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School Board talks ag facility, MECHS agreement

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Topics in the July regular meeting of the Towns County Board of Education included a new Collaborative Operating Agreement between Towns County Schools and the Mountain Education Center and the unveiling of the new Agriculture Center's blueprints.

Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong shared plans for the upcoming Agriculture Center, suggesting that Charles Black Construction Company act as construction manager for the project. The decision was approved unanimously followed by some brief updates.

Construction is expect-

ed to begin anywhere between late fall and early winter and is not expected to be disruptive to school operations.

Along with the Agriculture Center, Berrong mentioned a few other projects that may be pursued with ES-PIOST and safety funding, such as upgrading the windows on campus to be bullet-proof and possibly updating the PA system.

Turning to Mountain Education Center, Berrong noted that recent legislation made some behind-the-scenes changes to how MEC works, declaring it "a special school in the state."

"So now, kids can't just go and enroll in the Mountain Education Center, and a school system that wants to

be a partner with Mountain Ed has to have a Memorandum of Understanding," Berrong said regarding the potential agreement between MEC and other school systems.

"Before, a kid would leave us and go to Mountain Ed, so we would get no money for them," Berrong continued. "Well, now, (if) the kid is a Towns County kid, they go to Mountain Ed - we get the state funding and then Mountain Ed will just bill us for the same state funding we were going to lose. So, there's no money difference whatsoever."

Students would remain Towns County graduates, and their test scores and grades would be factored in with those of students not enrolled at MEC. Additionally,

students wishing to attend the more flexible "second chance" school would require approval, likely by their high school principal and counselor.

Board Chair Stephanie McConnell suggested more discussion was needed, but according to Berrong, "This is all still ... being built, so there's still questions that are obviously going to continue coming up."

Students who enrolled in Mountain Ed before Aug. 1 of this year would remain Mountain Ed graduates, but more questions remain for newcomers. One issue is that Mountain Ed requires only 23 credits for graduation, whereas Towns County requires 28.

"That's a conversa-
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Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong led the monthly School Board meeting alongside Chairperson Stephanie McConnell on July 6.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Department of Transportation updates public on GA 515

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Four representatives from the Georgia Department of Transportation joined members of the Towns County Civic Association at the Senior Center in Hiwassee on June 29 to discuss the SR 515/SR 2/US 76 widening and relocation project between Blairsville and Young Harris.

"The state's divided into seven districts; District 1 is the Northeast 21 counties. We're housed in Gainesville," explained District Preconstruction Engineer SueAnne H. Decker. "These guys come from our Atlanta office, so I'm your local contact here for these 21 counties."

According to Project Manager Oluchukwu "Olu" Anyaebosi, "This project goes back a long time." Indeed, talk of modifying the road first began as far back as November 1998. Earlier this year, the project was divided into three stages to "spread out the



Officials with the Georgia Department of Transportation enjoyed spending time with area residents and updating them on the massive Georgia 515 construction project set to begin later this year.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

costs." Project Manager and Transportation Engineer Jeff Middlebrooks elaborated, adding, "It has been in design for

almost 25 years, and a lot of (the delay) is to do with environmental impacts up in this area."

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Libraries restructure branch management in Towns, Union

By Natalie Mintz
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Mountain Regional Library System is excited to announce several recent leadership changes in the three libraries between Union and Towns counties.

Union County Public Library in Blairsville, Mountain Regional Library in Young Harris, and the Towns County Public Library in Hiwassee have all undergone shifts in management after former Union Branch Manager Susie Brendle retired in May.

Marlene Cannon stepped in to lead the Union County library at the beginning of June, coming over from managing both the Towns County Public Library and the headquarters location at Mountain Regional.

When Cannon moved to Blairsville, the system decided to replace her dual management position in Towns with a branch manager for each location, offering a primary advantage of increasing the number of days the Mountain Regional Library is open each week from three to four.



Ann Lewis
MRL Branch Manager



Kevin Kirby
TCPL Branch Manager

Kevin Kirby, who was assistant manager for both of Towns County's libraries, is now manager of the Hiwassee-based library.

Over in Young Harris, Ann Lewis, who was previously responsible for youth services at the Union County library, has been promoted to manager of the Mountain Regional Library.

Mountain Regional Library System Director Heath Lee explained that, when de-

ciding who would helm the libraries, he and the MRLS Board took it on as a priority to "advance people within the system," hence the "staff restructuring and realignment."

According to Lee, Cannon has done an exceptional job at Mountain Regional and was an "obvious candidate" to fill the Blairsville vacancy. Cannon has over a decade of experience working with the Mountain Regional
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Towns County FBLA students win in national competition



Towns County FBLA students Will McConnell, Haley Merritt, Laura Mauldin and Dhriti Patel.
Photo/Submitted

News Special
Towns County Herald

Four Towns County High School Future Business Leaders of America students competed in national level competition in Atlanta from June 26-July 1 after advancing from state competitions.

