

# Towns County Herald

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## Development variance hearing packs Civic Center

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

On Thursday, Sept. 7, the City of Hiwassee's Building & Planning Committee held a public hearing at the Towns County Civic Center to discuss the proposed housing project called The Common at Lake Chatuge.

Specifically, the meeting regarded a variance request made by the developer to increase the number of livable spaces the city's development ordinance allows on a single parcel of land.

Formerly known as The Overlook at Lake Chatuge, the Common is slated to be developed at 200 US Hwy 76 East, off Ross Lloyd Road, and will

contain a "combination of town houses and cottages."

The parcel takes up five acres, but only four are earmarked as residential; the final acre has commercial plans, with no word yet on the details.

To start the variance hearing, Hiwassee Mayor Liz Ordiales and Developer Kim Bucciero introduced the project, breaking down the statistics and measurements.

For example, according to Chapter 26 Article II Section 26-91(d) and 26-170(1) of the Code of Ordinances of the City of Hiwassee, "parcels of land shall be limited to 6 living spaces with no more than four structures per acre. No parcel shall have more than 40 units." Therein lies the problem.

The Common began with only 24 planned units, and now, with the hope of offering more living spaces, the goal has risen to 54, resulting in a needed variance of 30 units.

A unit is defined as any structure containing one to three bedrooms and covers anything from houses to apartments, explaining why the current plan shows 39 buildings offering varying bedroom allotments.

Essentially, the hearing let people argue whether to honor the stated intent of the development ordinance "to maintain proper density within the city" via the specified unit number, or to allow more units in the case of this development, See *Variance Hearing*, Page 6A



The Hiwassee Building & Planning Committee heard from a packed audience inside the Civic Center last week. The committee is composed of Jay Chastain Jr., Matt Espalin, Paul Scherer, Ken Pollard and Nancy Noblet. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## Berrong offers updates on millage rate, ag facility



School Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong calmed the fears of some property taxpayers with a millage rate discussion in the September School Board meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

In the Sept. 5 meeting of the Towns County Board of Education, School Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong said he wanted to clear up some misunderstanding he'd heard from taxpayers who have received their annual property assessment notices in the mail.

"I did want to touch on the millage rate just a little bit, because I know some counties around us are already setting their millage rates," Berrong

said. "The tax assessors have yet to give us what our rollback rate is.

"The tax assessments were mailed out, so if you got that at your house, you need to understand that when they send those out, they use the millage rate that was our millage rate last year, which does not mean that is going to be the millage rate this year.

"This happened to us last year, too. People called and said, 'You've raised our property taxes.' Well, no, that's

See *School Board Meeting*, Page 6A

## Spirit Week to culminate in crowning of Homecoming Royalty on Friday



The 2023 Towns County Homecoming Court: (Front Row, L-R) Anabella Wilson, Maycee Garrison, Hope Chastain, Emma Lallement, Breelan Sieveking, Cece Pizzaro, Raegan Rogers, Scotlyn Fain and Bella Childs. (Back Row, L-R) Jay Grimsley, Connor Chastain, Brant Youngblood, Tanner Cunningham, Zane Floyd and Kade McConnell. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

News Special  
Towns County Herald

Towns County High School will celebrate all things Homecoming this week, spending five fun-filled days dressing up with various themes for Spirit Week.

Monday was Movie Character Day and Tuesday

was Anything But a Backpack Day. Wednesday will feature Decade Day, with Fraternity/Sorority Day on Thursday and TCHS Spirit Day Friday.

Homecoming Court was decided last week, comprised of female representatives Anabella Wilson, Maycee Garrison, Hope Chastain, Emma Lallement, Breelan Sieveking,

Cece Pizzaro, Raegan Rogers, Scotlyn Fain and Bella Childs.

Representing the young men on Homecoming Court is Jay Grimsley, Connor Chastain, Brant Youngblood, Tanner Cunningham, Zane Floyd and Kade McConnell.

Students were treated to a Homecoming Dance on Friday, Sept. 8, and Spirit Week

will wrap up with a Pep Rally the afternoon of Friday, Sept. 15.

Two deserving members of the 2023 Homecoming Court will be announced and crowned as Homecoming King and Queen during Friday night's home football game against Coosa High School.

