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Bradshaw discusses budget, revisits parrot-feather

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw convened a public hearing for the 2024 Tentative General Fund and Special Revenue & Capital Funds budgets on Dec. 19, after which he held a first reading for the budgets in his regular county meeting that followed that evening.

The county's fiscal year matches the calendar year, so the 2024 General Fund Budget, which shows how public funds will be collected and allocated for the maintenance and operation of the county next year, must be submitted to the Georgia Department of Revenue by the end of 2023.

A second reading and

adoption of the budgets are expected to occur in a called meeting on Friday, Dec. 29, at 2 p.m. inside the Temporary Courthouse Offices at 900 North Main Street in Hiawassee.

Compared with the current year 2023 General Fund Budget that was originally presented at just under \$14 million, the 2024 Tentative General Fund Budget is up about 9% to balance at roughly \$15.2 million.

"One of the biggest changes was competitive raises, salaries, in order to better retain our employees," County Finance Director Andrea Anderson said of the increased budget. "We have to compete with surrounding areas or we'll lose our employees, so that's a

big increase."

"As it has every year," revenues have steadily increased, Anderson said, though there have been no particular jumps.

Collections for the Title Ad Valorem Tax on motor vehicles are "a huge amount" and "bigger than you think it would be" at \$1 million.

Anderson said T.A.V.T. combined with \$2.5 million in local option sales tax revenues and property tax collections of \$5.3 million are the largest sources of the county's income.

The beginning 2024 General Fund reserve balance is \$6.9 million, though the county has earmarked \$2.9 million to go toward the SPLOST-backed Towns County Courthouse

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Commissioner Bradshaw honored Shirley Hooper last week for decades of dedication to the Child Development Center. She recently retired after 47 years. Also pictured: Daycare Director Jessica Ledford. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Student talent on display at Winter Fine Arts Night



The Towns County High School Symphonic Band was a treat for the ears during the recent Winter Fine Arts Night. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

During the final week of classes before Christmas Break, many local families embraced the opportunity to escape the crisp winter air to enjoy the annual Winter Fine Arts Night at Towns County Schools.

Beginning at 5 p.m. on Dec. 12, students, teachers, families and community members gathered for a diverse celebration of the arts, all under one roof.

In the elementary school gymnasium, an art gallery for budding middle and high school artists featured works of paint, pencil, pottery and much

more.

Each student chose his or her favorite piece of artwork to display at the gallery, and with around 80 total students in the art program, there was no shortage of talent on display.

The evening festival not only offered a platform for students to showcase their artistic talents but also gave them an opportunity to sell a piece of their artwork for \$20, with proceeds going right back into bettering the art program, which started just seven years ago.

"It has grown pretty quickly, and it's only getting bigger and better," said Sarah Ewing, the Art Teacher for sixth through 12th grades. "The

kids are really passionate, so if (you) like art – even if you don't have a kid here – it'd be a great thing to just come and support them and check out what they've done.

"I try to do (an art show) every semester so that every kid in my class gets to see their art and experience what it's like to have their art up in a gallery."

The Winter Fine Arts Night also showed off the immense talents of Towns County students involved in performing arts.

As the visual art show came to a close, guests packed into the seats of the Anne Oliver Mitchell Auditorium at 6

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TCHS Student Council serves, thanks first responders

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

'Tis the season of giving, and for the second year in a row, Towns County High School Student Council members have given back to their community in a big way.

In 2022, they held a coffee and donut breakfast for local first responders, and it was so popular that they brought it back again this year on Thursday, Dec. 14, the day before the start of winter break.

"We wanted to do something for our first responders, especially the ones that are coming off night shift or going onto their shift," student Haley Berrong said. "We just thought they should have something where they could come get coffee and a donut in the morning and chat."

The event started bright and early, a little after 8 a.m., on the high school side of the cafeteria. Berrong, along with River Chauncey, Chloe Krowe, Ansleigh Hardin and

Max Baron, hung out toward the front, waiting for first responders to arrive.

Baron was of the belief that he and his friends might as well do something useful with their time after school started winding down for the holidays. As a member of the Student Council, he was grateful for the unique opportunity that came with getting involved in public service.

"The events we do (with the Student Council) help us

See Students Say Thanks, Page 6



Towns County Paramedics Brett Denton, Jay Chastain Jr. and Walker Ross make their way through the breakfast station set up by the TCHS Student Council just before school let out this month. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Plenty on offer to ring in New Year '24 mountain-style



Brasstown Valley Resort will again be hosting its annual New Year's Eve Gala, this year with a masquerade theme. Photo by Towns County Herald/2020

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Area residents are gearing up for a New Year's Eve like no other as 2023 draws to a close.

