

# Towns County Herald

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## Ex-deputy accused of lying in shooting case

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

Former Towns County Sheriff's Deputy Austin Bradburn was arrested last week for allegedly lying to investigators about the December shooting that sent him to Northeast Georgia Medical Center in Gainesville with a bullet hole in his leg.

He was reportedly shot around 2 a.m. on Friday, Dec. 13, in Young Harris. He told the Georgia Bureau of Investigation that he and a driver

from a traffic stop on Plottown Road got into a struggle over his handgun that caused the injurious discharge before the suspect drove away.

But the GBI, which routinely investigates officer-involved shootings around the state, has now accused Bradburn of falsely reporting what happened, resulting in 10 criminal charges being filed against him in three county jurisdictions.

"The GBI conducted a thorough and independent investigation which revealed

information to support the charges against Bradburn," according to a GBI news release from Jan. 21, the day of his arrest.

Per his Towns County arrest warrants, which include misdemeanor false report of a crime and felony violation of oath by a public officer, Bradburn's testimony about the incident "was later refuted by his patrol car's laptop GPS data and other evidence obtained" in the investigation.

Bradburn is also facing charges in Union County,

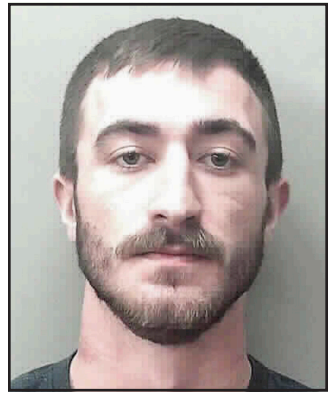
where he lives, and in Hall County, where he received medical treatment. He is alleged to have made false statements to GBI in both counties over the course of the investigation, in turn violating his oath as a deputy.

The GBI did not note in its news release what aspects of Bradburn's testimony are believed to be false, and GBI Region 8 Special Agent in Charge Kim Williams said, "The release is all we are putting out."

Many unanswered ques-

tions remain about what exactly happened on the side of Plottown Road Dec. 13, such as who is responsible for injuring Bradburn, but the GBI has declined to comment on what it believes took place the morning of the shooting.

The charges, which SAC Williams said were "self-explanatory" following a media inquiry, do not appear to address what happened in the shooting but instead highlight what authorities believe did not happen, namely, the ver-



Austin Bradburn  
Towns County Jail

## Bradshaw honors Turner, awards Splash Pad & more

By Shelly Knight  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

On Tuesday, Jan. 21, Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw hosted his first regular meeting of the new year, welcoming Callie Moore, the Western Regional Director of the conservation group MountainTrue, to present a well-deserved award to a local volunteer.

"MountainTrue is a non-profit organization ensuring clean water, resilient forests and healthy communities in Southern Blue Ridge," Moore said. "We're part of the Georgia Adopt-A-Stream network, and so we offer classes where volunteers can get trained to go out and sample water quality in our rivers, lakes and streams."

"Noel (Turner) here was in the second class we ever had, in 2014. As of December, he had been sampling for 10 years. We got together with Commissioner Bradshaw to recognize his volunteer services here in Towns County."

Turner was grateful for the recognition that evening, and while he believes local

waterways are "in pretty good shape," he touched on the importance of continuing to monitor water quality.

"We're kind of the canary in the coal mine," Turner said. "We keep a watch on everything. There's over 45 of us that are testing all the streams feeding into the lake, which is our drinking water. We're the only group that's out there en-

suring that our water quality is good enough to drink."

On top of monitoring the quality of water being treated for drinking, Moore said MountainTrue also keeps tabs on safety for recreational use, and she referenced the successful multi-partner regional effort to eradicate the invasive parrot-feather weed from Lake

See County Meeting, Page 7



MountainTrue's Callie Moore presented an award to local water quality monitoring volunteer Noel Turner in the Jan. 21 county meeting.  
Photo by Shelly Knight

## DDA updates leadership, approves PBC lease w/city



L-R: Hiwassee DDA Board Co-Chair Tyler Osborn, Chair Scott Benton, Outgoing Chair Peggy Gardner and Treasurer Paul Smith.  
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

For its first meeting of the year on Jan. 14, the Hiwassee Downtown Development Authority Board carried out organizational business including appointment of officers for 2025.

DDA Board Member Tyler Osborn was named Vice Chair, with Board Member Paul Smith to serve as Treasurer. Outgoing Chair Peggy Gardner revealed that she would not be renewing her board term, so Board Member Scott Benton was named in-

coming chair in her place.

