

Towns County Herald

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Paris Business Center info to hit mailboxes soon

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

People can expect to see major progress this year at the Paris Business Center in Downtown Hiawassee, with additional construction expected to begin in the next two to three months.

It's been a long journey for the center, which is perfectly positioned to become a major driver of regional economic development by assisting area entrepreneurs in creating and executing successful business plans.

In addition to serving as a professional business incubator, the center will feature multiple new businesses, a restaurant, and outdoor entertainment space once completed, said Denise McKay, the Joint

Economic Development Director for Towns County, Hiawassee and Young Harris.

Residents should keep an eye on their mailboxes, as the Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority will soon be mailing information on the project to keep the public apprised of ongoing developments.

"The Paris Business Center is the first full-service business development center in North Georgia," according to program literature. "Eligible clients can be either an existing business or a startup."

"So far, more than a dozen clients have been helped, even though the doors haven't opened. The service area includes parts of Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee. More than \$1.3 million has

been raised through grants and donations thus far."

The project that has been underway for a couple of years now, as it has taken some time to get funding squared away "to bring it to this stage of completion," McKay said.

Progress has picked up of late, however, to include the receipt of updated drawings for the center, and the DDA aims to have a final price tag for construction before long.

"We will hopefully be closing on it by October or January, so it's been two years in the making, and we're so excited that we're finally here," McKay said.

The Hiawassee DDA has charge of the effort to restore and renovate the historic Paris Buildings, and the organization



This recent design rendering depicts what the front of the Paris Business Center will look like. The center will be an invaluable resource for regional development.

Chase suspect charged in statutory rape case

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation has charged Caleb Matthew Price with statutory rape, a felony, after conducting an investigation at the request of the McCaysville Police Department, GBI said Friday.

GBI took out an arrest warrant against Price on Feb. 10, after he was already in custody at the Union County Jail on multiple misdemeanor traffic charges for his involvement in a cross-county police chase from Hiawassee to Blairsville.

The chase occurred on Feb. 6, the same day the statutory rape investigation was requested, but the GBI said the two incidents were unrelated.

According to the arrest warrant, Price "willingly and



Caleb Matthew Price knowingly engaged in sexual intercourse "with a female child under the age of 16, not his spouse, between the dates of Jan. 31, 2023, at 12 a.m. and Feb. 4, 2023, at 11 p.m., in

Fannin County." "Additional charges are likely," said GBI Region 8 Special Agent in Charge Kim Williams regarding the statutory rape case. "Upon completion of the investigation, the case will be provided to the Appalachian Judicial Circuit for prosecution."

Price, 23, of Hiawassee, is currently serving 30 days in jail after entering a Feb. 13 guilty plea in Blairsville Municipal Court to charges stemming from the Feb. 6 police chase, including fleeing officers and failing to obey traffic lights.

As part of his Blairsville sentence, he has agreed to pay a fine of \$3,378 and serve 12 months on probation following his release, and his license has

Law enforcement feud takes spotlight again

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The feud between the Towns County Sheriff's Office and the Hiawassee Police Department logged additional miles last week after Sheriff Ken Henderson took to the airwaves to clear up confusion over who was involved in a Feb. 6 chase that spanned Hiawassee to Blairsville.

Sheriff Henderson was responding to a Feb. 14 news report by radio station WJRB that stated chase suspect Caleb Matthew Price of Hiawassee had "Towns law enforcement in hot pursuit."

The sheriff reached out to the radio station to correct the record, saying it was the Hiawassee Police Department, and not the Towns County



Jeremy Parker Hiawassee Police Chief Sheriff's Office, that initiated and sustained the chase. According to the radio, Henderson said that Hiawassee PD was "contradicting its own policies" in undertaking the chase, which he criticized as



Ken Henderson Towns County Sheriff "reckless," asking, "Don't you agree that we don't need to endanger everybody's lives over a traffic ticket?" Indeed, the chase resulted in multiple misdemeanor

Fairgrounds receives award for Hiawassee Pro Rodeo



GMF Manager Hilda Thomason, center, receiving a recent award with Southern Rodeo Company owners Robin and Josh Brooks.