This year's celebrations embrace the spirit of Appalachia and the West with rustic charm, live music and traditional toasts, so be sure to show up for one of the many celebrations across Union and Towns counties.

To kick off the holiday, the Mountain Liners of Blairsville are throwing an "End of the Year Thank You Party" at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center from 6:30-9 p.m. on Saturday, Dec. 30.

Admission is free, and guests are encouraged to bring their own food, drinks and holiday traditions, such as white elephant gifts and ugly sweaters, to the dance floor.

Across town at Vogel State Park, people can enjoy

live music at the pavilion overlooking Lake Trahlyta beginning at 7 p.m.

Meanwhile, at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, the beloved Southern Rock band Blackberry Smoke will be taking the stage inside Anderson Music Hall at 7 p.m. on Dec. 30 in lieu of the annual fireworks show.

Although the venue is nearly sold out, there are still several single tickets available

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Lake Levels

Blue Ridge 1,668.41
Chatuge 1,917.89
Nottely 1,761.74

BASKETBALL

BATTLE OF THE STATES 12/28

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The support you need for your next big dream. Talk to us today about your loan and line of credit options.

United Community

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The Berrong-Oakley House in Hiawasse: A Remarkable 6-Month Progress Update



August 2023, The state of the historic house after being purchased from the Nelson family, descendants of J. Miles & Maggie Berrong. Photo Credit: Bruce Roberts



October 2023, Fall colors adorn the house as it begins to shine over the city again. Photo credit: Tyler Osborn

In a mere half-year, the ambitious undertaking to restore the Berrong-Oakley House in Hiawasse has yielded extraordinary results, breathing renewed vitality into this treasured piece of history. Spearheaded by the Towns County Historical Society, the restoration initiative has achieved significant milestones, marking the inception of a promising journey.

The restoration voyage commenced with a meticulous general home survey, unveiling no major issues—a positive prelude to the project. Subsequently, a Historic Preservation Report was crafted, pinpointing priority focus areas to serve as a roadmap for the restoration efforts.

An initial hurdle involved combating overgrowth, particularly the notorious kudzu that had ensnared the house. Additionally, two imposing pine trees, leaning precariously towards the structure, were expertly removed. The yard underwent regrading to redirect waterflow, fortifying the foundation's integrity. Collaborating with MBRA, BRMEMC, City of Hiawasse, and Youngblood Construction, the area was cleared, providing a pristine canvas for the historic beauty.

Swift action was taken to address infrastructure concerns, including the installation of an on-site water source.

Efforts are underway to obtain repair quotes for interior plumbing. A comprehensive electrical inspection by Turpin Electric revealed no issues, facilitating the restoration of power to the house. The large power pole in the middle of the yard was removed and an underground powerline was installed. In addition to planning for the future, an underground fiberoptics cable was also installed so that once the house is ready to use as an event center and museum, internet access can be quickly and easily attainable.

Structural enhancements persisted with the demolition of a dilapidated rear stove pipe chimney. Simultaneously, the front chimney underwent meticulous repointing and repairs, ensuring its longevity. WRC Masonry successfully executed this crucial work.

Recognizing the historical significance of the Berrong-Oakley House, the restoration team initiated the process to have the property listed on the National Historic Registry. This crucial step underscores the unwavering commitment to preserving and honoring the rich heritage embedded in the house's walls.

The society has also been working closely with the Georgia Department of Community Affairs and Simo Community Designs, a skilled

preservationist, to identify suitable roofing options for the house. After much discussion, an asphalt shingle design was chosen that will complement the historic nature of the house while being aesthetically pleasing.

In a bid to secure additional resources for the restoration, letters of inquiry for two grants have been submitted, with the society eagerly anticipating news on qualification. Remarkably, the restoration effort has garnered overwhelming support from the community, raising over \$39,000 through fundraising endeavors.

As the Berrong-Oakley House restoration project gains momentum, the community remains at the heart of this inspiring journey. The dedication and enthusiasm displayed by all involved promise a bright future for this historic gem.

If you would like to be part of saving a piece of our history, visit our website at www.townscountyhistory.org for more info or contact us at townscountyhistory@gmail.com. You can also follow along with the restoration on our Facebook Page: Berrong-Oakley House.

The Towns County Historical Society is managing the restoration of the historic house and will use the space as an event center and a museum for the community.

