

Towns County Herald

Legal Organ of Towns County

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75 Cents

Publication Number 635540 Volume 92 Number 36

Wednesday, July 7, 2021

Fairgrounds brightens night sky for Independence Day

By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds welcomed area patriots on Sunday, July 4, to celebrate America's 245th birthday.

Festivities kicked off at 6 p.m. with an appearance by the Vintage Vixens band for the second year in a row, performing on a small stage in front of a large crowd outside the Fairgrounds Front Office until the fireworks started at 9:45 p.m.

Throughout the evening, volunteers grilled hotdogs and hamburgers to offer along with barbecues, while Lions Club

members collected generous donations at the gate as visitors poured in to celebrate America's Independence Day.

Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason said the weekend turnout was amazing and that everyone seemed to be having a terrific time celebrating the Fourth of July in Towns County.

"It's been great," Thomason said. "We've got both campgrounds full, and we've got several in the overflow campground... I want to thank all of our sponsors, people who gave donations, and all the staff and volunteers who came to help."

Added Thomason, "We've had a bigger turnout

this year than we have ever had, simply because nobody was able to do anything last year because of the pandemic."

This looks to be a pattern the rest of the year will follow, as several concerts and events in the Fairgrounds have already sold out well ahead of their debut date, and Thomason thinks people are ready to get out and do the fun things they did before COVID-19.

Athens residents Anthony Monico and his family were celebrating the Fourth of July in Towns County for their first time.

"It's amazing here, and everyone is so nice," Monico said. "The band has been great; my family and I are really

having a great time.

"This is our first vacation together as a family since before we were all affected by COVID. It's so beautiful here, with the mountains and the lake. We are already planning for our next trip here in Towns County."

With everything getting back to normal, Monico said he's been enjoying seeing so many people out having fun and celebrating America's birthday.

"For much of 2020, everyone in the country was scared and unsure if and when things would get back to normal," Monico said. "We live in the greatest country in

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The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds' annual Fireworks Show did not disappoint in 2021, with roughly 30 minutes of colorful blasts filling countless spectators with patriotic pride.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Hamilton Gardens nonprofit working to dissolve in 2021

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Citing an ongoing failure to come to terms on an agreement with the Georgia Mountain Fair, the nonprofit Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge, Inc. will be dissolving this year.

Grace Howard is the executive director of the organization, and she made the announcement at the Mountain Movers and Shakers' weekly meeting on Friday, July 2, noting that the 501(c)(3) had plans to finish out its obligations for the year before completely disbanding this fall.

Upon dissolution, care for the gardens located inside the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds is set to be taken back over by the Georgia Mountain Fair.

As the parties involved are still finalizing a parting of ways, Howard was limited in what she could disclose, but she did speak briefly in the meeting, which featured an open forum Friday instead of a scheduled guest speaker.

Howard thanked the Movers and Shakers for their constant support of the organization and said she wanted to let them know what was going on with Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge.

"We are (dissolving) for one main reason," Howard said. "We've been up there since 2016. The management agreement just

gives us the right to manage the property.

"There's nothing in there about us having a lease or a leasehold, the language of which is essential if you want state and federal funds. So, we've been unable to procure any kind of state or federal funds over the language of the agreement."

The purpose of the nonprofit has been "to restore, preserve, and enhance this public botanical legacy garden for the education and enjoyment of all who visit," and the volunteers and staff have done just that, preparing and upgrading the gardens to make them enjoyable by the public.

But the inability to apply for grant funding or borrow money to continue improving the gardens is a sticking point for the nonprofit, and those involved have yet another concern that their insurance may not be honored if they do not have exclusive rights of use at the property.

"Our board actually voted in January to begin the process of dissolution of our 501(c)(3) if we were not able to get an agreement by the first of July, so here we are," Howard said. "The garden's going to be there; we are not going to be the stewards of the garden."

"We will be working out a notice up there. We will be dissolving the 501(c)(3) legally through the state. We will be divesting our assets, and we do



Grace Howard
Executive Director
Hamilton Gardens
at Lake Chatuge

own a good bit up there that, we'll have a big yard sale and y'all can come.