"My term ends in August 2025, and I am stepping down from the DDA once my term ends," Gardner said via email after the meeting. "But I will always be a community builder, and a supporter, of Hiwassee."

In a called meeting on Jan. 21, the board accepted a lease agreement to operate the City of Hiwassee-owned Paris Buildings as the Paris Business Center – a regional business incubator – as well as a proposal to use previously awarded grant money for purchasing furniture.

In a nutshell, the lease

lasts until Jan. 31, 2030, unless terminated beforehand or the destruction of the premises by "storm, fire, lightning, earthquake or other casualty."

The document outlines basic care rules of the Business Center as a structure and rights of ownership, including responsibilities of the landlord, that is, the City of Hiwassee, and the DDA as the tenant.

Hiwassee City Council members were expected to finalize the agreement by accepting the lease on behalf of the city in a called meeting that occurred after press time

See DDA Leadership, Page 6

## Committee, public hear Whiskey Mountain plans



Public interest was high for the January meeting of the Hiwassee Building and Planning Committee, which welcomed the developers of the Whiskey Mountain Project for a presentation.  
Photo by Shelly Knight

By Shelly Knight  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

On Thursday, Jan. 16, the Hiwassee Building and Planning Committee hosted a well-attended meeting that featured local developers Scott and Kelly Benton to talk about their Whiskey Mountain Project at City Hall.

As previously reported, the development is slated to be built on 14.4 acres of land off Bel Aire Drive behind Chatuge Regional Hospital, with construction estimated to start by early Spring.

The project will consist of 11 larger single-family homes on 1-acre wooded lots above the 2,200 feet in elevation subject to the Mountain Protection Act, with the lower 3 acres holding 12 smaller single-family homes on quarter-acre lots.

Before the Bentons began their presentation, Committee Chair Nancy Noblet let attendees know that, as long as construction stayed within official development guidelines, the project was "a go."

"I know some people don't like growth, some people don't like ground moving – I mean, it is what it is," Noblet said.

"When we selected this

property," opened Scott Benton, "we did a lot of research and looked at all of the ordinances, everything that the city required, and everything the state required. And based on that, we came to the decision to go with it, and it's been approved."

Benton pointed to recent discussions of the project in local media and online as the likely reason for the above-average attendance at that evening's meeting, "because of the impact you feel it may have on your lives."

"Traffic is a concern, I'm sure, and we will abide by the laws of the city and the state for ingress and egress of neighborhoods and how the public roads are used," Benton said before countering online notions that Whiskey Mountain is "a pristine, undisturbed mountain."

"The fact of the matter is, there is development of many houses on the left side, many houses on the right side, a hospital, a business center and a gas station at the bottom of it," Benton continued. "So, all the way around this property, there is already development on Whiskey Mountain."

Benton distributed a map to guests showing the development layout.

"The road that you see on the plan right now may or may not be what we end up seeing – it depends on what the lay of the land is," Benton said. "We want the roads to be safe and wide, and the way to do that is to get out there and find out where roads are going to be by the seat of your pants."

"Only until you see where the elevations are, and you also have to take lot layout into consideration, and then you can do the roads. We will probably start that process in the next three weeks."

Added Kelly, "It's been our goal the whole time to do something that complements the city, fits in with the city. It's going to be a beautiful neighborhood. The aesthetic is going to be mountain homes."

"I think that everything we have here on this handout has already been shared in the newspaper, so if there's anything new that you're not aware of that is on here, that's fine, too."

Residents who live near the impending development on Bel Aire Drive and others asked questions after the presentation, expressing concerns about impacts to traffic, city infrastructure, erosion and even if the major project

See Whiskey Mountain, Page 7

## TCSO makes drug arrest after meth found in traffic stop

News Special  
Towns County Herald

On Tuesday, Jan. 21, Towns County Sheriff's Deputy Keanu Nguyen conducted a traffic stop on Highway 76 West.

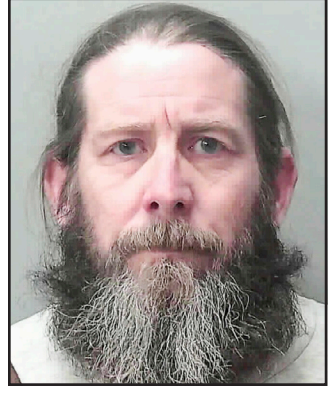
Probable cause was developed during the stop to search the vehicle. An amount of crystal-like substance, which field-tested positive for methamphetamine, was confiscated.

David Anthony Lowe,

44, of Blairsville, was arrested and charged with felony possession of methamphetamine; possession/use of drug-related objects; obstruction of an officer; taillight requirement; and failure to have driver's license on person.