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Earlier this month, Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds Gen-

eral Manager Hilda Thomason traveled to Biloxi, Mississippi, to receive special recognition in an awards event hosted by the Professional Cowboy Association

Feb. 2-5.

The Professional Cowboy Association is a top-tier rodeo-sanctioning nonprofit "estab-

Family Connection discusses meeting children's needs

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

On the morning of Friday, Feb. 17, the Mountain Movers and Shakers hosted three important figures to speak on behalf of the Family Connection programs of Towns and Union counties.

Family Connection is a resource coordinating organization aimed at generating better outcomes for children and families in school systems, which in turn impacts entire communities.

"Georgia Family Connection is the only statewide network in the country dedicated to the health and well-being of families and communities," per gafcp.org. "We empower communities in 159 counties to craft local solutions based on local decisions."

Amy Rosser is the director of the state-funded Towns County Family Connection. The local program was officially started by Rosser in 1999, and ever since then, she's been devoting herself to finding ways for every child to succeed.

"Our purpose is to improve the lives of families and children," Rosser said. "In Towns County, our goals center around child abuse and neglect. We have a higher-than-Georgia average of child abuse and neglect in Towns County substantiated cases."

"Our other goal is school success, and school success covers kids having everything that they need to be successful in school ... We want them to graduate; we want them to see their potential above high school, above Towns County." Every year, among other



Amy Rosser TC Family Connection special events, Towns County Family Connection organizes a school supply drive. Having helped "right at 200" students last year, Rosser hopes that the number will only continue to climb as awareness becomes

Elementary School students complete C.H.A.M.P.S. program

News Special
Towns County Herald

Today's students face dangers older generations could not have imagined. Choosing Healthy Activities and Methods Promoting Safety, aka the C.H.A.M.P.S. program, was founded in 2003 by the Georgia Sheriffs' Association to address these urgent challenges.

Each year, Towns County Elementary School fifth-graders go through a 12-week program one day a week with School Resource Officer Sally

Tanner, who is equipped with lesson plans covering the following:

Internet Safety & Social Media; Alcohol; Leaders & Followers; ATV Safety; Marijuana; Bullying; Methamphetamine; Peer Pressure; Choices & Consequences; Prescription Drug Abuse; Cocaine; Stress; Gangs; Tobacco; Understanding & Avoiding Violence; and Home Alone/Child Abduction Safety.

The students completed the program last week, and the following children received

the Role Model Award: Reid Brown, Charli Jones, Harper Oliver and Owen Ward.

Essay winners were Lexi Deerman, Connor Nelson, Caroline Brennan, Averie Byrd and Jonah Baker, with the overall essay winner being Caroline Brennan.

Towns County Sheriff Ken Henderson would like to congratulate all the students who participated, and he praises their hard work. He would also like to thank SRO Sally Tanner for her dedication to the kids and this program.



2023 C.H.A.M.P.S. graduates with TCSO School Resource Officer Sally Tanner.

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Lake Levels

Blue Ridge 1,672.39
Chatuge 1,918.26
Nottely 1,762.28

BASKETBALL

Class A State Tournament
Boys: @ Greenforest 2/22
Girls: vs. Christian Heritage 2/21

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Paris Business Center...from Page 1A

is kicking off what it's calling the "second phase" of the public education and fundraising element for the project, said DDA Chair Peggy Gardner.

"All last year, everyone involved spent a lot of time meeting with people individually," Gardner said. "And between that and the Appalachian Regional Commission's grant of \$600,000, \$1.3 million has been raised, so we are already that far down the road in terms of financial efforts."

"From this point forward, you're going to start to see a lot more information coming from the DDA out to the broad public, so we want to send out a mailing to all of the Towns County residents educating them on the Paris Business Center, what it is and why it's important."

According to McKay, the DDA has acquired multiple partners to help with business incubation, including the Small Business Development Association, North Georgia

Technical College, and University of North Georgia, among others.

"So, if somebody has a business startup they would like to do or they need assistance, all of these people will help us," McKay said. "For the startups, they are tailor-made programs to help them with whatever it is they are looking for."

