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Bradshaw signs elections contract, talks Splash Pad

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw held a short-and-sweet regular meeting on Tuesday, March 18, with the only new business being the signing of an agreement between the Board of Elections and City of Hiwassee for the county to conduct the city's elections this year.

"It basically talks about reimbursements the county would get from them for any costs the county would incur to do the election," Bradshaw said.

To start off his Commissioner's Comments, Bradshaw offered condolences to the family of the twin brothers from Lawrenceville who were found deceased on Bell Moun-

tain March 8.

"This was very sad, very tragic, and we pray for their families," Bradshaw said. "The GBI is doing the investigation, and it is ongoing."

"I have no more to say, and I don't know anything more to say anyway because it is an ongoing investigation. I do want to ask our community to actively pray for those families."

Switching gears to a much lighter subject, Bradshaw announced that the recently awarded Splash Pad began construction earlier that day at the Towns County Beach.

As previously reported, planning for the Splash Pad has been ongoing for over two years, to include a successful application for a 50/50 match-

ing grant totaling \$316,000 to pay for the project, with half coming from SPLOST collections and half from federal monies.

"When you drive by the area, you'll see the work in progress, and hopefully we'll have that done by the time the good weather gets here so that our children and visitors can use it," Bradshaw said. "We're very excited about that."

Concurrently, the county is building a community pavilion and public restrooms next to the Pickleball Courts, to be erected in part using inmate labor to save money.

"The pavilion next door has been started," Bradshaw said. "The rough plumbing has been done; and the slab has been poured. We're waiting on some materials and some

labor.

"We use inmates as much as we can, but they are not very skilled, so a local contractor, Larry Hedden, will be helping to oversee that work for us. They should be getting started in the next couple of weeks."

As usual, Bradshaw highlighted the state of county finances for guests of the meeting.

"That's something that is always on my mind and the minds of (County Finance Director) Andrea Anderson and (County Clerk) Brenda McKinney," Bradshaw said. "So far, we are where we should be."

"The next county meeting that we have, Ms. Anderson ... will have a report for
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Commissioner Bradshaw was excited to let people know about Splash Pad progress last week. Photo by Shelly Knight

Two volunteer firefighters arrested in separate cases

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation arrested two Towns County volunteer firefighters last week for separate alleged offenses.

On Monday, March 17, the GBI arrested and charged volunteer firefighter Scott Kerlin with misdemeanor obstruction.

Kerlin, 42, of Hiwassee, is accused of taking photos of the Lewis twins' death scene and sharing them publicly this month. He is innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

As background, the GBI has been investigating the deaths of twin brothers Qaadir Malik Lewis and Naazir Rahim Lewis, both 19, of Lawrenceville in Gwinnett County.

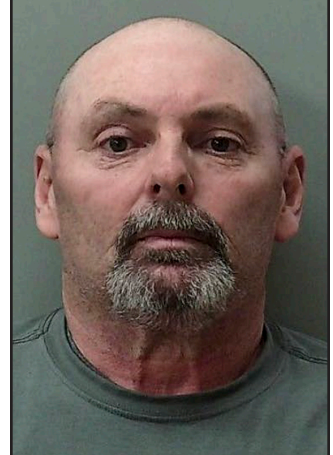
The investigation began after hikers reported finding the twins deceased with gunshot wounds at the top of Bell Mountain in Hiwassee on the morning of Saturday, March 8.

A GBI Medical Examiner has completed autopsies for the twins, but the official Medical Examiner ruling and results are pending additional forensic tests, according to the GBI.

The preliminary investigation has revealed the deaths



Scott Kerlin



Wayne Canterbury

to be a murder-suicide, though the death investigation remains active and ongoing, per the GBI.

Last week, Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw described Kerlin's alleged crime as "disturbing" and confirmed that the volunteer firefighter had been fired from his paid-on-call position after admitting to breaking Fire Department protocol.

Unlike career firefighters, volunteers often work primarily in other professions and are paid for responding to emergencies as they are able.

It came to light last week that a photo of the death scene allegedly taken by Ker-

lin - which eventually made its way onto social media - "had been shared with some of our students on Monday, (March 17)," according to Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong.