The students were Laura Mauldin, Word Processing; Will McConnell, Computer Applications; Haley Merritt, Word Processing; and Dhriti Patel, Spreadsheet Applications.

Two of the students fin-

ished in the Top 10 in the nation in their respective events: Laura Mauldin, Third Place in Word Processing; and Dhriti Patel, Ninth Place in Spreadsheet Applications.

Future Business Leaders of America is the largest business Career and Technical Student Organization in the world, each year helping over 230,000 student members prepare for careers in business, according to www.fbla-pbl.org. Georgia has the largest student membership in the nation.

The FBLA mission is to inspire and prepare students "to become community-minded business leaders in a global society through relevant career preparation and leadership experiences."

Towns County FBLA students regularly excel in regional, state, and national competition. "These young people represented our school and community well," said business teacher and FBLA adviser Ruth Taylor. "Congratulations to all!"

Council welcomes Boy Scouts, discusses apartment complex

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Young Harris City Council and Mayor Andrea Gibby held their regular meeting on Tuesday, July 11, having skipped a week for the Fourth of July holiday. Business continued as usual, but there were a few surprise guests to kick off the evening.

At the very start of the meeting, members of the Hiwassee-based Boy Scouts

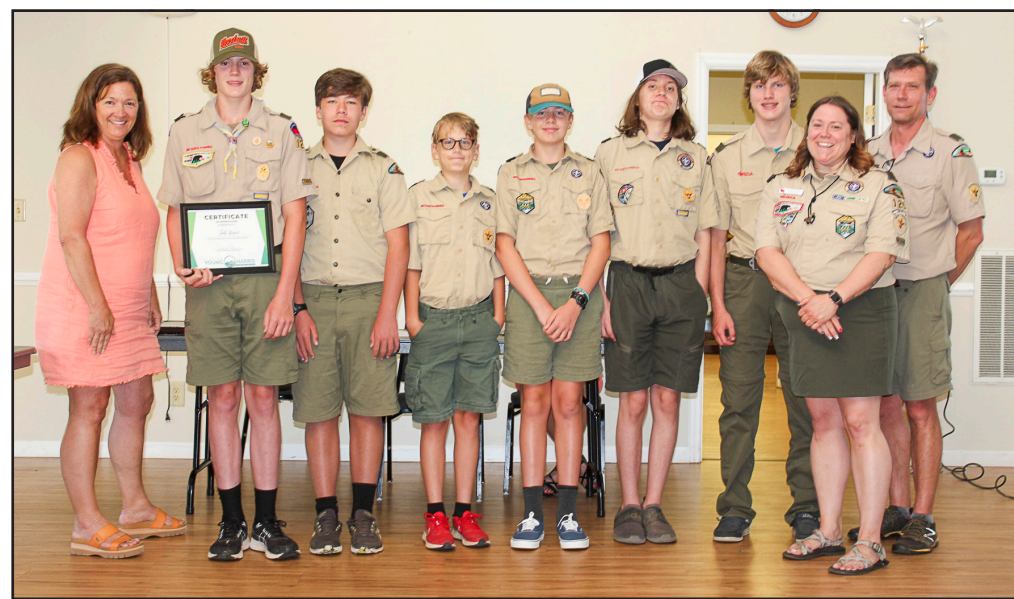
of America Troop 125 introduced themselves at the front of the room, or rather, their Scout Master Chad Houser did, alongside Assistant Scout Master Jenny Stowers.

"One of the things that I've been wanting to do for our troop is get more involved with the community," Houser said, noting the importance of young people understanding local government. "Service is a big part of scouting, and so we are looking for opportuni-

ties to help in the community, especially with cities and the county."

Always looking for additional opportunities, Houser invited the local chamber and others to contact him if the Scouts could find a place at other functions. New Mainstreet Program Director Rosemary Royston said she'd definitely be calling them.

Boy Scout Jack Stowers was highlighted in the occa-
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The City of Young Harris was pleased to welcome Boy Scout Troop 125 to the July regular meeting of the mayor and City Council.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

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Chatuge 1,925.01
Nottely 1,775.46

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City Council...from Page 1A



Young Harris Mayor Andrea Gibby showing off some recently received awards recognizing achievements made by both the city and her as mayor.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

...ion, being awarded a Certificate of Appreciation by Mayor Gibby for his help at the recent Seafood Festival after he "literally did everything we told him to do and more."