Go Indians!

## Halloween committee talks 'spooktacular' event at GMF



The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds' Halloween Committee met last Wednesday to discuss details of the upcoming holiday event. Photo by Daysya Pandolph

By Daysya Pandolph  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Families should mark their calendars for Tuesday, Oct. 31, from 5-9 p.m., as the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds will be transforming into a "fangtastic" candy-filled extravaganza for the children of

the community.

The "Fangtastic Halloween at the Fairgrounds" will feature the usual evening fun of trick-or-treating, face painting and tasty s'mores, as well as the newly added hayrides, mini-carnival and first-ever costume contest for the little ones. As always, Halloween admission is free.

Photo by Daysya Pandolph

A small assembly of representatives from across the county met at the fairgrounds office the morning of Sept. 6 to share this vision and suggest changes that could make the festival even more entertaining and efficient than past events.

There was a lengthy discussion over allowing vendors See *Halloween at GMF*, Page 3A

## Levins illuminates residents on accountability courts

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

On Friday, Sept. 8, the Mountain Movers & Shakers hosted Enotah Superior Court Judge Buck Levins to speak about the responsibilities of various courts, statistics and recovery programs available to struggling, convicted addicts.

Judge Levins works within the Enotah Judicial Circuit, which includes Lumpkin, Towns, Union and White counties.

Levins, of Blairsville, considers himself a family man before anything. This is why he believes Accountability Courts are so important, and why he was delighted to shed some light on what the legal system is doing for Georgia's children and families.

Part of that is helping parents break the cycle of abusing illicit substances, and according to Levins, one of the first "types" of these courts was Drug Court. In the Enotah Cir-



Movers & Shakers Leader William "Scotty" Scott with Enotah Superior Court Judge Buck Levins in Friday's breakfast meeting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

cuit, there are two functioning Drug Courts - the North Side Drug Court and the South Side Drug Court.

"Beyond that, we have a S.T.A.R. Court, which is a

mental health treatment court," added Levins. Along with the aforementioned courts, the Family Treatment Court out of the Juvenile Court and Pa-

See *Judge Levins Speaks*, Page 3A

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Lake Levels

Blue Ridge 1,679.90  
Chatuge 1,922.54  
Nottely 1,770.23

FOOTBALL

9/15 7:30 PM  
vs. Coosa

ARFS Vacation Raffle

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## Lions Funnel Cake Crew Connects with Rodeo Fans



L-R: Kathy Carlson, Jim McConnell, 2023 Miss Georgia Mountain Fair Caroline Roberts, Wayne Austin, and Janice Smith

The “Gutenstein”, Towns County Lions Club’s Funnel Cake Trailer, showed its community value once again by making a sizable and unique impact on the September 2nd & 3rd Hiawassee Pro Rodeo entertainment extravaganza this past Labor Day weekend at the GA Mtn. Fairgrounds. Chef Grandmasters Kerry Jones, Jim McConnell and Jeff Myers left no doubt about the reason why many Fair

visitors feel like it’s a valuable and time honored tradition to indulge in funnel cake eating at any and all GMF activities and events.

The T. C. Lions want to thank Wayne Austin, David Barrett, Kathy Carlson, Kerry Jones, Jim McConnell, Kari McCullough, Frank Morgan, Jeff Myers, Barbara Savas, Janice Smith, Hilda Thomason and Matt Turpin for their volunteer service above and beyond the call of duty.

The Lions also promise to provide the Gutenstein for

the upcoming last 2023 First Friday celebration, October 6, at the Hiawassee Town Square, and don’t forget the delectable and delicious funnel cakes will also be available at the 2023 GMF Fall Festival October 6-14, 11 AM -6 PM.

All volunteer 2023 GMF workers, whether or not you’re a Lion, are invited to the annual GMF appreciation celebration banquet at the Anderson Music Hall, Tuesday, September 26 as we congratulate our outstanding helpers for yet another job well done! T(Sept13,AS)JH

## Halloween at GMF...from Page 1A

during the event, with the committee ultimately deciding that free candy will be more than enough to get kids smiling from ear to ear, and will most likely draw business away from being vendors for the evening anyway.