Sheriff Ken Henderson commends K-9 Deputy Nguyen for his concentrated patrol efforts and keeping the community safe.

All individuals are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.



David Anthony Lowe

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Blue Ridge 1,668.64  
Chatuge 1,917.65  
Nottely 1,761.43

NASCAR 2025 Season Schedule See Page 6

Western NC Relief Drive Jan. 31 See Page 8

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# Bradburn Arrested...from Page 1

sion of events Bradburn provided to investigators.

Regarding the Dec. 13-announced hunt for an unidentified suspect wanted in the aggravated assault as described by Bradburn, SAC Williams said last week: "We are not searching for anyone."

Given the nature of the charges involving the false report of a crime and the fact that the GBI is no longer searching for a suspect in the case, the newspaper asked Williams if the investigation had determined whether Bradburn was alone at the time of the shooting.

"We have no information to support the presence of another party," Williams said the day after Bradburn's arrest.

Bradburn was booked into the detention centers of Towns, Union and Hall counties over about nine hours between the afternoon of Tuesday, Jan. 21, and early morning Wednesday, Jan. 22, according to the respective Sheriff's Offices.

The GBI arrested the former deputy at his home in Blairsville that Tuesday, taking him to the Towns County Jail for booking at 3:20 p.m. under the misdemeanor and felony charges listed above.

Bradburn made his \$3,000 bond shortly after 6 p.m. on Jan. 21, and the Towns County Sheriff's Office transported him to the Union County Jail for booking there under two felony counts of making false statements and two felony counts of violation of oath by a public officer.

He posted his \$7,000 bond in Union County later that evening, after which the Union County Sheriff's Office drove him to the Hall County Jail in Gainesville, where he was booked in after midnight under the same felony charges filed in Union County.

According to his Hall County booking info, because Bradburn is a former law enforcement officer, jailers there housed him separately from the general population until his

release, and he subsequently made his \$18,900 bond a little before 11 a.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 22.

The Towns County Sheriff's Office terminated Bradburn's employment on Dec. 20, 2024, about a month before his arrest; he was a Towns County deputy for roughly two and a half months, having taken his oath of office in early October 2024.

TCSO declined to comment on the reason for his termination, citing confidentiality around personnel matters, but the decision came a week after the GBI began investigating the shooting, and the day after two consecutive days of alleged false statements eventually charged by GBI.

Immediately prior to his TCSO employment, Bradburn served as a deputy in the Union County Sheriff's Office.

UCSO said Bradburn began working as a jailer on June 7, 2022, and that he became a deputy on Sept. 25, 2023. On Sept. 17, 2024,

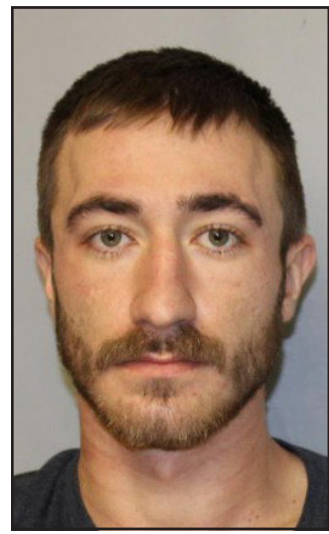
Bradburn resigned from his position for personal reasons after being confronted with off-duty conduct.

No further information was provided regarding his employment at the Union County Sheriff's Office, which cited personnel matters.

As highlighted in area media, Bradburn was maintaining his innocence following his arrest, and he is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

In terms of next steps in the case, Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley said he could potentially seek indictments during the January terms of the of the Union County and Towns County Grand Juries, which continue through June.

"It's a pending case," Langley said. "I can't make further comment on it other than what is within the warrants. Probable cause was found. He's been arrested in each of the counties. The GBI is continuing their investigation."



**Austin Bradburn  
Hall County Jail**



**Austin Bradburn  
Union County Jail**

"Once that investigation is completed, we'll review that and make decisions about grand jury presentations."

"This investigation is active and ongoing," per the GBI. "Anyone with information is encouraged to call Towns County 911 or the GBI Tipline at 800-597-TIPS (8477), online at <https://gbi.georgia.gov/submit-tips-online>, or by downloading the

See Something, Send Something mobile application."

Reportedly, investigators are looking into a GoFundMe account that may have been set up by a third party to assist Bradburn after the shooting. It was not known at press time if he authorized the creation of the account or accessed any of the funds raised. The fundraiser is now inactive.