"In collaboration with local law enforcement, our administration promptly initiated an investigation and took appropriate measures to ensure the photo was no longer in the possession of any students," Berrong said.

The superintendent added that the students involved were unaware of the illegal nature of how the photo was initially distributed "and were
See Firefighter Arrests, Page 6

Special Election candidate qualifying is next week

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Candidate qualifying will take place next week for the June 17 Hiwassee Special Election to fill the currently vacant mayoral seat, the term of which expires after 2025, and a council post through 2027 that will soon be vacated.

Special Election qualifying will start Tuesday, April 1, and run through Thursday, April 3, from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. inside City Hall at 50 River Street, with an hour lunch break from 1-2 p.m. The qualifying fees are \$780 for Mayor and \$72 for Post 3 Councilmember.

Qualifying packets may be obtained at City Hall. As previously reported, since former mayor Liz Ordiales resigned last June, mayoral duties have been conducted by Mayor Pro Tempore Jay Chastain Jr., a longtime member of the Hiwassee City Council.

According to the city charter, however, in the event of a vacancy, a new mayor must be elected "unless such vacancy occurs within three months of the expiration of the term of that office," in which case, a successor mayor may be appointed by the council.

But the currently unexpired mayoral term ends Dec. 31 of this year, well outside the three-month mark for appointment, so the city must call an election.

One of the reasons a special election has not already occurred is because the city has been working with the Towns County Board of Elections to arrive at a new agree-



ment for the county to host municipal elections, including the regular city elections scheduled for November.

Last year, the Elections Board terminated the former intergovernmental agreement to negotiate a new, amended contract, with the biggest change being that the agreement will now automatically terminate each year to allow greater flexibility to both parties in amending the arrangement.

The new contract has since been approved by the Elections Board and City Council.

As for the council seat up for grabs in June, that's to fill the unexpired term of Councilman Chastain, who has publicly announced he will be stepping down from the council to run for mayor, as required by the state. Chastain's Post 3 council term runs through Dec. 31, 2027.

The last day to register to vote for the June 17 Special Election is May 19.

Early voting will run May 27 to June 13 inside the Towns County Elections and

Voter Registration Office at 67 Lakeview Drive, Suite A, in Hiwassee. Early voting hours will be 9 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., with Saturday voting to be held May 31 and June 7, same location and hours.

Regular absentee ballots by mail may be requested beginning on March 31 through June 6 at the Elections Office.

The Special Election will be in addition to the Municipal General Election on Nov. 4, which will see the regularly scheduled elections of mayor as well as Council Posts 1 and 2, currently held by Amy Barrett and Patsy Owens, for four-year terms running Jan. 1, 2026, through Dec. 31, 2029.

Qualifying for the Nov. 4 Municipal General Election will take place Aug. 20-22 at Hiwassee City Hall.

The State of Georgia is also running a Special Election this year for Public Service Commission Districts 2 and 3. The qualifying period, primary and election in these state races coincide with the same dates as the upcoming Hiwassee elections.

Civic Association discusses affordable housing issue

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Towns County Civic Association held its Winter Meeting this month to facilitate discussion of the often-controversial subject of affordable housing.

Association President John Clemens welcomed two groups of people to the Towns County Civic Center on March 6: business representatives, and "influencers" who hold sway over bringing more housing into the community.

Local business owners spoke first, with a common theme being a concern for employee housing. Brasstown Valley Resort District Manager Jonathan "Jon" Peels opened by revealing that only a third of his employees live in Towns County.

"We do have a challenge with recruitment, but that doesn't mean that I'm here to tell you I support low-income housing," Peels said, advocating for "something that's



Towns County Civic Association President John Clemens in the organization's Winter Meeting on March 6.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

affordable for our employees and future employees to live."

Closing out with a recommendation, Peels added that developers should "leave the restrictions off of it so that our employees can actually live there."

For his part, Blue Ridge Mountain EMC General Man-

ager Allan Glidewell pointed out a rising pattern on both the local and national levels.

"We're not just alone here in our area, but nationwide, we're experiencing issues with hiring, (and) we're experiencing issues with housing costs," said Glidewell, re-
See Affordable Housing, Page 6

Towns County man arrested for indecent exposure in NC

News Special

HAYESVILLE, N.C. - The Clay County Sheriff's Office in North Carolina arrested a Towns County man for indecent exposure on Wednesday, March 19.

