

Towns County Herald

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Ribbon cutting commemorates return to courthouse

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw had the honor of cutting the ribbon for the updated Towns County Courthouse on Tuesday, June 18.

The event commemorated the first week back conducting official business in the county courthouse after having to hold court proceedings and administrative functions temporarily in the Old Rec Gym since October 2022 to allow for renovation construction.

“We’ve renovated and did a substantial addition because we needed more space, especially for the courtrooms,” Bradshaw said. “Just as an

example, the previous courthouse did not have holding cells when it had court for the prisoners.

“We did not have conference rooms for attorneys and clients. They were talking in the hallways, around the public.

“The building boasts all new heating, all new plumbing, all new windows, all new electrical and insulation, so it’s going to be much more efficient.”

Renovations include totally revamped wings for the District Attorney, Superior Court Clerk, Probate/Magistrate Judge and the Commissioner’s Office, as well as

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As of last week, the renovated Towns County Courthouse is finally open for official county business.

Photo by Shelly Knight

Bradshaw updates retirement benefits, welcomes ag agent

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

On Tuesday, June 18, Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw excitedly marked the milestone of hosting his first regular monthly meeting back inside the renovated Towns County Courthouse, an occasion he identified as a “historical moment” now that construction has finished.

“We’ve been working so hard to get to this day right here,” Bradshaw said. “Now, here it is, and I’m just so thankful.”

To open the business portion of the meeting, Bradshaw signed a resolution to amend the Association County Commissioners of Georgia 401(a) Defined Contribution Plan for Towns County employees and signed an adoption agreement.

According to Investopedia, “a defined contribution plan is a retirement plan ... in which employees contribute a fixed amount or a percentage of their paychecks to an account that is intended to fund their retirements. In addition, the sponsor company can match a portion of employee



Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw relished the “historical moment” of welcoming the public to the first county meeting held in the renovated courthouse last week.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

contributions as an added benefit.”

Previous retirement rates for Towns County matched employee contributions up to 4%, but with this change, contributions can now be matched up to 6%.

“We want to do that to retain our employees and to attract new employees, (because) it’s very competitive out there,” Bradshaw said. “(Six percent) is what most counties are doing, so we were

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City Council seeks solution for apartment development

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Lowcountry Housing Communities joined the Young Harris City Council for a June 4 public hearing about the proposed Valley Trail Apartments, which have been in the works for two years.

The apartments are planned for the area just outside city limits between the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Headquarters and Brasstown Valley Resort, which Young Harris officials are hoping to annex into the city for residential zoning purposes.

Members of the community were given a chance to provide feedback on the apartments in the hearing, during which Ben Elbe and Robert Haley of Lowcountry Housing provided a brief informational presentation on the project.

Lowcountry Housing came about in 2010 as a company dedicated to offering affordable housing thanks to the work of private developers entering into “public-private agreements.”

The development company manages nearly 40 properties throughout Georgia and South Carolina, and the managers want the community to know that “it is not a Section 8 project” but instead utilizes tax credits to make development – and therefore rents – more affordable.

Ultimately, what drove Lowcountry to consider Young Harris as a possible site for new affordable housing options were its lack of similar developments and the city’s status as a GICH community – a part of the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing.

“We don’t take where we go very lightly. We really make



Main Street Program Director Rosemary Royston and Young Harris City Councilman Steve Clark in the June city meeting.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

sure that we find an area that needs (affordable housing), that wants it, and then we’re going to be competitive,” Elbe said. “We don’t have the manpower or the resources to just waste time chasing stuff all over.”

The 33-acre property has been subdivided into a 10-acre lot and a 23-acre lot, with the latter to be set aside for future development. Meanwhile, the apartments will feature 44 units of mixed one-, two- and three-bedroom options, and may even include special additions like a community room, business center and fitness center.

Rent is ultimately dependent on government standards, which state that no more than 30% of an individual’s income should be spent on rent and utilities. Suggested rents are \$668, \$801 or \$1,069 monthly depending on income for a one-bedroom unit, whereas a

two-bedroom unit might run anywhere between \$802, \$926 and \$1,284.

One-bedroom apartments might measure around 750 square feet, while a two-bedroom unit would come in at 964 square feet and a three-bedroom would take up 1,157 square feet. Once started, construction would take approximately 12 to 14 months to complete.

And there’s already interest in the project. Despite rumors that the apartments would be used to house criminals and “out-of-towners,” Elbe and Haley noted that everyone who has approached them so far has been local.