"We also have to disperse our funds, and any money that's left over at the end of our time will be dispersed to 501(c)(3) nonprofits. We expect to do that within this community. So, we're on a path, unfortunately. We're sad about it."

Added Howard, "Our legacy is that we were the Garden SWAT Team, and I'd like you to think about us as the Garden SWAT Team, because we came in at a time where there was huge distress up there. There were lots of things that needed to be fixed, and we rescued that garden."

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Patriotic boat parade a huge success at Lake Chatuge

By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce hosted its annual Fourth of July Boat Parade on Saturday morning, with more than 25 boats lining up at Sunset Cove ready to begin their voyage at 10 a.m.

Chamber President Candace Lee was excited as always for the annual parade, saying it was wonderful to see so many patriotic people with their boats decked out in red, white and blue.

Hundreds of spectators lined the shores at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds and

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The boat parade at Lake Chatuge is a popular event for boaters and spectators, with patriots aptly lining the Fairgrounds Boat Ramp and County Beach to see the red, white and blue decorated boats.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Hiawassee Night Market remains popular with visitors



Rachel Pinson and Dusty Burchfield were happy to be back performing in Hiawassee on Friday following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Photo by Allison Youngblood

By Allison Youngblood
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Local artisanal vendors, friendly faces and good music filled the Hiawassee Town Square for the monthly First Friday event on July 2.

Known as the Hiawassee Night Market, the downtown event takes place every first Friday of each month through October, lasting from 5-9 p.m. Artisan booths featured various products ranging from fresh honey to handmade soaps, personalized clothing and much more.

Steven Harper of the Downtown Development Authority said that, with 24 vendors present this month, the market just keeps on growing, which is meeting one of the goals of the DDA - to foster vibrant community engagement downtown.

Harper is chairman of the volunteer-based authority that is dedicated to ensuring that Downtown Hiawassee remains as economically viable as possible.

Mayor Liz Ordiales said the DDA formed after a year's worth of focus groups and meetings to increase downtown activity, and that after its formation, the DDA decided that a great option to improve commerce was to better utilize the Hiawassee Town Square.

Night Market vendor Ashlyn LaPorte owns Bacchus on the Lake, a shop selling fine wine, craft beer and cigars, and she said the market offers a unique atmosphere to talk with customers and see what new businesses are coming into town.

Bre Deneve of Bre's Tees, a small business she operates out of her Dallas, Georgia, home, was excited to advertise her venture July 2. It was her second time attending, and she "loves everything about the market, the town, the people, the views of downtown."

Ashley Bottoms from The Sweet Spot had visited the market before, enjoying herself as a customer. Her first time as a vendor proved that the market was a great place to support local as well as attracting tourists, providing a win-win situation of new business from near and far.

Folks happily milled about the square Friday evening, shopping with local vendors, chatting with business owners from the area and listening to the live music performed by Rachel Pinson and Dusty Burchfield.

Pinson, who has performed in the Town Square before but not at the market, played country classics and her own music to a revolving crowd. She was happy to be back in Hiawassee performing after a couple years' absence from the Town Square.

The next Hiawassee Night Market is slated for Friday, Aug. 6.



July's First Friday event, aka the Hiawassee Night Market, continues to grow with each passing month.

Photo by Allison Youngblood

City to further amend density limit in ordinance change



Members of the Hiawassee City Council hashed out the final details of the upcoming density limit change for multi-unit dwellings in their June 28 work session meeting at City Hall.

Photo by Chad Stack

By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

In their June 28 work session at City Hall, Mayor Liz Ordiales and City Council finalized the proposed amendment to the Planning and Development Ordinance, signaling in the process their commitment to listening to community feedback following a recent public hearing.

Specifically, the ordinance amendment increases the density limit for the construction of multi-unit dwellings inside city limits. Prior to the July 6 regular meeting, the limit sat at four units per acre on parcels equal to or greater than 1 acre.