However, there will be a small selection of festival food for sale such as corn dogs and pizzas.

Gates will open at 5 p.m. Halloween night to allow entrance at several different points, keeping families from crowding the first booth and draining their candy supply first thing. There will also be more activities available this Halloween than ever before.

“We’re going to add hayrides, a costume contest, and some carnival games to kind of break up the foot traf-

fic,” said Committee Member Miranda Burnette.

The costume contest will be one of the most interactive additions to Halloween event, to be divided by age group. As of now, the contest is set to start with ages 0-4 at 6 p.m., followed by 5 to 7-year-olds at 6:30, 8-10 at 7, and 11-plus at 7:30.

Committee members are also considering adding a haunted trail that will be appropriate for young audiences, most likely staffed by Young Harris College students. Further details on the trail will come later.

To streamline setup this year, the fairgrounds will be open to booth-holders the weekend and Monday before Halloween, giving candy handers plenty of time to prepare trick-or-treating stations

before families start showing up Tuesday night.

With the new additions, the 2023 Fangtastic Halloween at the Fairgrounds is all set to bring the community a joyous and memorable holiday. If the festival has to be postponed due to weather, it will be rescheduled to Thursday, Nov. 2.

The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds credits the City of Hiawassee and Towns County Commissioner’s Office for helping to organize the annual event.

Any business, organization, or individual is welcome to get a free booth this Halloween by contacting the fairgrounds at 706-896-4191 any time before Oct. 17, which will be the date of the next committee meeting to finalize plans.

## Judge Levins Speaks...from Page 1A

rental Accountability Court all seek restoration in one way or another.

Accountability courts have been around since about 2013, and 307 participants have graduated thus far. To be eligible to attend a potential rehabilitation program like those offered in accountability courts, Levins said the convicted must be over 18 years of age and have no prior convictions for violent crimes.

“Drug abuse and drug use is a lifestyle,” Levins said. “It often involves hiding that habit from your loved ones, from your employers, and it develops into a lifestyle of essentially smoke and mirrors. And it can lead to financial ruin to break up families and a life of crime to sustain that lifestyle.”

Levins said that most participants in the court also have underlying issues like mental health disorders or financial woes; the average yearly expenditure “on the street level” for chronic drug users is more than \$11,200.

And most of those people also have families that are left behind after their arrest.

“Every little boy and ev-

ery little girl deserves to have a mama and a daddy who are their best selves,” Levins said, referring specifically to family-related courts, though often, they work together with other accountability courts to provide a light in the darkness of addiction.

The judge said he believes in – and indeed works toward – “redemptive justice.” Sending clients through the judicial system shouldn’t be solely for punishment, and where possible, “criminals” should be given a chance to return to a stable life.

“We’re to a point now in Georgia where you can actually look at the metrics of that and quantify the benefit of that for the citizens of our state,” Levins posited, explaining that the net savings from 2020 were \$43 million due to reduced incarceration rates and boosting rehabilitation.

It’s worth noting that across the state in 2020, 78 families were reunited, and 322 babies were born without withdrawal thanks to their mothers receiving aid in battling substance abuse, according to Levins.

The average cost of returns to the health care system was \$66,000 per child, making for more funds set aside for needed medical treatment of other issues. In all, that accounted for an additional \$22,625,660 in returns.

In the end, that money can be used for purposes such as housing and community development, and while great for the general population, it offers more benefits for someone struggling with recovery so they might not have to worry about securing a roof over their head.

“The important part of that, though, is that you have drug-free parents and drug-free children that were restored into the community,” Levins said, focusing on the social impact of the courts he plays a part in managing every day.

The Movers & Shakers meet every Friday at 8 a.m. at the Sundance Grill at Hiawassee. They invite local figures and community leaders to speak, and often, a Q&A session follows the presentations to stimulate thought and conversation. The public is encouraged to attend.

## Young Harris College Presents Upcoming September Fine Arts Events for the Whole Community



EST. 1886

Young Harris College invites the community to attend upcoming Fine Arts events in September. Most events will take place on the YHC campus, which is located at One College Street in Young Harris.