New Year 2024...from Page 1

online, which can be accessed at <https://www.freshtix.com/events/blackberry-smoke-hiawasse>.

"We're expecting 3,000 people in Hiawasse at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds for the concert this New Year's Eve," General Manager Hilda Thomason said. "We will make plans next year to bring back the fireworks show, the food trucks, the crafts and everything else; it was just really hard to do both this year."

Not only has the staff at the fairgrounds been preparing for a big concert all while putting on the Mountain Country Christmas in Lights show for several weeks, but they have also been planning for some big events as the new year rolls in.

The fairgrounds has already booked concerts all the way until August, and the debut of the new Hiawasse Rod Run Car Show and the return of classic festivals such as the Spring Series, the Rhododendron Festival and the Georgia Mountain Fire & Smoke Cooking Festival are sure to bring many visitors to the area.

"We've got 125 cooks lined up already (for the cooking festival in May), and the tickets are already on sale for the tasters," Thomason said. "So, we'll definitely be getting our communities together and making plans for a great 2024."

But before anyone can welcome the new year, they must say goodbye to 2023—and what better way than attending the annual masquerade-themed New Year's Eve Gala at Branstown Valley Resort?

The formal gala, which begins at 7:30 p.m. on Sunday, Dec. 31, featuring champagne and chocolates, a gourmet dinner buffet, music and dancing, is restricted to guests over 21.

To attend only the party, couples will be charged \$350 plus tax and gratuities.

For the guest package, which also includes an overnight stay and a breakfast buffet with Bloody Marys and Mimosas the next morning, couples will be charged \$699. All guests must RSVP to attend.

Just down the road at the Ridges Resort, visitors can celebrate New Year's Eve "North Georgia Mountain Style" at The Oaks Lakeside Kitchen for \$290 per couple. Tickets will only be on sale until Dec. 28, however, so better act soon.

Admission to the party includes an open bar from 8 p.m. to midnight, live music by a Motown classic cover band, dancing, a midnight champagne toast, a karaoke lounge, and door prizes such as gift certificates to The Oaks, water park passes and hotel stays.

Later that night, at the Marina Station, the resort will throw a free Boots and Bubbles Bash. Show up in your best Western outfit for a fun night of live music and a cash bar.

All of these Hiawasse celebrations ring in the new year for Towns County residents, who can look forward to the return of Chatuge Burger Week Plus this coming year.

"It's going to run for 10 days," shared Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce President Julie Payne. "It will be sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, and we will have member restaurants participating in that again. We're looking to do that Jan. 16-25."

"We just want everyone to have a wonderful 2024, and bring all your friends and family to the mountains and we'll show them a good time."

Down the highway in Blairsville, the Union County

Chamber of Commerce and many local businesses are also getting ready for 2024.

"With the new year fast approaching, we celebrate all of our hard-earned successes of 2023 and gear up for thrilling new adventures ahead," said Union County Chamber Director of Operations and Marketing Crystal Fairless.

"Blairsville is the perfect place to usher in the new year with its charming small-town vibes and breathtaking natural beauty," Fairless continued. "From outdoor winter fun at Vogel State Park to sipping hot cocoa by the fireplace at one of Blairsville's cozy cabins, there's something for everyone to enjoy."

Paradise Hills Resort and Spa will kick off the holiday fun with a New Year's Eve Pre-Party from 2-6 p.m. on Sunday, Dec. 31. For \$85 a ticket, guests can enjoy live music by Chris Carpenter, a glass of wine, heavy appetizers and holiday gifts on the Vineyard Overlook Pavilion. At 6 p.m. sharp, they will toast the new year with Western Europeans.

Later that night, in Downtown Blairsville, Granddaddy Mimms Distilling Co. is throwing a New Year's Eve Cowboy Disco Ball Party from 8 p.m. to 12:30 a.m.. To participate in a Western costume contest, guests are encouraged to wear their best "Dolly sequins" and cowboy hats.

There will be appetizers, games, a DJ and a moonshine toast at midnight.

On New Year's Day, Lucky's Taqueria and Cantina will have its normal Monday night live music from 5-8 p.m., as well as a buy-one, get-one free taco sale.

"We wish everyone a safe, festive and unforgettable start to 2024," said Fairless on behalf of everyone at the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce.

County Meeting...from Page 1

Renovation & Addition project in anticipation of SPLOST proceeds coming in later in the year.