The amendment originally capped the density limit to 10 living units per acre with a

limitation of 40 units per parcel. In a compromise with people concerned about population overgrowth, Ordiales asked the council June 28 to consider a revised density limit of six units per acre.

She proposed the change both to allow the proposed 16-unit townhome development by Celtic Realty Group LLC, and to give the city more control of density to better maintain services and the small-town feel inside the 2-mile radius of town.

To put things into perspective, with the 40 units per parcel development cap, prior to the change, a developer would need 10 acres to build 40 units, whereas a density limit of 10 could see 40 units developed on just 4 acres versus the 7 acres

needed to meet a limit of six units per acre.

Some public input in the meeting featured suggestions that perhaps the Celtic development should be moved elsewhere, but Councilwoman Nancy Noblet pointed out that if it was not going to be townhomes, it was likely to be something else such as a car wash or storage units.

Most people in the room seemed to support the revised amendment, and the mayor and City Council are hopeful the change will help with the current housing issues in the city, including support for a larger labor pool down the road, as everyone has agreed that more housing is needed in Hiawassee, with density sure to play a key

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Boat Parade...from Page 1A



More than two dozen boats took part in the annual Boat Parade on Lake Chatuge Saturday. Photo by Lowell Nicholson



Patriotism comes in three colors – red, white and blue. Photo by Chad Stack

Towns County Beach to watch the parade, and though more than two dozen boats signed up for the contest, several more boats joined in with the annual parade as they do every year, Lee said.

The boat parade is always something special, and the lifting of COVID restrictions allowed even more families and friends to feel safe celebrating again this year, giving the parade a different feeling in 2021, Lee said.

For the people involved, the annual event is a fun tradition to celebrate America's independence and unity, with parade participants decking out their boats in festive red, white and blue to display their patriotic love for America while also retaining hopes of winning the contest.

Tiffany Cooke of Young Harris and her family have been fans of and participants in the boat parade for many years now, even before its recent return as a Fourth of July tradition.

"Seeing it go away for a few years was sad, and we were excited to have it back as a yearly tradition," Cooke said. "It's always a lot of fun decorating our boat and seeing all the other boats that are decorated. The best part is seeing all the people cheering and waving as we go by."

"This year, there weren't as many boats as there are usually, but the boats that did show up showed up with

amazing decorations and tons of red, white and blue. It's also nice to see other boats join in on the fun."

As the patriotically festooned boats passed by the hundreds of onlookers, people cheered the parade from the shorelines and from boats that were also anchored to get a view of the parade.

Spectator Phillip Toma of Hollywood, Florida, enjoyed the parade with his family as they all waved American flags and applauded.

"This is our first year visiting Towns County, but my family and I have already

had so much fun that we will definitely be back next year," Toma said. "My kids love the water, so getting a spot at the beach was great for the kids. We didn't know about the parade until it started to go by – it was really cool to see all the boats decorated with red, white and blue."

"The Fourth of July is special for our country, and to know that this year we are celebrating 245 years of independence is something to be proud of as an American. We as Americans take for granted many of the freedoms we have, and today is a day that really

makes you think about how great we have it as Americans.

"So much of the news and media make it seem like things in this country are awful and/or bad, but if you look at what's going on in other countries around the world, there's no doubt about it – we as Americans live in the best country in the world."

2021 Fourth of July Boat Parade Contest winners were Greg Byer with the Most Red, White and Blue Award, and The Harveys won the Most Creative Boat Award. Each of the winners took home a \$500 cash prize.

Hamilton Gardens...from Page 1A

"So, the Garden SWAT Team is going to move on to whatever next project is out there for us after a long-awaited rest, and it'll come again. The legacy of this garden will belong to Georgia Mountain Fair and to Towns County; not to us."

"We were just a moment in time that did some work up there, that made a difference in this community and certainly made a difference in this garden."

Donations are no longer being accepted, and the membership drive and all fundraising activities have ceased, Howard said of the mostly volunteer organization.