Added Gardner, "There really isn't a full-service business development center in Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina, so places like Blairsville, Murphy, Clay County, that kind of triad will be our service region."

In addition to mailing info out to the public, the DDA is planning upcoming speaking engagements "to get the information out to all the business owners and entrepreneurs to let them know about this resource," Gardner said.

"We want to recognize Dan Parris for his invaluable contribution to getting this

started, because both of those buildings were sold to the city for a very reasonable price," Gardner said. "So, that's why it's called the Paris Business Center."

"And we have 14 donors who have contributed \$5,000 or more, and they will be recognized on a donor wall inside the lobby when you first come into the center."

"Through \$20,000 and above to \$75,000 donations, we have sold five rooms in the center that give the ability to have your name on the wall recognizing your contributions. So, that is another way to leave your legacy as a sponsorship, and you can recognize whomever you want like grandparents or a spouse, anything like that."

For more information, including a look at building designs, to learn how to make tax-exempt donations or to get involved otherwise, visit www.downtownhiawassee.com or call the office at 706-896-2202.

Feud Continues...from Page 1A

traffic charges across three jurisdictions – Hiawassee, Blairsville and Union County – but Hiawassee Police Chief Jeremy Parker took issue with the claims that the decision to pursue was against HPD policy and reckless.

"It is apparent through audio recording, dispatch information, and the driving behavior witnessed by Officer (J.R.) Murray that this was no minor traffic violation," Chief Parker said in a lengthy Feb. 16 press release responding to the allegations. "The driver, identified as Caleb Matthew Price, was driving in reckless disregard to the safety of the public."

Further, Chief Parker said that departmental policies were followed during the chase, and he commended Officer Murray "for operating his patrol vehicle with due regard and recognizing the potential increasing hazards ahead during the pursuit."

"No injuries or property damage were caused as a result of the pursuit," Parker concluded.

TCSO and Hiawassee PD have been involved in a behind-the-scenes territorial dispute for some time now.

The Sheriff's Office has questioned the legality of Police Department activity outside city limits, while Hiawassee PD insists it is well within its rights to pursue suspects for immediate violations that occur inside the city.

Last summer, the ongoing feud spilled out into the open when body cam footage of a heated roadside argument between Sheriff Henderson and a Hiawassee officer over jurisdiction hit local, state, national and international news markets.

In all this, residents have been left to wonder when the two agencies will finally make peace for the sake and safety of the citizenry.

Parker is new on the job, having come aboard as Hiawassee Top Cop at the start of the year, and he said last week he had hoped "that Sheriff Henderson would want to resolve the issues with a new administration versus continue the attacks ... on the Hiawassee Police Department."

"I'm not here to fight and argue with the Sheriff's Office," Parker said. "And my experiences with the Sheriff's deputies while working a shift have been very good. I merely

want to know that my department is taken care of, the officers are providing a quality, professional, law abiding, trustworthy service.

"I also want to make sure they are receiving adequate and proper training so they are safe ... (and) make sure when they call for help that an available law enforcement officer is not in fear of discipline for coming to assist."

"Again, I hope that these issues can be resolved. I would love the relationship between the two agencies to be one of cooperation, trust and teamwork. We may not see eye to eye personally, but professionally we can work together."

"We all have the same goals no matter what color uniform we wear, or what the patch on our shoulder says. I can also promise that if facts are presented, and misconduct is occurring, that it will be dealt with."

When reached by the Towns County Herald last week, the Sheriff's Office confirmed that it was looking into unspecified legal avenues pertaining to the jurisdictional dispute but declined to comment further on the matter.

Statutory Rape...from Page 1A

also been revoked, according to Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter.

He is facing additional chase-related traffic charges in two other jurisdictions – Hiawassee and Union County – in addition to his felony charge of statutory rape in Fannin County.

As previously reported, the Feb. 6 chase began when Hiawassee Police Officer J.R. Murray spotted a dark Ford Explorer that had been the subject of a "be on the lookout" for erratic driving.

