

Towns County Herald

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GMF receives big award at jam-packed rodeo

By Todd Forrest
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Nearly 10,000 fans flocked to the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds over Memorial Day Weekend for the Southern Rodeo Company's Hiwassee Pro Rodeo on Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

Saturday's standing-room-only crowd topped out at more than 4,500 people as the evening's entertainment began with the Fairgrounds earning an International Professional Rodeo Association award as one of North America's best new rodeos.

Accepting the honor were Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason, Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw and Southern Rodeo co-founder Robin Brooks.

"(Thomason) is one of

the hardest working women I've ever known," Bradshaw said. "She and Georgia Mountain Fair President Matt Turpin are a big reason why this rodeo is here and so successful.

"Hilda does an amazing job and is constantly promoting this area, the Fair and the Anderson Music Hall."

The event opened with a special Memorial Day ceremony featuring the presentation of colors set to Johnny Cash's 1974 Stars and Stripes tribute "Ragged Old Flag."

"We've had a great turnout, but I want us to remember it's Memorial Day Weekend and what that's all about," Bradshaw said. "We have so much to be thankful for because so many people made the ultimate sacrifice for the freedoms we enjoy in this country, and we give thanks to God for those freedoms we enjoy."

Nate Browning of Hiwassee's Calvary Baptist Church delivered the invocation, and Nashville recording artist and White County native Destin Bennett performed "The Star-Spangled Banner."

When Bennett concluded the anthem by belting out "the home of the brave," the chutes flung open and the fearless cowboys and cowgirls delivered a thrilling performance for the jam-packed audience.

As the sun sank over Towns County, the fans were treated to bucking horses, bulls, world-class contestants and specialty acts from all over the nation.

Despite talent coming from far and wide, the fan-favorite by a wide margin was Hiwassee's own Andrew Turpin, son of GMF President Matt Turpin.

"None of this would



Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason, Southern Rodeo co-founder Robin Brooks and Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw during the IPRA award presentation at the Hiwassee Pro Rodeo Saturday. Photo by Todd Forrest

be possible without all of the fans, our volunteers and our sponsors," Thomason said, "especially Nelson's Tractor,

who provided the equipment to prepare the grounds for this event."

Thomason made sure to remind the audience of the upcoming rodeo over Labor Day Weekend. Tickets are already

See Hiwassee Pro Rodeo, Page 8A

Mayor Gibby addresses new Young Harris Franchise Fee

By Andrea Gibby
Young Harris Mayor
News Special

Dear Young Harris Community,

As mayor, I understand that there have been questions about the new franchise fee. This letter will address the franchise fee and the misinformation that has been going around regarding the fee. This will also explain how we reached our conclusions and give you more information.

I will begin with our staff size, benefits and personnel costs. We only have six staff. The six employees include office staff, main street director and public works. We keep our payroll and benefits small. However, like everyone else, our costs have gone up. 2023 Property and Liability Insurance increased by 9%. Our major costs for operating the city have gone up on average by 30% since 2021.

Some things you may not know have to do with daily operations. Did you know that the city pays for the streetlights/usage within the city limits? The city spends around \$10,000 annually to make sure the streets are lit and safe. In

the last three years, the city has spent over \$173,000 on roads/streets for upgrades, repairs and maintenance.

One other thing that you might not be aware of is the cost to the city for the Hwy 515 expansion and bypass. The Georgia Department of Transportation is bearing the cost to move our water and sewer lines. The city has had to pay for the engineering for this infrastructure move. We have spent around \$170,000 in city funding - your funding - to make sure, when the road is built and our lines are moved, that they are moved and re-installed correctly. When the bypass around Young Harris is completed, the big trucks will be routed around the city, making our town safer.

Did you know that we replace culverts, fix roads and make sure trees are not blocking the roads? We spend close to \$17,000 a year on mowing, weeds and lawn-work in the city. This includes the sidewalks on Hwy 76 and the grasses along Hwy 66.