“I’ve not received one inquiry (like), ‘Hey, I live in Atlanta, or I live in Macon or I live in Charlotte,’” said Elbe, adding that anyone who moves

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Civic Association volunteers discuss role in community



The Mountain Movers and Shakers packed into Sundance Grill on Friday to hear from leaders in the Towns County Civic Association.

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

On Friday, June 21, the Mountain Movers and Shakers welcomed Michael Courey and John Clemmons of the Towns County Civic Association to share information about the purpose of their organiza-

tion. Civic Association Secretary Joan Crothers opened the breakfast meeting inside Sundance Grill with the group’s origin story, which dates back 20 years.

“In 2005, a pitch for an interstate reaching from Savannah to Oak Ridge, Tennes-

see, was proposed,” Crothers said. “The interstate would have run directly through the town of Hiwassee, wiped out all the businesses that are on Main Street and made our little town a big town. The citizens of the area exploded.

“A group of homeowners

See Movers & Shakers, Page 7

Young Harris woman killed in three-car crash in Blairsville

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

BLAIRSVILLE – A Young Harris resident died in a three-car crash at the intersection of Georgia 515 and Doc Thomas Ridge Road on Wednesday, June 19.

Patricia Ann Russo, 73, was driving north on Doc Thomas Ridge in her Acura MDX, approaching a stop sign, according to the Georgia State Patrol.

After stopping, Russo failed to yield for a Subaru Outback traveling east on Georgia 515. She turned left directly in front of it, and the front of the Subaru struck the



northbound shoulder.

Russo was pronounced deceased on scene and a passenger in her vehicle was airlifted to Northeast Georgia Medical Center for emergency medical treatment.

No serious injuries were reported in the other vehicles involved in the accident, but the two occupants of the Subaru were transported by ambulance for medical evaluation.

The accident occurred around 4 p.m. after Russo had picked up a friend to attend a church function.

Russo lived in North Palm Beach, Florida, and owned a part-time residence on Townsend Mill Road in Young Harris.

left side of the Acura, per GSP. Following the initial impact, the Acura traveled into the westbound lanes and was struck in the front by a Toyota Tundra that attempted to avoid the collision by going off the

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Chatuge 1,925.17
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Chamber Chronicles

The official source of Towns County Chamber News

Wednesday, June 26, 2024

Welcome to our Newest Members!

Rose of Sharon Herbs LLC- Joyce Alphin, Owner- 293 Hwy 180, Hiwassee, GA. (712) 845-6308 Email: roseofsharonherbs@gmail.com Facebook: Rose of Sharon Herbs, LLC; www.roseofsharonherbs.com Herbs have been a way of life for me for 46 yrs. My products were created for needs directly related to my family. This business allows me to create help for others from the very nature God had intended for us to use for healing and nourishment to our bodies.

Chamber Events & Programs

Ribbon Cutting- Firehouse 17 Pizza and More! On Thursday, June 13 Lake Chatuge Chamber



of Commerce held a ribbon cutting at Firehouse 17 Pizza and More located at 1717 Hwy 17, Young Harris, GA. Todd & crew had a special pizza deal for the evening and it was delicious! Thank you, Todd, and Welcome to the Chamber!!

Made in Georgia Festival 2024- See our ad in this week's paper! It is back... Our annual Made in Georgia Festival. The event will be held on Saturday, June 29 & Sunday, June 30 at the Towns County Recreation & Conference Center. \$5 admission and kids are FREE. Hours: 10am-4pm daily. New for 2024- Mountain Breeze Band on the lawn Saturday! For more information visit golakechatuge.com or call 706-896-4966.

Check out our calendar at www.golakechatuge.com for all our member sponsored and community events.

Follow us: Facebook & Instagram: Visit Lake Chatuge
Thanks to all our members for their continued support!

Additionally, we'd like to thank these Platinum and Gold Members:

PLATINUM MEMBERS: Blue Ridge Mountain EMC; Century 21 Black Bear Realty; Hiwassee KOA Holiday; Lake Chatuge Lodge; Majestic Mountain Getaways, Inc.; Mountain Realty; Peach State Federal Credit Union; South State Bank; The Ridges Resort on Lake Chatuge; United Community Bank; Veteran Contracting LLC; Windstream Communications.

GOLD MEMBERS: Bennett Equipment; Blairsville Printing; Brasstown Manor; Brasstown Valley Resort & Spa; Brother's Restaurant at Willow Ranch; Chatuge Regional Hospital; Chick-fil-A of Blairsville; Erlanger Western Carolina Hospital; Hiwassee Package Store; Holiday Inn Express & Suites-Hiwassee; Homestead Hospice; Hughes Accounting; K. Boyer Photography; Little Bear Rentals & Property Management; Men on The Move; NeuroSport Physical Therapy LLC; Regency SouthernCare Hospice; Ridgeline Exteriors & Roofing; ServiceMaster Restoration; Tri-County Office Supply, and Young Harris College.