That day, Sheriff's Detectives observed a white-in-color Chevrolet Trail Blazer parked at the Chatuge Recreational Area and surveilled an unclothed man who was later identified as 79-year-old Harrison Leslie Thorpe of Towns County, according to the Clay County Sheriff's Office.

Thorpe remained in his vehicle and was observed masturbating while he

watched three women and three children who were enjoying an afternoon at the lake, according to the Clay County Sheriff's Office.

After verifying his actions, detectives approached the man, who was completely nude, and took him into custody without incident.

Thorpe was taken to the Clay County Detention Center where he was charged with three felony counts of indecent exposure and three misdemeanor counts of indecent exposure.



He is currently being held in the Clay County Detention Center on a \$225,000 secured bond. Thorpe is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

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Hiwassee DDA Meeting Schedule See Page 2



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Blue Ridge 1,678.33
Chatuge 1,920.36
Nottely 1,765.80

Job Fair @ Towns Co. High April 3 See Page 6

Banff Mtn. Film Festival Saturday See Page 7



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United
Community

County Meeting...from Page 1

us. We always do percentages for each department so that we can track everything. She is actually working on that right now. That will be ready for the May meeting.

"The April meeting is going to be cancelled because I am going to be out of town, and I cannot reschedule that. I do think we'll have a called meeting in April, and we will put that on the website because we will put out a bid for steel bridges."

In terms of bridges, Bradshaw said the county still has a few that are wooden, "and our goal over time is to get rid of them."

"They are very expensive to maintain," he said. "You've got to replace the wood a lot because of the water. So, we have an opportunity now with Young Harris to put

a steel grate in place of the wood.

"And they are very expensive, however, we can use a part of the (Department of Transportation) grant. We have to put this work out to bid because we know it's going to be over \$100,000. But over time, it's going to save us a lot of money because we're always working on the bridges.

"Therefore, we'll have to do a called meeting about the 17th of April to open up the bid, but we'll put that information on the website."

Finally, Bradshaw said he wanted to remind people to recycle.

"I mentioned this several months ago – it used to be that we did not recycle glass, but we've made an agreement with Union County, so we now can take glass," Bradshaw

said. "We also do cardboard, motor oil, antifreeze and so on. We're working on plastic.

"We are going to get some more signage up there (at the Transfer Station) to let people know where and what the bins are. We will be looking at what we do and don't recycle so we can do better.

"The building is separate from where you dump your garbage. We want to get some signage up there to bring it to people's minds, because we do a lot of recycling and want to do more."

Bradshaw adjourned the meeting at 6:20 p.m. The public is encouraged to attend the regular county meeting each month. Unless otherwise posted, county meetings take place the third Tuesday of each month at 5:30 p.m. inside the Towns County Courthouse.

Firefighter Arrests...from Page 1

fully cooperative with the administration during the investigation."

In a completely separate incident, the GBI arrested another Towns County volunteer firefighter on Monday, March 17.

Wayne Canterbury, 55, of Hiwassee, has been charged with two counts of misdemeanor false statements or falsified records and one count of felony computer forgery. He was processed and booked into the Towns County Sheriff's Office.

As background, the GBI

was requested to assist with a theft investigation involving Canterbury on Dec. 12, 2024.

The investigation uncovered evidence that Canterbury had falsified documents pertaining to the Firefighter Pension Fund and committed computer forgery, per the GBI.

"This investigation is active and ongoing," per the GBI. "Anyone with information is encouraged to call the GBI Tipline at 800-597-TIPS (8477), online at <https://gbi.georgia.gov/submit-tips-online>, or by downloading the See Something,

Send Something mobile application.

"Once the investigation is complete, it will be turned over to the Enotah Circuit District Attorney's Office for prosecution."

In addition to being a volunteer firefighter, Canterbury also serves as a Towns County E-911 Dispatcher. Commissioner Bradshaw said last week that Canterbury would be suspended without pay pending the outcome of the case, as he, too, is innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

Towns County Retired Educators Scholarship Applications due soon

Towns County Retired Educators Association (TCREA) is committed to excellence in education and is pleased to announce the availability of two scholarships for Towns County college students and teachers to help them further their academic careers and fulfill their potential.