Join us and enjoy any of the following events:

Pops on the Patio (formerly Pops on the Plaza) will be held September 16 at 5:30 PM on the Rollins Campus Center’s patio. The community is invited to gather with lawn chairs and blankets to enjoy the YHC Concert Band’s annual outdoor concert - this year, featuring a variety of whistling tunes from traditional marches, film music, and beyond. Admission is Free.

Enchanted Stories: Tales from an Epic Sleepover by Gina Marie Dropp. Showtime is at 2 PM on Saturday, September 23, in Glenn McGinnis Hall. This original theatre for young audiences production is

written and directed by YHC Alumna Gina Marie Dropp and is presented for free with the support of the Fred Register Endowment for Children’s Theatre at Young Harris College.

Vanities by Jack Heifner will have two performances; September 26-27, 2023, at 7 PM in the Dobbs Theatre located in the Goolsby Center. Vanities is a coming-of-age comedy/drama centered around the lives of three popular friends. From high school, through college, and into adulthood, snapshots of their lives show them growing and, like the times, changing but is it for the better? This Studio Season production is being directed by YHC Theatre Performance student, Alyssa Bantum.

Piseog by Adam Gabriel Winnie in the Campus Gate Gallery from September 28- Oct. 26, 2023. There will be an opening reception on Thursday, September 28, at 6 PM. This event is a free event. Adam Gabriel Winnie is an interdisciplinary artist who lives and works in Decatur, GA. He is a 2023 MFA graduate of Georgia State University’s Ernest G. Welch School of Art

& Design. While drawing has notably become the core of his art, Adam’s creative process is informed by the expanded field which he extends to painting, photography, video, and sound.

YHC Jazz Band Concert on September 28 at 7 PM in Glenn McGinnis Hall. The YHC Jazz Band performs repertoire ranging from swing, shuffle, jazz-rock/funk, Latin, and various other styles.

Vocal Masterclass with Leah Partridge on September 22 at 2:30 PM in the Susan B. Harris Chapel. Metropolitan opera star, Leah Partridge has been singing opera, concerts, and recitals in the U.S. and Europe for more than 20 years. She will be working with select YHC music and musical theatre students in this masterclass workshop. The public is welcome to come and observe.

There will also be Student Recitals scheduled for Friday, September 15 and September 22 at 2:30 PM in the Susan B. Harris Chapel. Recitals are approximately one hour long, and feature performances by music, musical theatre, and instrumental students. They are free and open to the public. NT(Sept13,FP2)JH



# Variance Hearing...from Page 1A



**Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw spoke in the Sept. 7 variance hearing of the Hiawasse Building & Planning Committee.**  
Photo Brittany Holbrooks

with the ultimate decision to be up to the committee.

The Common will help the city plug some of the affordable housing gap in the area, as a percentage of the homes will be made available at below-market rates. The variance is needed to make the project profitable for the developer, thereby justifying the development.

"The proposed development is not government subsidized," the city said in a recent press release. "It is a private development of one-, two-, and three-bedroom housing units that will be marketed at prices ranging from \$160,000 to \$330,000. The proposed development will be comprised of townhomes, detached houses, and duplexes."

"I think this is a really good opportunity to do a cool project that's not something most developers would take on," Bucciero said. "It's really hard to build more cost-effective housing, and so that's why today we mostly see larger homes being built and luxury homes being built."

Proponents and opponents of the development signed up that night to speak, filling the Civic Center building to capacity. Each speaker was given three minutes to have his or her points heard, and each side of the argument was given 45 minutes.

That said, there were far more entries against the variance than for it. Those in favor spoke first, generally communicating that they would like to see both units and structures more than doubled for The Common.

The people wanting the variance pointed to the statistics displayed in Ordiales' opening slideshow, such as the decline of enrolled students in Towns County Middle School mirroring a decrease of local families. For context, 2008 saw 295 students; conversely, 2024 anticipates 225.

It was highlighted that young couples and families primarily seek out smaller spaces to live in due to affordability, with a notable lack of local options for people in those situations, which even opponents of the variance agreed with.

But due to inflation and other market conditions, just because someone has a large family doesn't mean they can afford a home of their own. One of the more emotional speakers that evening was Destiny, who was overcome with tears when she shared her plight with the committee.