In reviewing the budget, we had to make some decisions. There are only so many ways a city brings in revenues



Andrea Gibby
Young Harris Mayor

for general operations. This year we must repave part of Maple Street because there is a crack, and the road is sinking. There will be some additional engineering for the Hwy 515/75 bypass due to GDOT splitting the construction into three phases. That will cost between \$30,000 and \$50,000. The estimated cost for the Timberline Pump Station renovation came in over \$1 million.

Property taxes, LOST and SPLOST (Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax that goes to specific projects

See Young Harris Fee, Page 8A

MECHS graduates 22 in Class of 2023 commencement



Mountain Education Charter High School Class of 2023 Union Site Graduates

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE - Mountain Education Charter High School held its Union Site Graduation Ceremony on Tuesday, May 23, celebrating the accomplishments of the Class of 2023 inside the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center.

Featuring 22 students, the Class of 2023 is made up of students from both Towns

and Union counties.

Union County graduates include William Matthew Anderson, Keirra Reena Barnes, Zachary Terrell Barrett, Elijah Stephen Batura, Curtis James Beavers, Rylee Shae Blevins, Makayla Sky Bouchard, Gabriella Marie Campos, Lillian Rae Carpenter, Alexander James Clay, Makayla Brooke Davenport, James Dalton Dockery, Ashleigh Taylor Duffey, Faith Dianne Green, River Hughes, Autionna Marie

Lemott, Alexander James McClure, John Ronin Patterson and Zachary Lee Taylor.

Graduates Olivia Oliva Escamilla and Drew Walt Sofield are from Towns County, and Kinley Eva-Marie Long is from Fannin County.

This year's 6 p.m. ceremony saw 10 Honor Graduates, with Sofield receiving High Honors. Joining him as Honor Graduates were Batura, Barnes, Blevins, Bouchard, Duffey, Green, Hughes, Marie

See MECHS Graduation, Page 8A

Preparedness highlights talks in public safety meeting



Towns County Fire Chief Harold Copeland and Sheriff Ken Henderson were two of the important players attending Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw's public safety meeting last week. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw convened a public safety

meeting at the Civic Center on Tuesday, May 23, to go over protocols and preparedness in the event of a major public emergency.

In particular, discussions

focused on how local emergency agencies would respond to events like a public shooting or a hostage situation.

"We're just talking about

See Public Safety Meeting, Page 8A

'Summer Heat' organizers welcomed to county meeting

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

In his May 16 regular meeting at the Towns County Temporary Courthouse Offices, Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw was happy to welcome Wayne Fiorito and Jeff

Pierot of the "Summer Heat of Towns County" first responder fundraiser initiative.

To commemorate the occasion, Bradshaw proclaimed the third Saturday of June each year to be "Towns County Public Safety & First Responders Day" to coincide with the an-

nual Summer Heat event aimed at "serving those who serve us."

The nonprofit initiative does this by raising money to create a financial "safety net" for all Towns County's first responders" should they become

See Summer Heat, Page 2A



Commissioner Bradshaw, center, with Jeff Pierot and Wayne Fiorito of the nonprofit first responder resource organization Summer Heat of Towns County for a May 16 proclamation signing. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

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Lake Levels

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Chatuge 1,926.24
Nottely 1,776.89

TCMS Student Honors Program

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Hiwassee Night Market Friday, June 2

See page 1B

Farmers Market Opens on Saturday

See page 1B

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Summer Heat...from Page 1A

unable to work for any reason and, by extension, unable to pay their bills.

“But we can’t do this without the community,” Fiorito said, inviting everyone to attend the upcoming extravaganza.

This year’s rain-or-shine event – the Taste of Towns Family Fun Day – is set for Saturday, June 17, from “noon to 4ish” at the Foster Park Recreation Center, and it promises to be “an afternoon of fun for all ages,” according

to <https://summerheatoftownscounty.square.site/>.

“Local musicians will keep you entertained with a variety of music,” per the website. “Craft vendors will be on hand, along with plenty of food options. There will be games and activities for all ages. You can also enjoy watching the kickball tournament between First Responders.”