For information on becoming a member of the Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce, visit www.golakechatuge.com or call Mary Ann at (706) 896-4966 or email her at LCChamber2021@gmail.com.

Towns County Retired Educators wrap up year with Awards Banquet

The Towns County Retired Educators Association (TCREA) held their annual banquet on Thursday, May 2, at the Hawg Wild BBQ & Catfish House in Hiwassee.

Two scholarships were awarded, the Towns County STAR Student, and STAR

Teacher were recognized, new officers were installed, and members of TCREA were recognized for their service. Donna Howell, President-Elect, presented the awards and certificates.

Each year, TCREA Awards two scholarships,

one for an undergraduate, and one for a teacher pursuing an advanced degree or certification.

The Emerging Educator Scholarship is awarded to a student who is a declared education major and is at least a junior by the fall of

the year the scholarship is awarded. The student must be a legal resident of Towns County and have a GPA of at least 3.0.

Former TCREA President, Margie Winkler, installed new officers for 2024-2025, President, Donna

Howell, and Vice-President/President Elect, Katherin Hunter.

The TCREA would like to thank Hawg Wild BBQ & Catfish House for the use of their meeting facility. And they wish continued success for all those recognized at

this year's banquet.

The new TCREA meeting year will begin in September 2024. If you are interested in membership, please contact Paige Marlow, Membership Coordinator at tpmarlow@windstream.net.



Brady Wilson of Hiwassee is the 2024 TCREA Emerging Educator Scholarship winner. He attends Young Harris College and is majoring in Elementary Education.

The Advanced Degree Scholarship is awarded to a student with a current teaching certificate who is enrolled in, or accepted into, an accredited advanced degree program or subject endorsement program. They must have a GPA of at least 3.0 and must be a legal resident of Towns County or teach in a school in Towns County.



Kimberly Petty of Young Harris is the 2024 TCREA Advanced Degree Scholarship winner. She teaches at Towns County Elementary School.

Kimberly graduated from Young Harris College with her Bachelor of Education degree, graduated with honors from Mercer University with her master's degree in Elementary Education in May, and has been accepted into Mercer's Accomplished Teacher Program to pursue her specialist degree.



Towns County STAR Teacher, Shane Casey, was presented with a certificate for his excellence in teaching and a prize.

Mr. Casey came to Towns County High School 8 years ago after teaching 25 years in Alabama. This is his final year at TCHS as he is retiring at the end of the school year.



Towns County 2024 STAR Student, Dhriti Patel, was presented with a prize and a certificate acknowledging her academic achievements and community service. She plans to attend the Georgia Institute of Technology to pursue an architecture degree.



Community Projects Coordinator, Joy Lockman, was presented with a certificate for her community service



(L- R): VP/President Elect Katherin Hunter; former President Margie Winkler; and President Donna Howell

City Council...from Page 1

in must pass a background check for criminal activity and income.

Hampering progress is the proposed construction height for the apartments. In addition to requesting annexation, Lowcountry "would like" the buildings to stand at 50 feet tall, but doing so would require a 15-foot height variance above the local maximum development standard.

A request for annexa-

tion was denied this month by Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw for that reason.

"The county and municipalities have all maintained the height restrictions for the purpose of ISO ratings," Bradshaw wrote in a letter to Young Harris Mayor Andrea Gibby, responding to the request. "Further, it is a matter of public safety in that firefighting and rescue services for buildings over thirty-five (35) feet require

specialized equipment and training."

Bradshaw said Towns County does not have such equipment or training available, and trying to change that would "significantly (impact) the cost of fire and rescue services." That said, if the 50-foot height is lowered to the legal 35-feet, "the County would have no other objection to the annexation."

During the regular meeting, the denial was a major talking point met with frustration from council members because, as Clark

said, "there are other buildings in the county above 35 feet."

As explained by City Attorney Marvin Harkins, the next step is to take the issue to the Planning Commission, where it will fall before a five-person arbitration panel as soon as possible.

When asked by Councilman Dr. John Kelley whether Lowcountry would scrap the apartments in response to the denial, Elbe and Haley said they had no intentions of abandoning their project.

"We'll work with what we need to do," Elbe said. "(But) we think it's a much better product aesthetically and just in general (at 50 feet)."

Also discussed during the regular meeting that followed the public hearing was an update on the Timberline booster pump project. After years of anticipation, construction is set to begin this month, according to Clark, and should only take "a couple of days to get done."