A mother of four, Destiny works 60 hours a week. Despite her 10 years of experience running businesses in Hiawasse, she has been homeless twice in the past two years.

"There is nothing worse than (having) to look my daughter in the eye and tell her, 'We can't go home tonight

because we don't have one,'" Destiny said, adding that while she and her husband "make decent money," closing costs and housing prices are so astronomical that they cannot afford a place of their own.

"I don't want to see this happen for any other family as well," Destiny added. "It's just not fair; we provide a lot for this community and we are loved in this community."

"We should not have to face a lower way of life by leaving this community to go somewhere we can't afford where I have to compromise the integrity of the schooling that will be provided for my children (and) the safety of my children."

Other talking points included the potential atrophy of the community, considering many essential services must be sought elsewhere. One man cited needing to go to Blairsville for car work, considering new business owners and workers couldn't move into Hiawasse to provide such.

Another consideration was controlled growth. Without setting aside properties for housing, some speakers anticipated that buyers with means would purchase land otherwise dedicated to mountain wilderness, whether for personal or commercial use, resulting in a sully of the natural surroundings via the destruction of resources like clean water and open farmland.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there was such an interest in speaking against the increase that not everyone who signed up was able to offer remarks.

Local officials were among those protesting the variance, including Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw and Towns County Coroner Tamela Cooper.

"I have friends on both sides, and I am a peacemaker. After many days of prayer, I feel that I could not just be silent," Cooper said, stating she felt it was her duty as an elected official to help protect the people of Towns County.

It is for that reason that she became "hypersensitive to high-risk areas," which include density-rich Main Street and exits from certain residential areas near the development. Cooper foresees the project bringing "a lot of danger to our little city that we love."

"I'm concerned for my father pulling out of that road when he visits and about my son driving to school and going to work," Cooper said. "We're not guaranteed a light (from the Department of Transportation). I don't want the end of my residential road to get a coined name because of people being injured or dying at it."

Bradshaw agreed, with his "main concern being traf-

fic" and the long backup that trails from the red light at the Town Square to the crosswalk. What's more, that traffic could impact response times for emergency vehicles like fire trucks and ambulances.

"It's not our job for any developer to meet their financial goals in this capacity as far as deviating from the ordinance," Bradshaw said. "If the developer can't make it work while adhering to the adopted ordinance, then they should find another property that will work better for them."

Another of Bradshaw's concerns was that granting the variance could pave the way for even more ordinance deviations. Where would those deviations stop, and what would happen before they did?

Those against the decision said that despite lowering development costs, density is not something Hiawasse needs. More density means more people, which leads to even more congestion on Main Street.

Others argued that those in favor of the variance had unrealistic expectations and had not "struggled" to save money to buy their own home. Yet more accused Bucciero's Tiny South, LLC, of "not doing their research" into local traffic patterns.

Maggie Oliver offered a suggestion despite her own gentle opposition to the project, saying, "Put the entrance up at (Southeast Eye Group)," adding to so many other voices that relayed concerns regarding safety hazards and the perceived threat to Hiawasse's "small-town" feel.

The meeting was largely civil, but the audience grew more vocal as the evening wore on. When Red Rooster Realty owner Sonya McClain was forced to leave the podium after speaking beyond three minutes, an unhappy murmur spread through the crowd.

And Bucciero was met with laughter after she said there would be enough parking for one vehicle per residence in a development that would feature more than 100 bedrooms.

That came after Committee Chair Nancy Noblet enforced strict rules demanding a show of respect for each speaker and the holding of applause and questions until after each point.

Sure enough, the night wrapped up with questions for Bucciero, but even the Q&A had to be cut off almost 10 minutes after the meeting passed two hours in length.

Following the meeting, Bucciero and Mayor Ordiales fielded other comments, answering both complaints and questions as best they could.

To offer additional input, visit Tiny South on Facebook or call Hiawasse City Hall at 706-896-2202. To see more of Tiny South's work, look up The Nest at Brannon Ridge or The Cottages on Vaughan in Clarkston.

As to next steps for the requested variance, the Building & Planning Committee will hold a meeting on Tuesday, Sept. 26, at 6 p.m. at the Civic Center.