The Blairsville Cruisers will be in attendance to offer a car show for spectators, and as mentioned above, people will be treated to a Sheriff’s Office and Fire Department “Guns vs Hoses” kickball game at 1 p.m.

Kids especially will enjoy the live 911 demonstration and a drone demo by TCSO – weather permitting – and all manner of public safety vehicles will be on display for inspection by the public.

Speaking of kids, they won’t want to miss any of the games, like balloon darts, floating ducks, ring toss and more, all to feature prizes for lucky winners. And youngsters with particularly good aim can square off with the Sheriff’s Office in a BB gun contest.

Admission is free,

though people may donate by purchasing game tickets, available now at the Summer Heat of Towns County website.

Residents can also support the fundraiser by bidding in the silent auction on June 17, with many items on offer, plus raffles for a Henry Golden Boy Rifle and a Ridgees Resort package, as well as a dunk tank featuring local volunteers – Commissioner Bradshaw included.

According to organizers, “Summer Heat of Towns County is a non-profit organization formed to provide limited financial support for Towns County First Responders should they suffer a debilitating illness or injury after having exhausted all vacation and sick leave and all other means of financial support.

“We are supporting all paid employees and volunteers in good standing in the following agencies: Towns County Sheriff’s Office, City of Hiwassee Police Department, Young Harris College Police Department, Towns County Fire Department, Towns County EMS, and Towns County 911 Dispatch.”

“Led by God on (his) heart,” Fiorito kickstarted Summer Heat last year with a group of dedicated local volunteers who organized a music festival at Anderson Music Hall, successfully raising thousands of dollars to benefit the first responders of the county.

The Family Fun Day continues that tradition in 2023 as the first big fundraiser since the effort became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in January.

“Please spread the word; we want to get as many people out as we can,” Bradshaw said. “This is a great effort these folks are doing. You never know when one of our first responders could be in need outside of what the county government can do, so this is a great fallback for them.”

Unless otherwise advertised, Towns County Commission meetings take place the third Tuesday of each month at 5:30 p.m., for now inside the Temporary Courthouse Offices at the Old Rec Gym.

Bradshaw said construction of the renovation and expansion project at the Towns County Courthouse was shaping up nicely, adding that he did not yet have a date for when the county offices would be able to move from the Old Rec Gym back into the courthouse.

“But as soon as I know more about a date, a month, then I will definitely report that,” Bradshaw said. “But as far as costs and things like that, no surprises, everything is going on schedule.”

Food Pantry Food Distribution

The Food Pantry hours are Monday – Thursday 9 AM– 12 PM with the exception of distribution day. The Distribution is every other Wednesday 11 AM – 2 PM.

Any questions or concerns, please contact Richard Thomas at towns.pantry@ndocsbg.org or (706) 896-4783.

Sons of Confederate Veterans Meeting

David W. Payne Camp 1633, Sons of Confederate Veterans meets the second Thursday of every month at 7 PM, at the Davenport Veterans Building, across the 4-lane from Longhorn Steakhouse in Blairsville. The public is welcome to attend.



The VFW is pleased to have you come and have Fish Fry with us at our post on Sunny Side for \$12 or \$15 all you can eat.

The nights of the fish fry is still the second (2nd) and the fourth (4th) Fridays of each month Remember no tax and no tip. We hope to see you there.

VFW Bingo

The VFW Post 7807 in Hiwassee has Bingo every Sunday afternoon at 2:30 PM. Doors open at 1:30 PM.

We are located on Highway 288, Sunnyside Road, Hiwassee, Ga. Food and drinks will be available. Come join us and have fun! Starting January 16. For more info call 706 896-8387.

Arrest and Fire Reports

Local law enforcement provides the following information for publication. Names are spelled as they were when received from the law enforcement agencies. It is important to remember that the following individuals have been charged only and are presumed innocent until such time as they are found guilty by a court or enter a guilty plea. Addresses of persons under arrest are no longer available from Sheriff’s Office.