Kelley's housing de-

velopment, McTyeire Crossing, has started the sitework stage, having been approved by the Planning Commission.

While the project has yet to receive approval by the Georgia Department of Transportation, Kelley said the engineer over the project is in frequent discussions with GDOT, which so far hasn't noted any problems.

Also discussed in the meeting, 538 new water meters have been installed, and the long process of replacing the old ones continues.

Movers & Shakers...from Page 1

ers opposed the plan. One question that was never addressed was an explanation of the purpose for or the need for this interstate. Opposition was so intense that the group grew to over 600 individuals, and in 2012, the matter was finally dropped.

“That original group of homeowners eventually became the TCCA and today boasts about 75 members.”

TCCA Board Member Michael Courey, who also served as a past president, spoke about the mission and goals of the organization and the importance of attracting new members.

“We are a group of retired individuals who wish to contribute our time, talent and treasure to our community,” Courey said. “We attend every community meeting we possibly can, representing the public, to learn what the values of our community are.

“We then work with two mayors and our county commissioner to communicate those needs to our government officials. Our goal is to impart your desires to our elected officials. We need to know what you think and what you want for our community.”

Added Courey, “You need to attend our meetings. We need your input and your presence. We must be accurate about what the community wants. You need to become a member.”

Courey said a major function of the Civic Association is to investigate concerns of residents regarding impacts to local quality of life, and the group gauges public opinion on how the county should grow and operate to bring rea-

sonable considerations to the attention of public officials.

Citing one such concern, Courey turned the conversation to Hiawassee’s U.S. Post Office building.

“In Hiawassee, it is almost impossible to get into and out of the building,” Courey said. “Is there a better way? It will take years for anything to happen, but now is the time to act. We must make recommendations before the bulldozers arrive. You do have input.”

TCCA President John Clemmons reiterated the influence of the Civic Association, offering the rise of cryptocurrency datamining centers – considered a nuisance by many communities – as an example of how the group works to guide responsible growth based on constituent feedback.

“When we learned of Bitcoin, we immediately went to (Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw), who of course already knew of it, and he said, ‘I’ll take care of it.’ And he did,” Clemmons said.

Added Clemmons, “I am pushing that TCCA stay involved in everything and help the people that manage our area do it the right way.”

And Clemmons listed other concerns the TCCA has helped address with local officials, like the parrot-feather weed growing in Lake Chatuge and the large dragon statue proposed and defeated in Hiawassee. Both of these issues have enjoyed outcomes commensurate with TCCA goals.

“When I first became commissioner, I knew about the (Civic Association),” Commissioner Bradshaw said. “One of the things I read in

their charter was that they hold elected officials accountable. I didn’t like that. I took that personally. They don’t trust me. I’m a trustworthy person.

“Over time, after learning about other elected officials across the country, like the sheriff in Clayton County (who went) \$33 million over budget – really? Anyway, it really does make sense to hold community officials accountable.

“The civic group has always approached me in a very professional manner. They work behind the scenes to stop things like the dragon, but they are also very transparent. I have never had any board member be rude to me, and they are about caring for the community. This is our home. The civic group wants to keep it great.”

After press time on Tuesday, June 25, the Civic Association held a meeting for its members that started at 6 p.m. inside the Towns County Civic Center. The purpose of the meeting was to celebrate 20 years as an organization and hear from multiple guests.

Guest speakers included District 8 State Representative Bradshaw, local Economic Development Director Denise McKay, Young Harris Main Street Program Director Rosemary Royston, and Hiawassee Mayor Pro Tempore Jay Chastain Jr.

The Civic Association is an all-volunteer group that holds regular meetings on the second Monday of every month at 2 p.m. at Hiawassee City Hall. Everyone is welcome to attend.

Return to Courthouse...from Page 1

dedicated space for the Sheriff’s Office, several conference rooms, public restrooms and ample storage.

All administrative areas have been expanded from their original footprints thanks to the brand-new annex erected on the backside of the building to relocate court proceedings with two state-of-the-art courtrooms and other features for the Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court.

“The judges now have a private hallway to enter the bench, as does the jury, to keep them isolated from the public,” Bradshaw said. “The courtrooms are set up for social distancing if we need to, but we can watch the proceedings on the televisions from other rooms.”

Continuing, “There is an electric fenced area for judges, inmates and detainee crew leaders to enter the court. There are male, female and juvenile holding cells.”

Add to that the evidence holding room and a room for jury deliberations, plus plenty of space for future growth, and the courthouse is set to serve the county’s needs for generations to come.