College students who are legal residents of Towns County currently enrolled in an accredited education program who will be at least a college junior in the 2025 academic year and have at least a 3.0 GPA are eligible for the TCREA Emerging Educators Scholarship. The amount of

the scholarship varies by year; for 2025 the scholarship is \$1,000.

Current teachers who hold a Georgia teaching certificate and are legal residents of Towns County or employed at a school in Towns County and are pursuing an advanced degree or additional subject endorsement are eligible for the TCREA Advanced Degree Scholarship. Applicants must be enrolled in or accepted into an accredited advanced education degree program or an endorsement program for additional subject specialty during the year in which the scholarship is awarded. Currently enrolled applicants

must have at least a 3.0 GPA and be in good academic standing with their college or university. The amount of the scholarship varies by year; for 2025 the scholarship is \$500.

For more information or to request an application for TCREA scholarships, please send an e-mail to TCREA.SC@gmail.com. Applications will also be available at the Towns County Board of Education Office. Completed applications for scholarships should be e-mailed to TCREA.SC@gmail.com or mailed to the address on the application form. Applications must be received by April 11, 2025, to be considered. Scholarships will be awarded at the annual TCREA banquet in May.

Air Force Veteran Harry Wilke receives Quilt of Valor for service

Another local veteran, Robert Harry Wilke, was honored by Appalachian Hospice and Quilt of Valor Outreach Group of the Misty Mountain Quilters Guild with a Quilt of Valor on Friday, March 7, 2025 at his home. Robert's wife, Wanda, and one of their sons were there to see their hero be honored.

Mr. Wilke served in the US Air Force active duty from September 1972 until September 1974. While in active duty he served as an Air Force aircraft maintenance specialist in the 4485 Test Squadron, TAC.

Robert transferred into the US Air Force Reserves in September 1974 and remained a reservist until July 1978.

After leaving the Air Force, he worked as a Police officer in the Chicago area until he moved to Leesburg, Florida and joined their Police Department where he retired after a 35 year career of being a police officer.

Robert met and married his wife, Wanda, in Leesburg and had two sons. The sons were both named after their father, Robert Harry Wilke, (R.H. Wilke II and III). After Robert's retirement, he and his family left Florida and now reside here in Blairsville.

Mr. Wilke's quilt was made and provided by quilters in Quilt of Valor group of the local Misty Mountain Quilters Guild.

The Quilts of Valor Foundation was started by a military mom, Catherine Robert's, when her first quilt of red, white, blue, and gold was awarded to a wounded Army soldier in the Walter Reed Medical Center in 2003. From that first quilt to the present, over 400,000 quilts have been



Air Force Veteran Harry Wilke

awarded to veterans in all 50 states and some overseas made by 1,000's of quilters with hearts which love and want to show honor to the men and women who have served our country in WW II, Korea, Viet Nam, Iraq, and Afghanistan wars.

Anyone who would like to nominate an honorably discharged veteran or one who is presently serving this great nation with a Quilt of Valor can contact Susan Young slyoung28906@gmail.com who is a liaison for QOV Outreach Group of Misty Mountain

Quilters Guild.

There are three Award ceremonies scheduled this year at the Historical Union Courthouse on the Square: May 10, August 9, and November 8. There are many in our community who could be honored in the way Mr. Wilke has been. Help us show them our appreciation with a "one of a kind" quilt for their service. To learn more about Appalachian Hospice and volunteer opportunities, please reach out to Cyndi Forsyth at 706-781-0924, c.forsyth@appalachian-hospice.com.

Affordable Housing...from Page 1

ognizing the difficulties that young people face today when it comes to making a living.

To match and exceed the rates of fast-food workers, the EMC has had to raise its pay rates to recruit linemen and customer support representatives. Ultimately, Glidewell said the EMC is facing a hiring dilemma, of which housing is "only a part."

Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce President Julie Payne offered some insight on the bigger picture of local business, saying that most of the county's income comes from tourism and support-based jobs.

In 2023, Georgia had a total economic impact of \$79.7 billion from tourism, and Towns County's portion of that totaled \$95.6 million, allowing for an opening of 561 jobs.