ARREST REPORT

Towns County Jail
Sheriff Ken Henderson

- 05/26/23 Jessica Renee Duckworth, age 26
Serve court sentence 72 hrs
- 05/23/23 Jake Clint Andrews, age 30
Theft by taking-felony
- 05/23/23 Dale Robert Carver, age 51
Failure to appear for fingerprintable charge-misdemeanor (2), probation violation (when probation terms are altered) for fingerprintable charge (2)
- 05/27/23 Amy Martina Dorsey, age 40
Marijuana-possess less than 1 OZ, unlawful purchase/possession 20 OZ or less of low THC oil
- 05/27/23 Galen Tyrese Lloyd, age 19
Expired vehicle tag or decal, marijuana-possess less than 1 OZ, unlawful purchase/possession 20 OZ or less of low THC oil, driving without a valid license (misdemeanor)
- 05/26/23 Moriah Suzanne Obermann, age 31
Aggravated assault, battery-family violence (1st offense) misdemeanor, terroristic threats and acts-misdemeanor
- 05/27/23 Anthony James Pickens, age 17
Unlawful purchase/possession 20 OZ or less of low THC oil, marijuana-possess less than 1 OZ
- 05/23/23 Frank Daniel Schaefer, age 62
Court sentenced 10 days
- 05/27/23 Antwon Maurice Scott-Fields, age 25
Unlawful purchase/possession 20 OZ or less of low THC oil, marijuana-possess less than 1 OZ
- 05/23/23 Jody Richard Anderson, age 42
Weekender
- 05/25/23 Benjamin Jeffery Brown, age 41
Disorderly conduct
- 05/24/23 James Blanchard Dobbins, age 26
Failure to appear for fingerprintable charge-misdemeanor
- 05/26/23 Rocha Cesar Alejandro Gallegos, age 41
Driving while license suspended or revoked (misdemeanor), failure to drive within single lane
- 05/23/23 Kevin Fitzgerald Grishaber, age 32
Failure to appear for fingerprintable charge- felony
- 05/27/23 Kevin Skyler Knight, age 26
Expired vehicle tag or decal, knowingly making a false statement pertaining to motor vehicle insurance required
- 04/16/23 Alan Scott Perkins, age 65
Serving sentence
- 05/25/23 Michael Lynn Towe, age 59
DUI-driving under the influence of alcohol, failure to drive within single lane, improper tag or display, laying drags, open container in vehicle, reckless driving



Movers and Shakers Welcomes State Representative Stan Gunter June 2

The Georgia State Legislative Session begins shortly after the new year and continues for forty session days, usually ending in late April.

Back from the Capital to give us a full rundown of the just completed session, we welcome back State Representative Stan Gunter (GA House 08) this Friday, June 2.

Just to refresh, Georgia’s 8th Congressional District includes Rabun, Towns, Union and a part of White County.

So, get to the Sundance Grill early to get a good seat to hear from and ask questions directly to your elected State



Stan Gunter
Representative. NT(May31.F2)JH



Towns County Farmers Market opens Saturday, June 3, 2023.

We’re looking forward to seeing all our regular vendors along with some new ones in the upcoming summer months. The Market will be open from 9 AM to noon each following Saturday and there is no charge for vendors.

We have plenty of parking for those looking for fresh, garden to table products, local raw honey, hand-made bench-

es, decorated gourds, bird and bat houses, native plants of all shapes and sizes, and many other items. Each year brings something new, so mark your calendars and we will see you there.

The T. C. Farmers Market is located on Hwy. 76, West of Hiwassee, directly across from the entrance to GA Mountain Fairgrounds.