Murray tried to pull the vehicle over after it entered city limits from the west, but the Explorer declined to stop and continued to drive erratically while turning around in the McDonald's parking lot, and the pursuit headed westbound out of the city toward Young Harris.

Towns County E-911 Dispatchers contacted authorities in Blairsville to alert them to the chase as it approached the county line, and soon after, Officer Murray called off his pursuit near Ensley Road in Union County due to traffic conditions growing heavier.

To prevent the dangerous driver from heading into town, Blairsville Police and the Union County Sheriff's Office stopped

eastbound traffic at Windy Hill Road and set up a spike strip in front of the Blairsville VA Clinic.

UCSO Maj. Shawn Dyer drove ahead to find the vehicle, which officers knew was traveling their way. As he passed Mountain Building Supply, Dyer saw the Explorer going west on the wrong side of the road, and he had to swerve his patrol car to avoid being hit.

When the driver got to the roadblock, he successfully navigated around the spike strip and continued toward Blairsville proper, where he blew through the red light at GA 515 and Farmers Market Way.

At that point, authorities decided that continuing the chase would be too risky, as it was a busy time of day in a busy section of the county. So, in the interest of the "safety of the general public," they terminated the pursuit.

A deputy waited at the GA 515/325 intersection to see if the driver would attempt to leave the county toward Fannin. When he failed to show up, local law enforcement stepped up area patrols to see if he was trying to hide on a side road, and they searched until dark.

The next morning, UCSO Staff Sgt. Brandon

Hogsed found the Explorer parked beside Coosa Methodist Church off Mulky Gap Road. An investigation revealed that the driver had abandoned the car there and gotten a ride from an unknown person shortly after the chase.

Blairsville authorities coordinated with Hiawassee PD to confirm the Alabama tag of the car that fled Towns County, and when a driver's license photo came back, Dyer, who got a look at the driver the day before as the two passed each other on 515, verified Price as their suspect.

Chief Baxter reached out to the Fair Hope Police Department in Alabama – Price had just moved to Towns County from there a little over a month ago – and Fair Hope PD contacted his mother, who helped negotiate Price's surrender later that day.

Initially, authorities were concerned about the driver's wellbeing, as they discovered three bullet markings in the Explorer's windshield that occurred at some point prior to the chase. As it turned out, Price was OK, though the origins of the bullet markings remained unclear at press time.

Regarding his outstanding charges, Price is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

Rodeo Award...from Page 1A

lished to promote the sport of rodeo," and as the largest such association east of the Mississippi River, "the PCA is committed to maintaining the highest standards in the industry," per pcarodeo.com.

Thomason was thrilled to accept the award on behalf of the regionally renowned Hiawassee Pro Rodeo, which rides into town twice a year at the Fairgrounds.

Specifically, the Fairgrounds received "Best \$1,200 Rodeo of 2022" for adding money for contestants to win, thereby upping the number of contestants and making for a more enjoyable experience for all.

"It was a nice honor to get," Thomason said. "It always helps build your rodeo anytime you can receive any kind of award. It gives you more recognition and is great advertising for us."

Speaking on the awards

event, Thomason said there was a rodeo each of the four nights, "with cowboys from all over the Southeast competing for their points for the finals." The event took place inside the Mississippi Coast Coliseum and "was an absolutely amazing experience."

"Saturday night is when they had their banquet for everybody, and that's when the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds received our award," she said.

People can go ahead and mark their calendars for the next installment of the Hiawassee Pro Rodeo, which is fast approaching at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

"We've got the rodeo coming up Memorial Day Weekend, Friday, May 26, through Sunday, May 28," Thomason said. "We have added new seating to it, so we'll have about 600 more seats than what we had last year, which is definitely needed, and we've already been selling tickets."

At the rodeo in May, the Fairgrounds will be honored by another major organization in the rodeo world, the International Professional Rodeo Association, for providing one of the "Top 5 IPRA Best New Rodeos of the Year."

"Our September rodeo will be Saturday, Sept. 2, and Sunday, Sept. 3," Thomason said. "We have a package deal available for sponsorships if someone wants to be represented on a sign hanging up in the arena and recognition all throughout the night by the announcer for your sponsorship."