Director of Economic Development Denise McKay revealed the Towns County HOME Team announcement for affordable housing, urging those interested in looking

into the proposed apartments to sign up for the waitlist by emailing valleytrail@lchousing.com.

If the Georgia Department of Community Affairs approves the Valley Trail Apartment Complex, the building would consist of 49 units to include one-, two- and three-bedroom options. The complex would be located just outside city limits between Brasstown Valley Resort and Blue Ridge Mountain EMC.

Monthly rental rates are projected to fall between \$700 and \$1,000, and apartments would be available on a "first come, first served" basis. If approved, the complex will be constructed between 2024 and 2025.

Back in June, the council approved a contracted partnership with Bureau Veritas but wanted to know more about the fee schedule. The company will be used as a third-party group for building inspections.

"I've reviewed the fee schedule several times, and I think it's fine. (I'd) be glad to help answer any specific questions," offered Councilman Dr. John Kelley, who has the most experience with the company, and he was met with no queries.

"The good thing about this fee schedule is ... if we need to make adjustments, then we'll do so," Kelley added. "This is far superior than anything we've used in the past."

Young Harris resident David Sellers returned this month to inquire about the status of his complaint. Last month, Sellers alerted the council and mayor to an overflowing drainage ditch near Sunset Estates on High Street that used to be cleaned by the city but has been left alone long enough for small trees to start growing in the detritus.

"The issue is not about (the city having an) obligation to maintain those streets, to pave those; the city does - the city just paved a portion of that in the last year," City Attorney Marvin Harkins said.

"The issue is not the road itself or the pavement itself, it's that potential for a gap there," added Harkins, referring to "no man's land" areas between paved streets and property lines, or public versus private property.

"My client is the City Council, and so the extent to which the City Council wants me to research that, I'm happy to do that," Harkins said.

Kelley agreed to go with Sellers to inspect the ditch, recognizing "a real risk of erosion." Meanwhile, the council approved Harkins looking into the issue more to determine a final mode of action.

Mayor Gibby shared that Young Harris had received a plaque recognizing the municipality as a City of Civility, as designated by the Georgia Municipal Association.

"Out of 530 cities, there

(were) only 77 that have actually approved resolutions to become a City of Civility, so you're all ahead of the game, and we do a good job being civil," Gibby said to council members.

And after finishing a seven-month "intensive" leadership class, Gibby received a Certificate of Completion as a Municipal Leader, sharing it alongside the plaque.

Barring delays or rescheduling for holidays, the Young Harris City Council meets on the first Tuesday of every month at 6:30 p.m. inside City Hall located at 50 Irene Berry Drive. These meetings are open to the public, and the community is encouraged to attend.

School Board...from Page 1A

May, the system had collected \$6.6 million, and June collections were \$135,000.

Title Ad Valorem Tax funds have so far added up to \$882,000, but Underwood anticipates the post-July total will be closer to \$900,000. For the month of June, sales tax receipts increased to \$289,000 from \$262,000, and elsewhere in the budget, expenditures came in less than planned.

"We're very blessed with our finances so far and everything seems to be going good," Underwood concluded.

The Towns County Board of Education meets on the first Monday of every month at the Towns County Middle and High School Library. School Board members met this month on Thursday, July 6, to accommodate the Fourth of July holiday.

Libraries...from Page 1A

Library. And though she had never planned to work in the library system, Cannon "landed in the library world and fell in love with it."

Even before working in Young Harris, Cannon was often there to pick up books for her children. Eventually, she was encouraged by a former employee to apply as assistant librarian, and she moved her way up to manager, at one point working in youth services.

It turned out to be a perfect fit, as she has "always wanted to help people," which is something she has been able to do through her position at the library.

The Blairsville library is currently looking for a new youth services specialist, and Cannon, who loves books and children's programs, eagerly anticipates working with whoever is hired.

Both Kevin Kirby and Ann Lewis have backgrounds in education.

Kirby had been working as a middle school teacher until he moved back home to Young Harris and accepted the role of assistant manager, where he used his teaching skills to organize events for youth and

promote Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math, or STEAM, programs.

He would like to bring the STEAM programs to the Hiwassee library and add some culture-based educational programs as well. He and Lewis have gotten used to coordinating community events, something they plan to do more of in the future.

"My goal is to have at least one program a month," Kirby said, with more planned down the road. Already, the Towns County Public Library hosts a story-time for children every Tuesday at 10:30 a.m. that "the kids seem to really enjoy."

As for Lewis, she retired from a position as a school media specialist before taking the role of Youth Services Specialist at the Union County library, since working in a public library was something she "always wanted to do."

Lewis emphasized how placing dedicated branch managers at each library will provide "more opportunity for growing programs for the community." She plans to get both local children and adults involved in library programs and events.