"The purpose of the meeting is to discuss and vote on a variance request for the Common at Lake Chatuge (formerly called the Overlook at Lake Chatuge)," the city said. "The public hearing for this matter was held on Sept. 7, and no further public comment will be heard at this meeting."

As a reminder, the allowable capacity for the Civic Center is 145 people, according to the Fire Marshal.

# School Board Meeting...from Page 1A

because, if your property value went up, by our millage rate last year, it's going to look on your assessment that your property tax went up.

"When we get that rollback rate, however, it will then decrease what you're paying on taxes back down. So, don't think the school has raised your taxes - we have not. We fully intend to accept the rollback rate when we get it, we just don't have that information right now."

Berrong also provided an update on the Agriculture Facility that's in the works, for which the schools will be receiving \$1.7 million in state grant funding.

As previously reported, the new facility will feature a classroom, a technology lab, 3D printing, etching, animal science, an electrical and wiring station, a plumbing station, HVAC welding and construction, a full kitchen with hydroponics, and a canning facility.

"We have finalized the actual architect plans, but now they have to send those to their engineers to make sure everything works out fine," Berrong said last week. "We did meet with (construction manager) Charles Black about two or three weeks ago, so our hope is, once the engineers approve the final plans, we can go ahead and start that bidding process."

Added Berrong, "Hopefully, we can get bids started in the next couple months - I would really like to get started in January. I don't know if that will be possible or not, but my hope is to be completed by July."

The School Board has called a countywide special election Nov. 7 to enact an Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax. If passed, ESPLOST will help flesh out the ag facility with extra features to benefit students and assist the schools with other construction-related projects.

Also Sept. 5, Career Technical and Agricultural Education Director Melissa McConnell gave a yearly update on the program, noting that the schools had 17 career pathways for students, with each pathway making national credentialing and certification available.

Among the CTAE pathways taught at Towns County High are Business and Technology, Entrepreneurship, Fi-



**New TCHS Principal Bryan Thomason was happy to report a great first month back in the Sept. 5 Board of Education meeting.**  
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

nance/Accounting I, Computer Programming, Cybersecurity, Allied Health and Medicine, Metal Fabrication, Forestry, Education and more.

Middle school students also have access to CTAE programs in Agriculture, Business and Computer Science, with high school credit available for programs in Basic Agriculture and Introduction to Business and Technology.

After construction of the Ag Facility, McConnell hopes to offer an Animal Science pathway at the high school.

The School Board approved the FY24 CTAE and Perkins Local Plan & Budget presented by McConnell pertaining to funding for the program.

Board members also approved a State Farm-sponsored Teen Driving Safety Event that will be paid for with grant funding. The event will feature a "distracted driving simulation" and will show students what it's like "to be driving under the influence." A date has yet to be determined.

Elementary School Principal Shannon Moss led off the individual school reports for the Sept. 5 meeting, saying that learning was going well at the start of the year and that students were beginning a social-emotional learning curriculum this month.

Staff have started a walking club this year that saw 12 students joining in last week, and Moss said a chess club is being formed by the Student Council, with many other ac-

tivities coming up in the near term.

Middle School Principal Dr. Connie Hobbs said the school year was off to "a smooth start," with the first round of progress reports going home last week. Athletics are in full swing; MAP, or Measure of Academic Progress, testing has been conducted; and SEL modules have begun.

Hobbs bragged on her teachers and students having earned No. 1 rankings in every category of Milestones testing for the 14-county Pioneer RESA, and more information will be available on this accomplishment in an upcoming edition of the newspaper.

High School Principal Bryan Thomason reported a "good start to the year" as well, noting a lot of positive feedback from students, staff and parents, especially regarding a new outreach initiative to let parents know how their kids have been doing in classes.

Football, band, cheerleading, softball and cross-country students have been enjoying the new semester, and it is Spirit Week at the high school this week, with various school spirit activities planned to culminate in the crowning of Homecoming King and Queen at the Sept. 15 football game.

The Towns County Board of Education meets the first Monday of every month for a work session and regular meeting starting at 6 p.m. in the Middle/High School Media Center.