# DDA Leadership...from Page 1



**The Hiawassee DDA Board has been overseeing the Paris Business Center's movement toward completion this Spring, pictured here at a meeting this month inside City Hall.**

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Monday, Jan. 27.

Coming to fruition is the vision for "the first, and only, program in the city created to specifically support our existing businesses with programming and resources, as well as to support new businesses in the region," per the DDA.

Initially, the project was projected to cost \$1.2 million, toward which the DDA raised more than \$500,000. Along

with that, funding came in the form of a grant received by the city worth \$600,000.

Rising costs in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in price hikes, resulting in a city-backed loan to finish construction, but the project is coming along nicely.

The second building now has a Letter of Intent and a cash deposit on it for a restaurant, which will remain

confidential until finalized. The tenant should arrive in mid-to-late Spring, and the DDA plans to include it as part of the PBC Open House tentatively slated for March 29.

With furniture on the way, the DDA is in talks with potential clients to serve as the PBC's first business ventures. One of the two incubator spaces will house that client when accepted, and the new busi-

ness will also feature in the series of open house tours set to take place this spring.

Current estimates place project completion in mid-March, after which tours will be open to donors and VIPs; city and county staff around the PBC's service area including Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee; local development personnel; and, of course, the community at large.

# Lions welcome Payne for County Tourism Report



The Towns County Lions Club hosted one of its own at the first meeting of 2025 on January 14 as Julie Payne provided the program presentation from the Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce highlighting the 2024 Towns County Tourism information and its important impact on the local economy.

Julie also mentioned the upcoming 2025 Chamber event schedule and thanked the Lions and the Georgia Mountain Fair for their long-time ongoing Chamber support.

Another topic near and dear to the Lions' hearts which was discussed that night was the club meeting on February 11 which will be the annual Towns County High School STAR Student/

Teacher Celebration at the Anderson Music Hall lobby which, for the first time ever, will honor and pay tribute to two separate but equal STAR Student winners who tied for the award and each chose different STAR Teachers.

Club Service Committee Chair Dianne Williams also announced ambitious fundraising plans for the club's annual 2025 donation to the longtime Georgia Lions Lighthouse For The Blind White Cane Fund from which expenses are paid for statewide vision surgeries and treatments.

2025 is also the 100th anniversary of Helen Keller's famous challenge to that annual International Association of Lions Clubs convention in 1925 to become "Knights For The Blind" when blindness prevention and vision care became the then eight year old organization's main goal.

The next club meeting is January 28, 6 PM, at the Anderson Music Hall lobby with Nashville Superstar Chris Jansen taking the concert stage on Saturday, February 1 at 7 PM.



# Whiskey Mountain...from Page 1

will have enough money to be completed.

Benton spoke on traffic first, stating he had seen studies showing four million cars passing through town every year, with a million of those being back-and-forth grocery store trips by city residents, and he estimated there are between 1,100 and 1,200 people living in Hiawassee.

“(The local population) would fill up less than half of the Anderson Music Hall,” Benton said. “You put all of those people leaving the Music Hall at one time – it doesn’t have a lot of impact on the city. Adding 25 more houses isn’t going to be an issue.”

Regarding erosion, Benton said the project was going through an “extensive process” with the Georgia Soil and Water Conservation Commission.

“We give them our plans, and we have to show where are retention ponds are, where our silt fences are, where our run-off is going to go and how we’re handling erosion,” Benton said. “They then review those plans and will send them back to us if there is something inconsistent with what they feel we need.”

“Erosion control on a project subject to the Mountain Protection Act is not something that can be ignored. We’re focused on it, our engineers are focused on it, and so is the GASWCC.”

In terms of the project’s finances, Benton referenced the current “housing crisis in this country that’s never been seen before,” adding that he and his wife “do not intend to fail; we have finances in place to see this project through from start to finish.”

On whether city infrastructure could support the development, Benton said the infrastructure today “has been here forever” and is already close to the point of failure.

“If you do not bring new money into this town in the form of new families, young families, people paying taxes in this town to increase the revenue, you won’t have the money you need to improve the infrastructure,” he said. “And when that infrastructure finally fails, there’s going to be no money to fix it.”

“These houses aren’t going to cause the failure of the infrastructure. The age



**Kelly and Scott Benton are the private local developers responsible for the upcoming Whiskey Mountain Project, seen here in the Jan. 16 Planning Committee meeting at City Hall.**  
Photo by Shelly Knight

and capacity of the system are what is causing failure. The only way to improve that is with tax dollars. Right now, there are not enough tax dollars to start it all over again. I feel it’s better to be proactive to start bringing in some new tax dollars.