Additionally, the county has earmarked about \$1 million from General Fund reserves to help balance revenues of \$14.2 million and expenditures of \$15.2 million in 2024.

Most of the fund balance money earmarked for the SPLOST project is expected to be reimbursed to the county after SPLOST collections finish coming in for 2024, so the ending balance for the General Fund reserve, often referred to as a "rainy day fund," is projected at \$5.9 million.

Pertaining to the Special Revenue & Capital Funds Tentative Budget, 2024 SPLOST revenues are projected at \$3.44 million, with \$2.6 million going toward the Courthouse Project, \$540,000 to Hiwassee and Young Harris, \$50,000 to the Fire Department, \$150,000 in grant matching for a Splash Pad at the Rec Department, and \$100,000 to the Road Department.

Parrot-Feather Problem

In other news, much of the Dec. 19 regular meeting

was dedicated to discussing the invasive parrot-feather weed, which has been aggressively growing upwards of 10 feet in length and more in the south end of Lake Chatuge.

The unsightly and unwelcome weed poses a variety of serious risks to the area, affecting the shorelines of many residents and navigable waters for visitors and locals alike, and it even threatens the future prosperity of the entire lake.

Concerns raised by residents and business owners in the meeting involved the parrot-feather getting close to the Hiwassee Water Treatment Plant; spreading to nearby bodies of water; "scaring off" tourists; tanking lakeside property values; and posing a drowning risk.

Bradshaw offered an update on the situation for attendees alarmed by the issue, saying that he has been corresponding of late with the Tennessee Valley Authority, which owns the lake and is positioned to potentially offer solutions to the problem.

The hope is to schedule a meeting between TVA officials, Towns County residents and business owners, and even Clay County, North Carolina,

people concerned by the situation that affects both communities, as Lake Chatuge spans both sides of the state line.

According to Bradshaw, TVA has said it would "get back to me with some dates for that meeting after Christmas."

The commissioner wants to be prepared for that meeting whenever it occurs by gauging public interest in attending and scheduling further talks meant to troubleshoot the parrot-feather, which, again, threatens the economic outlook and quality of life for the county.

Bradshaw has also committed to working with the public to look for short-term solutions to address the problem as soon as possible next year, hopefully before additional spread can occur once the lake starts to fill up again in the spring.

Because working with federal authorities like the TVA usually takes place over a longer timescale, Bradshaw said he will be holding a meeting with members of the public in early January to get the ball rolling on short-term solutions to rid the lake of the invasive weed.

"We are going to meet Jan. 4 (with citizens)," Brad-

shaw said, adding that a time had not been decided yet. "What we're going to discuss is hiring or getting quotes - I think there's two or three companies in Georgia that will treat this weed in our lake."

Ultimately, Bradshaw said, "I hate that we have this problem; it's terrible. But I'm also optimistic that, working together, we'll get it taken care of."

For more information and to get in touch with elected officials about the problem, visit <https://www.savelake-chatuge.org/>. There, people will find a grassroots awareness campaign set up by concerned residents and business owners in Towns and Clay counties.

Recognitions & Awards

Also in the meeting, daycare employee Shirley Hooper of Towns County Child Development received recognition for her years of service. Hooper's recent retirement marks the end of an era and the beginning of honoring her 47-year career "serving this county in the daycare capacity."

For her dedication and positive impact on the lives of so many children, Hooper re-



County Finance Director Andrea Anderson gave a rundown of the 2024 Tentative Budget in the Dec. 19 county meeting.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

ceived a plaque of appreciation and was notified that the playground at Towns County Child Development would be named in her honor.

"I feel so blessed," said Hooper, thanking Commissioner Bradshaw and Daycare Director Jessica Ledford, who also attended the appreciation presentation that night.

On behalf of the Blue Ridge Mountain Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution, Chapter Vice President

Sid Turner presented County Emergency Medical Services Director Ken Nicholson with an award for his exemplary public service.

The award is made annually to recognize distinguished first responders, and while Nicholson was unable to attend, Turner voiced his group's appreciation for Nicholson's 40-year career as a local paramedic. Nicholson will receive a certificate from SAR and an EMS medal.

Fine Arts Night...from Page 1



Students could purchase their art back from the school during the Art Show Dec. 12.

Photo by Daysha Pandolph

p.m. for a concert that began with a performance of "Can't Stop The Feeling" by the high school Indoor Guard.

The sixth and seventh grade chorus then took the stage to sing "Winter Lullaby" and "A Very Merry Christmas."