For more information, and to buy tickets for the Memorial Day Weekend rodeo, visit www.georgiamountainfairgrounds.com.

"Enjoy the best bucking horses, bulls, world class contestants from all over the United States and Canada, and the top-of-the-line specialty acts!" according to the website. "This is a family event that will definitely keep you on the edge of your seat with live entertainment!"

Family Connection...from Page 1A

more commonplace.

And it's not just notebooks and pencils or toys that help out – Rosser says that donations of clothing are acceptable, too, and can make a huge difference when it comes to student presentation.

"That's our job, to make sure that everybody's on the same page and we're communicating amongst each other, because that's the way that you become successful in a community," Rosser said.

She also stated that Family Connection strives to help young people in trouble with the law by providing rehabilitation programs that waive charges through participation in things like in-home therapy.

But, as the old saying goes, "it takes a village" to help raise a child, and that's where Lynne Abernathy comes in with her role in mentoring students.

Through its Mentor Program, Towns County Family Connection has helped an untold number of elementary, middle and high school students get a "second chance."

Mentor Coordinator Abernathy brings to her role extensive educational experience, what with being a kindergarten teacher for three decades.

This experience has helped her greatly in the eight years she's taken part in the program, watching it grow to include 35 mentors and their 35 mentees for Towns County alone.

It's worth noting that Union County, unsurprisingly due to their larger size, has 80 children being helped through its Mentor Program and Success Center.

The requirements for becoming a mentor are similar between the two counties, but there are some important dif-

ferences to keep in mind.

For one thing, mentors in Towns County need to set aside at least an hour of free time weekly to devote to their mentees, while Union County mentors, according to Blairsville Mentor Coordinator Pam Pauley, have half an hour to spend with their mentees.

During that time, mentors do what they can to enrich the lives of their young charges, whether that be playing games like chess and Uno, tutoring and homework assistance, providing life advice, or simply lending a listening ear, a shoulder to cry on, a helping hand, or just an open heart.

"The mentors will probably never know the impact they have on the mentees, but trust me, it's great," said Abernathy before revealing that, in addition to the 35 current pairs in Towns, nine more children are on the waiting list and looking for the perfect mentor match that could change the course of their lives forever.

For her part, Pauley felt the need to clear up some misconceptions about the children who benefit from the Mentor Program. Some mentors may go in expecting "troublemakers," but this isn't necessarily the case, and it's important to give the children a chance to earn just as much respect as anyone else.

"It would be kids that are very intelligent, they're just not doing well in school because they are over the top, and so they work on their own," Pauley said. "They can graduate any time they want to. I just had a girl I mentor graduate two months ago. She's ready to go, and a lot of them work to support their families."

Students being mentored are often going through tre-

mendous personal challenges that the mentor program can help them to deal with, and it is a very rewarding experience for volunteers to see the young people under their wings succeed despite those challenges.

"A lot of kids come from very poor families," Pauley said. "The grandmother takes care of them, they don't have anybody to send them off to school in the morning, etc."

And the mentees aren't the only ones who benefit from the program.

Pauley shared the story of a young boy living with cerebral palsy. His mentor was partnered up with him because she had lost a leg in a motorcycle accident, and both were trying to navigate the world with a disability that they were learning to master in their own ways together.

"They love each other and have a lot in common," Pauley said. "To be a mentor, you don't have to be a college graduate. All you have to do is love kids, have a half an hour a week (if volunteering in Union County), and you know, it's wonderful."

The shakers' own Michael Borkman admitted at the end of the presentation that he himself was "a product of mentoring," saying he was forever grateful not just for those who saved his life, but for people like Rosser, Abernathy and Pauley who carry on that same legacy of success.

To get involved in Union County, call 706-835-4351 or email Katy Jones at kjones@tncschools.org, and for Towns County, email Rosser at argibby@townscountyschools.org.

The Mountain Movers and Shakers meet every Friday at 8 a.m. inside the Sundance Grill in Hiawassee, typically with a guest speaker.