“People complain that if this neighborhood comes it’s going to increase their property taxes. If you don’t raise the property taxes, you won’t be able to improve anything in this city, and that needs to be a focus for all of us.”

“Right now, there is a pump station at the bottom of Bel Aire Drive. At the top of Bel Aire Drive there is a bladder in a shed. Water is being pumped from the bottom of the mountain up to this bladder, which takes the place of the tank, and it feeds the water back down the hill. It’s an expensive process for the city to operate.

“Up to this point, no one has granted an easement to the city to tie a water line into the 10,000-gallon tank. We’re willing to do that. There are no fire hydrants on the Bel Aire side, so if a fire broke out, it would be awful. There would then be 1,600 feet of water line that we could put fire hydrants on.”

“The 12 houses on the quarter-acre lots are required to be on city sewer. There will be an (homeowners’ association) because there will be private roads in the development, and the HOA will maintain them.”

When asked if the city

has committed to building the fire hydrants, Benton said that was a question for the city.

Turning to the appearance of the development, Benton said the new neighborhood will feature “a uniform-looking design in the modern mountain aesthetic,” adding that he and his wife would be working “with local home builders in town that will turn-key build the homes.”

“Before, it was going to be affordable housing, but we’ve gone back to our original plan with higher-end housing,” Benton said, referring to their recent decision not to pursue a Georgia Rural Workforce Housing Grant after diving into the details of the grant requirements.

Toward the end of the meeting, Planning Committee Chair Noblet, who also serves on the Hiawassee City Council, said she wanted to make clear that “the city has nothing to do with this project.”

“This is Mr. Benton’s project,” Noblet said. “Our involvement is to ensure codes and ordinances are upheld. Our plan when the development gets further along is to have Mr. Benton back to bring us up to date.”

This month, Benton was selected to lead the Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority Board as chairman. According to the DDA, there is no conflict of interest between Benton’s role on the DDA Board and his private development, as the DDA is not involved in the latter.

# County Meeting...from Page 1

Chatuge last year.

“They sample bacteria in the summertime too so that we know it’s safe for swimming,” Moore said. “No parrot-feather yet but we still have lots of supplies, so if it rears its ugly head again, we’ll be ready for it.”

Also in the meeting, Bradshaw selected Smith Aquatics as the winning bid – out of six total bidders – to build the Towns County Splash Pad for local youth.

Splash Pad planning has been ongoing for about two years, to include a successful application for a 50/50 matching grant totaling \$316,000 to pay for the project, with half coming from SPLOST collections and half from federal monies.

The Splash Pad will be installed at the Towns County Beach, hopefully by spring. Concurrently, the county will build a community pavilion and public restrooms next to the Pickleball Courts, to be erected in part using inmate labor and grading by the Road Department to save money.

In new business, Bradshaw discussed the disbursements of the Opioid Settle-

ment.

“The county joined in a class action lawsuit years ago, and the county attorney was involved in that,” Bradshaw said. “It was against pharmaceutical companies for people becoming addicted to opioids.”

“Now, a lot of the court cases have been closed, so the county has collected about \$190,000. It has strings attached to it. That money has to be used for treatment, drug education and things like that.”

“So, we awarded the money to go to two different areas tonight – Avita (Community Partners) and the Enotah Circuit CHAMPS Program up at the school.”

Avita Community Partners offers support and comprehensive services to individuals and families in crisis battling mental illness or addictive diseases.

CHAMPS is an acronym for Choosing Healthy Activities and Methods Promoting Safety created in 2003 by the Georgia Sheriff’s Association. Both programs use education as a keystone promoting behavioral change.

County Attorney Robb Kiker attended, saying the

county agreed to join the litigation about five years ago.

“(The commissioner) didn’t mention it tonight,” Kiker said, “but I think there’s another settlement because some of the other manufacturers liked the terms of the settlement and they’re joining in, and we may expect similar funding.”

Also that evening, Bradshaw delivered on a promise he made regarding transparency, as the regular county meetings will now be televised.

Local TV Four out of Murphy, North Carolina, did the honors by taping the meeting. At this time, the meetings are not live, but they will be broadcast on Fridays at 7 p.m. For a full listing of where to watch the broadcasts, contact the Commissioner’s Office.

Before adjourning, Bradshaw reminded everyone to sign up for CodeRED, the county’s emergency alert system, which notifies residents what’s going on in situations like the Jan. 10 snowstorm.

The county meeting is held the third Tuesday of each month at 5:30 p.m. inside the Towns County Courthouse. Everyone is welcome.