

Snowzilla...from Page 1A

and the road crew worked real hard," said Towns County Sole Commissioner Bill Kendall. "We were really pleased with the way it went. Most people have been understanding that we can't get there all at one time."

The road department works first on primary roads, tackling side roads when it gets the chance. Emergency situations were handled as they came in, such as medical calls requiring side roads to be cleared for home health services.

"It's been a while since we've had a snow this big, really, but this has been a pretty easy snow to work," said Shook, noting that ice is much more difficult to clear from roads.

Commissioner Kendall concurred.

"That was a pretty snow, and it wasn't so cold - people could get out and enjoy it. A lot of kids were sledding," the commissioner said.

The county road department and Georgia Department of Transportation worked in tandem to keep as many roads clear as possible.

"The state DOT has worked well with us," said Commissioner Kendall. "In fact, I got some calls yesterday morning from people that have homes here, wanting to drive up from the Atlanta area to look at the snow, and they called wanting to know if 515 and other roads were open."

Another department that worked hard during the storm was 911 Dispatch, which had a crew stay three days. They were prepared for the event, having stocked plenty of food and water, as well as cots to sleep on.

"It's been pretty good," said 911 Dispatch Director Laura Stamey. "We had coverage seven days a week, 24 hours around, and had three that stayed during the night."

911 Dispatch is the first emergency agency in the coun-

ty to know when anything happens around the county.

"We were pretty busy, but not what we expected," said Stamey. "Everything went very smooth. We had no power outages at all. The power lines were good. The road department, state department were out working. Everything went well."

The main reason the snow posed a little threat as it did was because the temperatures never got quite cold enough to turn the snow into ice.

"It didn't freeze, and we could get the trucks to scrape that off," said Commissioner Kendall. "If the temperature drops down, or if it melts a little and freezes back - but everything went really well."

All things considered, the snow was more an inconvenience than anything else - last week could have been much worse with emergent situations.

"If there are emergen-



cies, people who are really sick, like home health care needs to get there, we'll have somebody there, rescue or somebody to take them up," said Commissioner Kendall. "And we try to take care of those cases

first. I was well pleased with our road crew, our 911 dispatch, our rescue with the fire department, and most of all the understanding people of the county that relaxed more than usual and just accepted

it. I think one thing, it was so pretty, and as I say, we got some calls from people wanting to drive up from Atlanta to see it, wondering if the roads were open. It went well."

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Georgia and South Carolina to come together and share their successes and network among each other.

All told, 469 people attended the Atlanta conference, and the number of trade show booths maxed out at 46.

The convention lasted

three days, Jan. 22-24.

An auction was held on the opening night, the proceeds of which benefited the Georgia Scholarship Foundation with an eye toward FFA students.

Friday brought plenty of educational opportunities for those in attendance, as guest

speakers gave fair-centric presentations aimed at fair and carnival promotions, social media and other topics covering how to attract more fairgoers.

The convention wrapped up with the annual Miss Georgia Fairs State Pageant.

Towns County High School Senior Mia Manto, who is the current Miss Georgia Mountain Fair, competed in the event.

Manto did well, but the honor ultimately went to Kali Turner of the Georgia Carolina State Fair.

Next year, the convention will be held again at the Crown Plaza in Atlanta, Jan. 21-23.

"Plans are already underway for the first ever joint Georgia/South Carolina convention to be hosted in Greenville, SC, in 2017," according

to a statement released by the GAAF. "Fairs are indeed all about building solid, beneficial and lasting relationships, and Georgia and South Carolina's joint venture is a shining example of success in fairs helping fairs."

Pilot...from Page 1A

area, including Union General Hospital, Chatuge Regional Hospital and Nursing Home, Union County Nursing Home, Union County Dialysis, the Clinic at Walmart, Union General Wellness Center and the Glenda Gooch House.

The "spokes" in this model of the pilot program will integrate smaller critical access hospitals, Wi-Fi and telemedicine-equipped ambulances, telemedicine-equipped school clinics, federally qualified health centers, public health departments and local physicians, according to the committee report, which the committee hopes will ease the burden on rural hospitals and their emergency departments.

"One of the main areas of focus for the Rural Hospital Stabilization Committee was to address Emergency Depart-

ment (ED) stressors in rural hospitals that can contribute and lead to their closure," according to the report. "In an effort to address this issue, a process to scale down hospital operations and create a stand-alone ED was proposed. After testimony and research it was determined that stand-alone EDs are not financially viable, due to several reasons.

"There are issues with the reimbursement mechanisms and there are extremely high labor costs and capital investments. National trend data also shows most of these being developed in wealthier, suburban areas as opposed to rural areas. It was determined that it takes approximately 15,000 ED visits to break even, which equates to a needed population of approximately 35,000. However, Georgia has virtually no rural

hospitals in counties capable of supporting an ED without outside subsidies."

And telemedicine will play a key role in relieving the stress on rural emergency departments.