Although the middle school chorus is small, with only four sopranos, five altos and two baritones, their gifted voices reached across the entire auditorium.

As they filed offstage, the curtains drew back to re-

veal the small but mighty high school Percussion Ensemble

composed of freshman Victoria "PB" Barker, sophomores Mason Mitchell and Jack Stowers, junior Bella Rose Childs and senior Marshall "Money" McClure.

Their performance boasted two songs, "O Come Three Kings" and "Good King Wenceslas," which gave each percussionist an opportunity to show off his or her skills on multiple instruments.

Next, the 34-person middle school Concert Band stole the spotlight to play "Patapan Fantasy" and "Holiday Rock." Because of scheduling obstacles, the band is made up of three separate classes, so in preparation for the concert, they rehearsed only twice as a group.

Finally, to deliver the closing selections, members of the high school Symphonic Band took their seats in the concert arc.

With assistance from six dedicated middle school students, the Symphonic Band performed "A Christmas Fantasy," "A Carmen Christmas," "Do You Hear What I Hear?" and "Christmas at the Circus."

"Some of the middle school students come and play with us to help us with our instrumentation," said junior alto

saxophonist Max Baron. "The middle schoolers stepping up and practicing with us helps them improve a lot, so I'm really proud of them."

Baron also shared the newly adapted high school Concert Band practice schedule, which consists of two three-hour evening practices a week. Without consistent attendance from every single member, Baron felt that the concert could not have been possible.

Moving into the spring semester, music director Tim Skinner - who leads all middle and high school chorus and band ensembles - plans to immediately start preparing the high school Symphonic Band for Large Group Performance Evaluation, or LGPE.

LGPE is an annual assessment of band programs in which they are scored as Superior, Excellent, Good, Fair or Poor. Georgia Music Educators Association provides a three-judge panel to determine the score of each band, as well as an additional judge to oversee

the sight-reading portion of the evaluation.

"We actually already have our LGPE music in," Baron said, "so as soon as this concert is over, we're going straight into that."

Under the new direction of Skinner this year, the band is on track to pull off an outstanding performance at their evaluation.

"I wanted to say a special thank you to Mr. Skinner for the dedication, the vision and the excitement that he has brought to the program," High School Principal Bryan Thomason said. "It's been truly amazing to watch (the students) grow."

"I've had the pleasure of seeing them (since) they started over the summer, and hearing where they are now. (They have gotten to) where they're competing in competitions and pulling first place."

"It's truly an amazing feat, and it's set the stage for some incredible steps and accomplishments that are still to come."



The Towns County High School Winter Guard put on a moving display in the winter concert this month.

Photo by Daysha Pandolph

Students Say Thanks...from Page 1



SRO Sally Tanner enjoyed the First Responder Breakfast, both the breakfast part and the appreciation she felt from the TCHS Student Council.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

get more in the Christmas spirit," Baron said. "That's one of my favorite parts."

As for Paramedic Walker Ross, a favorite part of his job at the Towns County Emergency Medical Service is meeting new people, but it's not often that he gets to do that by being treated to breakfast for saving lives - or, as he put it, "buying time."

Ross, a TCHS graduate, was impressed and appreciative of the shindig - as was fellow Paramedic Brett Denton.

"I think it's actually a really good idea for emergency services - just camaraderie, get everyone together," Denton said. "Usually, we're all a pretty tight-knit community, but just bringing the community even more together (is great)."

Denton, who was savoring not just a donut but a change in environment that morning, said it can be difficult functioning for hours at a time in a high-stress environment like EMS, and the Student Council's First Responder Breakfast was the perfect way to unwind.

"Never hurts to get a coffee or a donut," joked Paramedic Supervisor Jay Chastain Jr., who was just starting his shift. On a more serious note, Chastain said he and his fellow medical workers were grateful both for the breakfast and the opportunity to let the kids "get to meet us as a real person."

Sitting beside Chastain at one of the lunch tables provided for the local heroes was School Resource Officer Sally Tanner of the Towns County

Sheriff's Office.

"Usually, when you see any of us, it's not a good situation, so it's nice to kind of do something that they appreciate and makes you feel appreciated, like they see us," Tanner said. "They actually get to see and talk to us and not just see us as a 'them.'"

Once she finished her breakfast, Tanner provided some thoughts on the Student Council itself and the individuals who work hard to maintain it.

"These are all really good kids, and we have a really good school system," said Tanner, who gets to see the students often since she works at the schools. "They're just very respectful and thoughtful - I can't say anything bad about any of them."