As background, Towns County’s first courthouse was built on the Hiawassee Town Square in 1858, only to be replaced in 1899 with another courthouse off the square, according to County Historian Jerry Taylor. The current courthouse was built in 1964, with the major refresh and addition having completed construction this year.

And the renovated two-story structure is the perfect union between past and present as form and function meet seamlessly.

The upgrades boast the most modern technology while still maintaining a sense of Towns County history, with walls decorated by donated photographs from former Gov. Zell Miller’s office.

One wall boasts the photographs of each Towns County Commissioner who has served. If a photo could not be located, a depiction of the courthouse as it appeared at the time of service is shown.

The Probate Courtroom, also in the annex, contains beautifully restored benches original to the courthouse, and the new front-facing domed tower addition – the renova-



One of the best views in the new courthouse can be found in the conference room located directly above the main entrance. Photo by Shelly Knight

tion’s signature feature – is a nod to the 1899 courthouse, demolished decades ago after the present courthouse was built.

“We had to build a fire escape to incorporate the design of the cupola on the top of the building. We took the idea from the original courthouse,” Bradshaw said. “We have a copier room; we didn’t have that before. Another room we didn’t have before was a file room. We have one now. We’re happy.”

In terms of the construction budget for the voter-approved SPLOST project, despite these economically unstable times, Bradshaw said the county was able to keep to the budget and avoid debt by staying on top of “every move made by the contractor.”

“They did a great job,” Bradshaw said. “They knew what the budget was, and they stayed within it, but we watched everything very closely.”

Though the contractor went over the time stated for the improvements by about two months, everyone is back

in business now.

The project was Bradshaw’s baby: “We’re very proud of this.” Of course, he is not the only one happy with the numerous improvements. Alisa Richards, Bradshaw’s assistant, is excited about the changes. Richards has been with the office over 20 years.

“I absolutely love this,” she said. “This is well deserved. Towns County deserves this. This will serve a long time. After we’re long gone, this building will serve our community for many years.”

Marty Roberts, director of the Emergency Management Agency and 911 Center for Towns County, photographed the entire reconstruction process, and he agreed wholeheartedly with Richards.

“It’s great. It’s a complete change. Everybody should be really happy,” Roberts said. “And it’s paid for. It’s a nice change. All of the facilities are updated. It’s modern stuff with technology and all. It makes things a lot easier. It gives us a lot of room that we needed.”

County Meeting...from Page 1

a little bit behind there.”

Next, an agreement with the University of Georgia’s Board of Regents on behalf of the UGA Cooperative Extension allowed Towns County 4-H Coordinator Kerri Bradshaw and County Extension Agent Jacob Williams’ salaries to increase by 4%.

To illustrate the need for signing off on the action, Bradshaw called Williams to come up and talk a bit about who he is and what he does.

“I’m here as a resource for any kind of agricultural and natural resource-related issue that folks in the county have,” Williams said. “I’m here as a resource to help people start to address those issues.

“Often, I talk to farmers, homeowners who have gardens – especially people who have questions about their lawn.”

Williams noted that, sometimes, people believe they are imposing on his time if they call or come by, “and I assure you that is not the case.” He urged anyone who has questions to feel free to call him at 706-896-2024 or swing by his office at 67 Lakeview Circle in Hiawassee.

On the subject of people who have made an impact on the county’s wellbeing, Bradshaw also reappointed Jim Reynolds to the Towns County Library Board of Trustees.

Following the passing of Barbara Hale last month, a new position has opened on the board, and Bradshaw said that her replacement would be named at next month’s regular county meeting.

Bradshaw shared a few words in her honor, saying that



In the county meeting June 18, Ag Agent Jacob Williams detailed the job he does for the Extension Office in Towns County. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

“she did so much for our community and our county, and she was a very good friend to me, and we will definitely miss her.”

Following the move-in to the remodeled courthouse last week, Bradshaw had updates for the status of the old Recreation Center that temporarily housed courthouse offices. The gym will return to its service as a site for youth basketball practice as well as a winter pickleball court.

The office side of the building may eventually become office space for the Enotah CASA, a local nonprofit organization of volunteer advocates for children in foster

care. Meanwhile, the former courtroom will be utilized by the GED adult education program courtesy of North Georgia Technical College.

Talks are also in the works about helping the Towns County Historical Society potentially store archives in the building.

If nothing else, Bradshaw assured, the building will open to the organization’s use. But before that, the Old Rec Gym is slated to undergo some repairs of its own, namely to the gym floors. The furniture will also be changed out, with older pieces likely being sold off.