Call Joan Crothers at 706-896-6240 if you need more information. T(May31.A1)JH

Towns County Community Calendar

First Monday of each month:	
School Board... HS/MS Media Center	6:45 pm
Every Tuesday:	
Storytime for Children... TC Library	10:30 am
First Tuesday of each month:	
Hiaw. City Council... City Hall	6 pm
YH City Council... YH City Hall	6:30 pm
Second Tuesday of each month:	
Conventions & Visitors Board... Civic Center	8 am
Second Wednesday of each month:	
Board of Elections... Elections Office	4 pm
Third Monday of each month:	
Planning Commission... Temporary Courthouse	6 pm
Third Tuesday of each month:	
Commissioner’s Mtg... Courthouse	5:30 pm
City of Young Harris Planning Commission...	
Meeting Room in City Hall	5 pm
Water Board... Water Office	6 pm

Hiawassee Pro Rodeo...from Page 1A

on sale for the Sept. 2-3 event at the Fairgrounds featuring the Southern Rodeo Company's second stop of the year in Hiawassee.

"Mark your calendars for Labor Day Weekend and come to Hiawassee to enjoy those two days - it'll be a Saturday

and Sunday," she said. "We're going to do this all over again. Go to our website, georgiamountainfairgrounds.com, and we'll be happy to help you with anything you need."

Thomason also mentioned the Georgia Mountain Fair coming up Aug. 18-26,

as well as performances at the Anderson Music Hall for the Happy Together Tour on June 3, Travis Tritt on June 10, Zach Williams on July 8, the Brotherly Love Tour on Aug. 19, Casting Crowns on Aug. 26, Rodney Carrington on Sept. 23 and more.



A bull rider holds on for dear life during the first night of the Hiawassee Pro Rodeo on Friday, May 26. Photo by Lowell Nicholson



Who doesn't love a good calf-roping event? Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Public Safety Meeting...from Page 1A



Hiawassee Police Chief Jeremy Parker and Macedonia Baptist Pastor Wade Lott waded into the important discussions surrounding public safety in a meeting at the Civic Center May 23. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

a generic problem," said Bradshaw, highlighting that the meeting was about addressing more than just the potential for school shootings. "We don't want to isolate one place (for discussion); we're talking about if there were a problem, a tragedy within the county anywhere."

Several public officials attended the meeting, including Sheriff Ken Henderson, Fire Chief Harold Copeland, Macedonia Baptist Pastor Wade Lott, Hiawassee Police Chief Jeremy Parker, EMS Director Ken Nicholson, EMA/911 Director Marty Roberts, and Towns County Schools Facilities Director Erica Chastain.

After an emergency call goes out and officers arrive on the scene, the next steps, according to Copeland, are for the Fire Department to "secure the perimeter from the public, regardless of where the buildings are," and set up a command post. From there, a perimeter is established.

After law enforcement sweeps the area and neutralizes any threats to reduce the chance for more casualties, firefighters help emergency medical service workers in quickly locat-

ing and extracting victims from the scene.

"That's where all the accountability is," said Copeland, adding that a critical part of setting up a stable response team is in making sure the area is safe enough for EMS to enter. "Obviously, (law enforcement is) going to go do what they have to do: they're going to shoot (if necessary)."

"But as other agencies come in, be it State Patrol, DNR, you've got off-duty Union County deputies around here, too, they may be coming. When they do come, they need to know where that command post is."

Within the command center will be the staging area, where ambulances can safely park. Pastors like Lott and other religious leaders in the community will be present to console loved ones and address emotional trauma.

"We need training from professionals who know what every little step is going to be," Sheriff Henderson said. "This is great that everybody's talking, everybody's in place - that's all good ... (but) the training is key to all of it."

The sheriff suggested going into the school to perform a training drill this summer, and with the agreement of Chastain, it was decided that mid-July would see extensive training in disaster situations.

"We need to actually set up the command post; we need to do the whole deal," Bradshaw said. "We can get some people to donate their time and pretend they're hurt, laying in the (hallways)."

There has yet to be confirmation on where that drill will be held, but suggestions for any of Towns County's schools and Young Harris College were mentioned, and planning will continue.

"We've got to be on-point and ready to go," said Bradshaw, further emphasizing that, should the worst happen, more lives will be saved if the chain of command is prepared.