Payne, too, offered up some grim housing statistics. 2019 data showed that the average sales price for a home in Towns County was \$269,869. That price jumped steeply by 2024 by more than \$231,000, resulting in an average sale of \$494,581.

In addition, the number of homes in Towns County has gone down; in 2019, there were 358, while in 2024, there were 226 on the market.

"Over the past two years (in) my role as chamber president, I have seen how tourism in our area brings the need for additional employees to businesses," Payne observed. "We need the employees to keep these businesses open."

Next, Clemens opened the floor to county officials. Up first was Dr. Darren Berrong, Superintendent of Towns County Schools.

"I'm kind of on both sides of the aisle here because we have a shortage with hiring as well, but also, on the governmental side, we're in the school system," Berrong said. "I can tell you that over the past 10 years, when we would have a teaching position open, we would have 15, 20 applicants.

"We would just have a slew of applicants that we could go through, and we could choose the best candidate we could find. Right now, we may get five or six."

Berrong shared that School Finance Director Myra Underwood had calculated the wages and living costs of a first-year teacher residing in Georgia.

The average rate of income is \$2,700 monthly after subtracting benefits and insurance. This would be totally depleted in a short time if the teacher wanted to own a home, as a house worth \$375,000 on a 30-year mortgage plan would require \$2,700 per month in payments.

Like Glidewell's earlier acknowledgment, Berrong noted that even if a married



Hiwassee DDA Chair Scott Benton attended the Civic Association meeting this month to add to the discussion about local "affordable housing."

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

couple tried to buy a home, their income would be taken up by bills, gas costs, maintenance and other necessary payments.

"Low-income housing does nothing for my school system; my teachers would not qualify for that," said Berrong, stating that the issue lies in defining affordable housing. "Right now, these people just can't buy those houses. If they do, they are literally living paycheck to paycheck and that is it – that's all they can do."

Hiwassee Acting Mayor Jay Chastain Jr. also spoke that evening, recognizing upfront that there is a need for affordable housing. Not only that, but it trickles down and impacts local business and services.

"Basically, the cost of living has outpaced the wages, making it hard for a working family – especially young professionals," Chastain observed, using his extensive EMS experience to provide some insight into how first responders are feeling the impact of a housing problem.

Chastain also recognized that some of the side effects of affordable housing may not be desirable to the community, such as rising property values, but ultimately, he believes that more housing options will lead to a more stable community environment.

"The concerns are understandable, but the data tells a different story. Studies have shown that well-planned, affordable housing developments do not increase the property values. In fact, they often improve communities by attracting businesses and stabilizing the workforce," said Chastain, adding that crime may also be lowered due to less stress.

Hiwassee Downtown Development Authority Chair Scott Benton addressed the audience as "a resident and a developer." He recalled that when he first introduced his Whiskey Mountain development to the community, it was met with "uproar" due to confusion between affordable housing and low-income

housing.

Benton said that, to build a house in 2025 without taking the costs of land into consideration, is \$220 per square foot, minimum. "Affordable" is subjective and must be defined, but no matter what, making a house livable – complete with modern amenities – is an expensive undertaking.

"That minimum cost to build a house is \$275,000, \$280,000. How is that affordable?" Benton said. "That's if I built that house with zero profit, if I built it with the good of my own heart, not looking to make a single dime."

Benton said that low-cost rentals may be potential solutions, but otherwise, Hiwassee "is not geared" for affordable housing projects until the economy corrects itself.

Economic Development Director Denise McKay offered some updates on the in-progress Young Harris apartment project, reassuring the public that tenants will undergo background checks and rent will be restricted by income.

Those rates will be evaluated again closer to opening time, expected sometime in 2026, but McKay did share the numbers calculated two years ago, when the project was conceptualized.

For a three-bedroom apartment, maximum income for one person was at \$38,500 yearly. For one bedroom, income levels ranged from \$28,500 to \$34,000. Monthly rent fell between \$486 and \$923.

"Our families that work in Towns County are on the wait list already. I know some of them that are on there, and it's locals, it's people that have moved in," said McKay, noting that these people include anyone from struggling retirees to young families.

"I don't really have anything to add to what (the other speakers) said, but we need your support if we can do this and bring people here to live and work in our communities," McKay closed before the start of a brief Q&A session geared toward all speakers.