and the rest of the board have been hard at work to ensure that everything is ready to go when voters step through the doors of the old jail.

“Anticipating that this year would be very busy, last spring, almost a year ago, the Towns County Board of Elections and Registration pulled out all the equipment and checked every piece,” said Dehler. “We found a couple of problems, mostly old NiCad batteries that needed to be replaced, fixed what we are authorized to fix and sent the others to the state approved vendor.”

“All equipment has been

returned, and we have done the Logic and Accuracy Testing on the equipment that will be used for this first election.”

It's too late to register to vote for the Presidential Preference Primary, but residents can still register to vote in the General Primary Election, which will take place on May 24.

Registering to vote is as simple as visiting Irma Nichols, Chief Registrar, in the Old Rock Jail, and some people can even go online at [registertovote.sos.ga.gov](http://registertovote.sos.ga.gov).

“There is nothing more important than for all registered voters to vote not only in this

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## Stephen Smith resigns from Hiawassee City Council

By Mason Mitcham  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

At the end of the Hiawassee City Council meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 2, council member Stephen Smith resigned.

Smith, a council member for six years, said that he was resigning for personal reasons.

“It's due to personal, family, and extenuating circumstances. I've enjoyed the opportunity to serve for the last six years, and I wish the council well, but there are personal and extenuating family circumstances that have caused me to tender my resignation,” he said.



Stephen Smith

Smith explained that even during his recent reelection, he had some doubts about serving for another term.

“This last election, there

was no opposition, and so we didn't actually hold an election, so everybody just continued on for another term, and I kind of debated about running at that time, but I did anyway. Too many things have come up, and it's really personal family stuff and I want to leave it at that. My family is number one in my life,” he said.

Smith is heavily involved in both his community and family life and insists that even though his time serving in an official capacity may be over, his service to the city of Hiawassee is not.

“I'm happily married, 43 years. I have six children, 37 adopted children, and 11

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## Alcohol sales, beautification and business at Hiawassee City Council

By Mason Mitcham  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

The Hiawassee City Council met on Tuesday, Feb. 2, to hear a number of presentations and to pass a variety of motions, resolutions, and ordinances.

Jay Chastain Jr. said that he wanted to look into having a referendum on Sunday sales of alcohol within the city.

“Last year we had talked about looking at a referendum for Sunday beer and wine sales. Right now I'd like to go ahead and see if we can get a referendum or at least talk about it and try to get

it going in this year's or next year's election,” he said.

City Manager Rick Stancil provided details of what pushing that referendum might entail.

“Sunday sales is one of those things the General Assembly give authority for a council to ask for a referendum on. If you want that referendum, we can prepare for the next council meeting the required format and go ahead and let you all take a look at it and vote it. I'll have to check with the Secretary of State's office,” he said.

He estimated a called election would cost the city



Callie Moore

around \$5,000.

“The last one cost us a little bit over \$7,000, so we

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## Commissioner Bill Kendall will not seek another term

By Bill Kendall

After much prayer and discussion with family and friends I have made the decision to not seek re-election in 2016.

I have had the great honor to have been elected to ten terms of public office. Seven terms as Towns County School Superintendent, three as School Commissioner, and have been shown kindness and encouragement from the greatest people anywhere.

I have had the honor as School Superintendent of helping our most precious resource, our youth, by providing them with excellent



Towns County Sole Commissioner Bill Kendall

teachers, staff and first rate facilities and ended this career with no school property tax

being levied on our citizens.

I have had the honor as Towns County Sole Commissioner of putting in place ordinances to protect our most precious natural resources, our beautiful Appalachian Mountains and lake, to construct Foster Memorial Park with first rate recreational facilities, also to put into practice, ordinances and budget controls that gives our citizens a county that is debt free with the lowest county property tax rate in the state. I have had the opportunity to work with a great staff and employees.

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## CEO of UGH and five others arrested on drug charges

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Mike Gowder, CEO of Union General Hospital Inc., was publicly arrested at his office and ushered out the front doors of the hospital in handcuffs on Thursday, Feb. 4.

Gowder's arrest came after a nine-month investigation conducted by the Union County Sheriff's Office, looking into illegal prescription drug practices, according to the sheriff's office.

According to authorities, Gowder had obtained from Dr. James Heaton, who was arrested Thursday at his office, some 72 prescriptions for Oxycodone 30 mg, 24



Mike Gowder

prescriptions for Oxycodone 10 mg and 12 prescriptions for Hydrocodone 10 mg, all controlled substances.

These prescriptions came in sometimes several times a month over the course of January 2012 through June



Dr. James L. Heaton

2015, for a total of 15,170 pills, and Gowder would fill them regularly in Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee,

according to authorities.

Also according to authorities, Dr. Heaton prescribed several months'



Dr. David Gowder

worth of prescriptions for opiates and Xanax at a visit, which was outside the normal

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## Six arrested in Union County are arraigned and post bond

By Todd Forrest  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

The six suspects charged in the Union General Hospital prescription drug ring were transported from Union County Jail to make their first appearances in Union County Superior Court on Friday, Feb. 5.

Each received bail ranging from \$3,000 to \$50,000 after being notified of



Superior Court Judge Martha Christian

## Towns and Union counties welcome new extension agent

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Melissa Mattee wants the people of Towns and Union to know that, as the new agent for both counties, she's got your back – and your backyard.

Whether you're a budding gardener in need of soil sampling and fertilizer advice, or a full-fledged farmer looking to spruce up on the latest in corn production, Mattee's waiting and ready to fill in those agricultural

knowledge gaps.

“Stop by, call me, don't be shy,” said Mattee, a Stockbridge native. “I want people to know that I essentially have an open door policy. We're here from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. If you have any questions, if you want some literature on something, or if you just want to see who I am and meet me – please, come in. I'll be in Union County at Blairsville four days a week, and Towns County one day a week, starting out.”

Mattee comes to the See Mattee, Page 9



Melissa Mattee

## For Union General Hospital board, the show must go on

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

The Board of Directors for Union General Hospital had a crisis on its hands last week – the CEO of the hospital, Mike Gowder, had been arrested, as well as one of their board members, area physician Dr. James Heaton.

In a statement posted to the hospital website, printed and handed out to Union General, Inc. employees, and sent to area news agencies, the

board let the public know that it had acted quickly in response to the unsettling turn of events that took place on Thursday, Feb. 4.

The very same day that Gowder, Heaton and four others were taken into custody by the Union County Sheriff's Office and the Drug Enforcement Administration on illegal prescription drug charges, the board voted unanimously to name Lewis Kelley as interim CEO of

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Lewis Kelley, Interim CEO

## Two charged in Blairsville Ingles Pharmacy robbery

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

A Young Harris couple was arrested following the strong-armed robbery of the Ingles Pharmacy in Blairsville on Tuesday, Feb. 2.

Jesse Thomas Cole, 29, a recent move-in from Colorado, was arrested that Tuesday night and charged with the robbery, while Jessica Chase Doan, 30, originally of Hayesville, NC, turned herself in on Wednesday, Feb. 3, to face the same charge at the



Jesse Thomas Cole

Union County Jail, according to GBI Region 8 Special Agent Dustin Hamby.

The robbery occurred



Jessica Chase Doan

shortly before the pharmacy closed for the evening, around 8:30 p.m.

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Iwo Jima Program at Towns County Recreation and Conference Center

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SPORTS BASEBALL

FEB. 16 @ PICKENS COUNTY 5 PM

JV FEB. 16 @ FANNIN COUNTY 5 PM