Until the exercise, Bradshaw agreed with those in the room that Towns County was sufficiently prepared for now; in his own words, the meeting made sure each agency was aware of the role they'd play during a tragedy. Keep an eye out for notifications on when the training will happen.

Young Harris Fee...from Page 1A

(voted on by the public) are the larger forms of revenue for Young Harris. Looking at our options for bringing in additional funds, we had the option to increase property taxes or institute a franchise fee. We have consistently rolled back the city millage rate because we do not want to increase property taxes. Franchise fees are a legal option under the state statute that

allows cities to impose fees for those who use the right-of-way.

The City Council decided that the fairest option for bringing in funds was the franchise fee. The council approved a 4% franchise fee rather than doubling or even tripling property taxes. Everyone pays for electricity. Not everyone pays property taxes. More than half the city is owned by nonprofits

or an educational system. Nonprofits do not pay property taxes. Colleges do not pay property taxes. If we had raised the property taxes, then you who pay those property taxes would be, once again, supplementing those that do not pay property taxes. In the end, it is your decision. If you prefer the city to raise property taxes, please let us know.

MECHS Graduation...from Page 1A

rd, Lillian Rae Davenport, Makayla Brooke Davenport, Escamilla, Hughes and Green.

Once students took their seats onstage following the processional, Honor Student Batura administered the program's greeting, Pledge of Allegiance and National Anthem.

"I heard a quote recently from Nelson Mandela: 'I never lose. I only win or learn,'" said Batura, thanking MECHS staff for their dedication and help with learning. "To all of my fellow classmates, even though there may have been setbacks, we have learned, and we are all winning tonight."

Sofield then gave the High Honor Address after one of MECHS' principals, Brandon Bradburn, announced that Sofield had been recruited by Auburn University and plans on playing baseball for the Tigers. To cheers and applause, he took to the podium.

"My path to graduation was by no means an easy one or a straight one," Sofield said. "Between injury and mental hardship and being on the road for as long as I have, school's been tough to navigate, and I guarantee the majority of my fellow classmates' experiences have been similar."

"The point is, while everyone may have a different end goal, we all have one common goal. That common goal couldn't be reached without the hard work of the students that they put in every night, and certainly not without the level of unwavering love and care these teachers have for their students."

Sofield encouraged his class to continue setting goals "one step at a time," admitting that he wouldn't be standing before the audience that evening had it not been for the tremendous amount of support shown to him during his time at MECHS.

Of course, behind every successful student is a strong support system, and Principal Casey Jones took a moment to ask parents, grandparents, guardians, siblings, friends and others there in support of their graduates to stand. Applause and cheers filled the auditorium.

Graduation Coach Gina Young shared the graduates' plans, relaying that two will attend college; 13 will attend technical college or trade school; three will enter or re-



MECHS Class of 2023 High Honor Graduate Drew Sofield leading his fellow seniors into their commencement exercises on May 23. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

ceived a scholarship from the United Community Bank. Lillian Carpenter received the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship.

Ashley Duffey received the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship, the Derrick Whittle Memorial Scholarship, and the Appalachian Shrine Club Scholarship. Olivia Escamilla received the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship and the Appalachian Shrine Club Scholarship.

Autionna Lemott received the Lions Club Scholarship and the Mountain Education Charter Scholarship.

Kinley Long received the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship. Drew Sofield received the Mountain Education Scholarship and a scholarship from Auburn University.

After the students collected their hard-earned diplomas, they and their loved ones were invited to the Union County High School Cafeteria for a dinner of hot dogs and hamburgers with cake and homemade ice cream for dessert, and some fun with a photo booth with tons of hilarious props.

Congratulations to the Mountain Education Center's Class of 2023!

Elijah Batura received the Derrick Whittle Memorial Scholarship and the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship. C.J. Beavers received the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship. Rylee Blevins received the Dr. Teena Atkins Memorial Scholarship, along with a scholarship from the Blue Ridge Mountain Electric Membership Corporation.

Mikayla Bouchard re-