According to the American Telemedicine Association, "telemedicine is the use of medical information exchanged from one site to another via electronic communications to improve a patient's clinical health status. Telemedicine includes a growing variety of applications and services using two-way video, email, smart phones, wireless tools and other forms of telecommunications technology."

One example of telemedicine in action is if 911 dispatch receives a call from someone having chest pains, and a telemedicine-equipped

ambulance arrives on the scene. Paramedics can give the patient an EKG to monitor heart activity on the way to the hospital, and doctors can review the data as it is streamed wirelessly from the ambulance to the hospital.

Before the patient even arrives, doctors can let paramedics know whether or not the patient is in need of a more specialized facility. Union General Hospital could, for example, instruct the ambulance to bypass UGH altogether, and get the patient to a rendezvous point with a helicopter to be airlifted to a larger facility that specializes in heart trauma, such as Northeast Georgia Medical's Ronnie Green Heart Center.

"The goal of the 'Hub and Spoke' model is to best use existing and new technology to ensure that patients are being treated in the most appropriate

setting, thus relieving some of the cost pressures on the smallest rural hospitals' emergency departments," according to the committee report.

By incorporating the "spokes" mentioned above, "healthcare professionals can ensure that each patient is being transported to the appropriate setting, monitor chronically ill patients to help them avoid repeat trips to the hospital and address frequent fliers that clog our small emergency rooms," according to the report. "Using methods such as health apps with medical reminders, social and community services like Meals on Wheels and mobile monitoring will relieve some of the most costly pressures on small hospitals."

Ultimately, the program aims to further communication between healthcare profession-

als, as well as their patients, in order to maximize patient care.

Joining Union General Hospital in the pilot program are Appling Health System, Crisp Regional and Emanuel Regional Medical Center.

"Just as a medical emergency can't wait, neither can we wait to act upon these recommendations," said Gov. Deal in his statement. "An additional \$3 million will be allocated in this year's budget to the State Office of Rural Health within the Georgia Department of Community Health to fund the necessary tools the four hubs need to effectively implement this pilot program. It is my hope that these efforts are not a temporary fix, but rather the beginning of a long-lasting road to recovery for our rural health systems."

Dodged...from Page 1A

some firefighters who chose to volunteer overnight in order to be ready at a moment's notice.

"We had dedicated volunteers that came in Wednesday night that manned Station 1 and Station 2 that spent the night just to come out to serve the citizens, to help the response," said Chief Copeland. "We didn't have any catastrophic calls and no bad events. We were very lucky, and I like it that way."

Chief Copeland puts a lot of that luck down to timing.

"Because of the timing of the snow, it allowed every-

body to go get their supplies and get in," said Chief Copeland. "We didn't have a lot of people on the road. We didn't have any big car crashes. Last week, when we had the icing event, on the east end we had a trailer jackknife on Clayton Mountain, but there were no injuries there, when we had round one."

But that's not to say the fire department hasn't been busy.

"We ran 1,525 calls last year, and that was a record for us," said Chief Copeland. "And right now, we're 35 to 40 calls over last year's pace as we speak, so 1,525 was a re-

cord for us last year and we're 40 over that right now."

The Towns County Fire Department is an all-hazard rescue group that conducts Appalachian Trail rescues, searches Lake Chatuge with its dive team, and responds to medical emergencies, car accidents, fires and more.

Prior to the snow moving in, the fire department battled several fires in the county and surrounding areas, including three or four brush fires in Towns County in February.

"We had two structure fires in February, both in Clay County for mutual aid, and

our operations were awesome," said Chief Copeland. "We had several chimney fires this month, and those operations all went well."

Chimney fires can occur with the buildup of soot over time, which can catch fire inside the chimney, and knowing the best and worst conditions for starting a fire in the home can help people prevent emergency situations.

"If people don't have good cured wood, the moisture in the wood adds up to it," said Chief Copeland. "But over time it builds up from when they dampen it down, and it just doesn't burn hot and clean. So,

people will load their wood stoves up, shut their damper down to keep the wood from burning fast, and then they leave. And over time, it builds up the soot, the creosol."

Firefighters try to avoid the use of water to put out chimney fires, instead relying on a dry chemical. But deficiencies in construction that allow for cracks in chimneys can lead a chimney fire into the rafters of a home, which make fighting the fire more difficult.

"In one chimney fire, we had guys on the roof, in the attic and down by the heater," said Chief Copeland. "So, we

had three tiers of firefighters in one of the chimney fires."

Chief Copeland offers some simple advice to minimize the chance of chimney fire.

"Clean your chimneys once a year, maybe twice," said Chief Copeland. "Your chimneys need to be cleaned."

And when it comes to mutual aid within the county, Chief Copeland is proud of his firefighters and how well each department within the county works with the others.

"Our ability to work collectively among our departments here in the county is second to none," said Chief Copeland.

Blessed...from Page 1A

just how it is. We've been very blessed, very fortunate. We're glad things worked out the way they did."