And the shifts in management positions have enjoyed a warm reception: "Every comment has been really positive," Lewis said, adding that people are happy to have the library open an extra day in Young Harris.

Overall, Lewis is "thrilled" about her new position, has felt "very welcomed" by the community, and is excited about "what's coming moving forward."

The Union County Public Library is located at 303 Hunt Martin Street in Blairsville. Hours are Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Tuesday and Thursday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.; and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Towns County Public Library can be found at 99 South Berrong Street in Hiwassee, open Tuesdays through Fridays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

People may visit the Mountain Regional Library at 698 Miller Street in Young Harris, with hours being Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

All three libraries are planning to launch fall reading programs, which will start in September. For more information, visit <https://www.mountainlibrary.com/>.

GA 515 News...from Page 1A

In addition to ecological challenges and archaeological finds, the rise in prices following the COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of difficulty to the project. In short, the high construction costs in returned bids were "unexpected."

Audience members were invited to approach the projector for a better look at the map detailing Phase 1, which will deal with the bypass around the City of Young Harris. Middlebrooks described it as a "separate project for GDOT."

Phase 1 is expected to begin this fall and will approximately last until the fall of 2025. It will cover a two-lane bypass running around the west side of Downtown Young Harris, serving to divert traffic away from the busy college crossing stations and businesses close to the highway.

In particular, the bypass will feature 12-foot-wide lanes with 8-foot shoulders, and 6-and-a-half-foot "paved shoulders" will sit on either side of the road for bike traffic.

"On this project, we are anticipating a few detours, but the detours are only for sideroads," added Middlebrooks. "If you're on 515, you're always going to have two lanes of traffic open."

"Businesses are always going to have access, drive-ways to homes that had access to 515 are always going to have access to their properties. That's never going to be a problem in the construction phase."

One detour is anticipated at Townsend Mill Road, and another is planned around Brasstown Creek Road while a third will be on Timberline Drive, with the bypass bookended by roundabouts at 515.

Young Harris City Councilman John Kelley attended the meeting, saying, "As you know, the town of Young Harris is a small com-

munity, and the inhabitants of the whole town face every single day traffic that's going anywhere from 55 to 75 (miles per hour).

"It's very unsafe. If you've ever tried to cross the street with the blinking light system ... we've had at least five near-misses that I'm aware of."

"Our goal within the community ... is to develop a village-like concept, promote walking, promote non-motorized vehicles, have areas together where people can socialize and get to know one another, where people can take their children and grandchildren out for walks safely and where it'll be quiet."

Phase 2 will pick up on Swanson Road in Young Harris and continue west to Earl Shelton Road in Union County.

"This particular project will have the bridge we're replacing," Middlebrooks said. "We're building a parallel bridge and replacing the existing bridge at the county line. This project has about four retaining walls ... to handle the slopes throughout the corridor."

Middlebrooks revealed that construction for Phase 2 will begin next spring and should wrap up around spring of 2026.

"This section will be the four-lane divided highway with a 32-foot depressed median and a 10-foot shoulder with a 6-foot paved shoulder to accommodate bikes from both directions," Middlebrooks said.

Bridge and Roadway Group Director M. Asif Iqbal added, "There's going to be two bridges, and the reason for that is we want to continue maintaining traffic on the existing bridge."

Following questions, he clarified, "We'll keep the ex-

isting, we'll build another one parallel to it, and then demolish the existing and build another one."

That said, the 3-mile stretch defining Phase 2 will have about eight detours "just to allow the sideroads to get tied back into the mainline."

Phase 3 will encompass Earl Shelton Road and "just past the Home Depot" inside Blairsville city limits, with construction expected to last from summer of 2024 through summer of 2026, so all three projects should be started within the next year and experience some construction overlap.

"This particular section has nine retaining walls that will be constructed to maintain slopes throughout the corridor of this project," Middlebrooks said.

Just like Phase 2's stretch of road, Phase 3 will consist of a divided four-lane highway with a 32-foot depressed median, a 10-foot shoulder and 6-and-a-half-foot paved bike lane. It will include nine detours.

"The project goal is to provide acceptable traffic levels of service for future traffic demands to reduce traffic, crash frequencies (and) severity along the corridor through Union and Towns County, and to provide better mobility through the additional bike lanes on the corridor and on the bypass," summarized Middlebrooks regarding the overview, including all three phases.

The SR 515/SR 2/US 76 Project will include several roundabouts meant to slow down notoriously fast traffic on the road to about 25 miles per hour, cutting down on the likelihood of devastating speed-related accidents.

For further questions on the Young Harris Bypass or any other GDOT projects, call 404-631-1990 for the main office in Atlanta or 770-532-5500 for the Gainesville office.