As for next steps, Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge has submitted for early contract termination with the Georgia Mountain Fair, "and our hope is that we will be there until the end of October – that's what we've asked for."

The news was not well received in the meeting, with Diana Gutenstein, an avid supporter of the gardens and the nonprofit's work there, asking, "How stupid is this?"

When reached for comment, Georgia Mountain Fair Authority Board Treasurer and Secretary Terry Taylor said Hamilton Gardens at

Lake Chatuge had done a good job at the gardens and that he, too, wished the two sides could have met on terms.

"About four or five years ago, the Fair made contact with the Master Gardeners to see if they might be interested in partnering with the Fair to manage the garden," Taylor said. "After several months of negotiation back and forth, they decided to do that. They later formed a corporation called Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge."

"Since then, there have been ongoing talks of re-doing the management agreement that we had at the time, and maybe 15 or 20 different versions have been looked at and rejected by one party or the other over the last two or three years."

From the way he understands it, Taylor said that Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge "wants to have the property pretty much titled in their name." This or its effect, said Taylor, is not workable for the Fair, which views the 40-year-old gardens as an asset it will not part with.

"We're happy to let them manage (the gardens) and would like to work with them in doing that, except that we're just not willing to deed

the whole property to them," Taylor said. "We think it's an asset for the Fair, and a right sizeable asset."

In terms of granting exclusive rights to the property, the Fair wishes to retain the ability to utilize certain aspects of the gardens moving forward, including for overflow parking and other potential uses, which is why the Fair wants to maintain a non-exclusive agreement.

He said the Fair was willing to partner with Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge to help acquire grant funds, though the parties have been unable to come to terms on the particulars of any such arrangements or whether this would even be possible.

Potentially complicating matters is the nature of ownership of the land, which the Tennessee Valley Authority permanently leased to Towns County Government that in turn leased to the Georgia Mountain Fair Authority, with some apparent oversight by Georgia Mountain Fair, Inc.

For now, the parties will be working behind the scenes to finalize a termination agreement, and Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge hopes to be able to honor its slate of scheduled lectures, concerts, weddings and workdays this year.

Ordinance...from Page 1A

factor in affordability.

"I think this is a nice compromise that we can do," said Councilwoman Anne Mitchell, who voted against holding the first reading of the ordinance in May. "The traffic is still going to be heavy, but folks, the traffic is heavy all over Hiwassee."

Council Members Noblet and Jay Chastain Jr. both agreed with Mitchell and Ordiales about the proposed density change, which was scheduled for a second reading and enactment during the July 6 regular meeting that occurred after press time.

In other news, Ordiales reported that the county was 43% fully vaccinated, and that the city had collected \$199,758 in property taxes for the most recent year.

"We have seven properties that have not paid their property taxes," Ordiales said. The seven properties amount to \$546 in unpaid taxes, and Ordiales said most are vacant properties.

Ordiales also spoke about the progress the city has made in fixing up and repairing the pump houses throughout the city. Sixteen of the pump houses have

been fixed, painted and look great, she said, with just six more to go before the city completes all 22 pump houses.

She also touched on the city's recent approval for a \$600,000 Appalachian Regional Commission grant, which will be used to restore and renovate the Paris Buildings on Main Street.

Council members discussed an agenda item for their upcoming July regular meeting, in which they were expected to approve the nomination of Tyler Osborn to the Downtown Development Authority Board of Directors.

Fairgrounds...from Page 1A



It's hard to say how many people watched the fireworks this year, as the entire Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds was full, including its campgrounds, as were the sides of the main highway with parked cars and Lake Chatuge with anchored boats. Photo by Chad Stack

the world and have so much to be thankful for, and I think everything that happened last year has really made people appreciate the life that we live as Americans."

This year's fireworks display was one of the better ones thanks to all the generous sponsors and people who donated money, Thomason said.

The 30-minute display was launched from the baseball fields inside the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, allowing campers from both sides of the road and boaters in the lake to enjoy the amazing fireworks, and especially that thunderous grand finale.