Social media helped both the sheriff's office and the community at large to remain up-to-date on road conditions.

"We've actually had about 5,000 active engagements on Facebook, with the act of people coming back, just checking on it with the weather, and people helping us spread the word as well," said Sheriff Clinton. "We had a lot of pictures. That helps. You want to know how the roads are, well here's a picture of some of them. Hopefully, here pretty quick we'll be through all of this frozen stuff and not get too many violent storms."

This week brings the threat of thunderstorms that could rip through the area, which has emergency agencies on standby should inclement weather come to town.

"We've got a tumultuous transition to spring here," said Sheriff Clinton. "Hopefully, if the old saying is true, March comes in like a lion, maybe the

last part of March it'll get real nice and we'll have an early, nice warm spring."

Sheriff Clinton and other civic leaders have expressed their appreciation for the uneventful nature of this latest round of winter storms.

"I really appreciate people staying tuned, and I really appreciate the hard work the DOT has done," said Sheriff Clinton. "Of course, all the guys in public safety working hard, and definitely the public - it seems like people kept informed and helped us relay information to other people. And a lot of folks kind of stayed put and heeded that advice. Just all of them and the DOT and the deputies and all the public safety guys that are out working hard - the EMC guys and everybody just pulling together."

"I think that's been a good thing, and definitely helped out in a surprisingly uneventful situation. A lot of times with this kind of weather we expect a lot of wrecks. We've been pretty blessed. We've been through a couple of weeks of this stuff, and we've come out

pretty good. And hopefully that'll last."

Meanwhile, Hiawassee City Hall was busy last week getting ready for the city council meeting that took place on Tuesday, March 3, and they, too, felt the pangs of the snowy weather.

"We missed Tuesday," said Mayor Barbara Mathis. "We stayed here Wednesday until it was getting so bad - it was 4:30 then. And then, we were closed Thursday."



But business commenced as usual Friday, and with some of the worst winter weather so far this year out of the way, the mayor and City Manager Rick Stancil wait to see what has happened in the ground.

"The only thing I know is probably increased water breaks, but that's more from the cold than snow," said Stancil. "That's always our biggest struggle this time of the year, because when the temperature drops - since we have kind

of a migrant population in part, people are away, and we have line breaks that the city directly deals with, but then you have individual homes that break, and they don't know that they've got problems until it gets above freezing. And if they're away, that can be a problem. I know in times past, people have come back and found icicles from their roof to the ground - never a good thing."

One indication that there are breaks in water lines due to cold weather comes from the water treatment plant, which is managed by Randy Warne.

"We know that Randy's pushing water at the plant, and when demand is up during this time of year, demand is up because things are leaking, not that we've got a new increase in population. We know that there are leaks out there," Stancil said.

Trees are another concern the city has been dealing with lately, as trees in winter conditions have a tendency to come down either whole or in part.

"We had to take out some big trees, mainly because of threatening potential sewer station sewer lines," said Stancil.

"That doesn't sound like much, but that's a big deal for us. And we get cooperation with Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, so that's always a positive. Because if one of those trees had fallen, it could cost the city \$50,000 to \$100,000 in potential damage if it hit a generator or that type of thing. Broken trees, we really haven't had that much. I mean, knock on wood, this one has been a pretty snow, not necessarily a deadly snow."

Even when city hall closes for bad weather, other parts of city government, like the water treatment plant and sewer plant, stay open for business - people still need to run water and flush toilets.

"We try to be here as much as we possibly can - somebody tries to be here," said Mayor Mathis. "It was just not worth taking a chance on people's lives. And with governments being closed everywhere, we took off the two days, too."

Make Up Days...from Page 1A

Dr. Berrong said that some people are worried that the school system might have to dip into spring break week itself.

"I'm doing everything I can so that we don't have to lose that, and we'll just take those two days before spring break and everybody should be okay," said Dr. Berrong.

The week before last saw winter weather that was more ice, less snow, and the decision of whether or not to close schools relied more on forecasts than what was on the ground at the time.

"This week has been way less stressful, because when you get this much snow, you don't

really have to worry about whether you're going to school or not," said Dr. Berrong. "It's kind of a given, and so you don't have to worry about, is it coming in in the morning, are you going to have to leave during the middle of the day? It's just a call you make, and all of these have kind of been a given,

and it's not been something really to stress about. It's just been, actually, a beautiful snow."

Fortunately, Dr. Berrong was able to enjoy the big snow that forced him to cancel the schools in the first place - no one is going to argue that it is okay for busses, parents, teachers or students to try to get to school

through 8 inches of snow in the North Georgia Mountains.

Dr. Berrong commended county and state road crews for keeping the roads as clear as they were, and school started back this week.

With warmer weather moving in, thunderstorms are the next weather concern. Snow

and ice, however, have hopefully taken their last stand of the season.

"This was a good one to finish on, so I hope this is it," said Dr. Berrong. "It was nice and deep and just absolutely beautiful, and now I'm ready to not see any more until next winter."