



Veterans Day November 11
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Ordiales under fire amid contract controversy

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Hiwassee Mayor Liz Ordiales is facing an impending investigation following serious allegations that she violated the city charter by signing at least two contracts without City Council approval.

One of the contracts was for the paving of Ordiales' home road, and the other a construction amendment committing the city to an additional \$1.2 million in backing for the Paris Business Center project that is being managed by the Hiwassee Downtown Development Authority.

For the mayor to have signed the contracts – and for them to be considered legally binding – she was required by the city charter to make the contracts available to the city attorney for review and then to the City Council for voting approval. It appears that neither requirement was met.

The allegations came to light in the city's Oct. 30 special called meeting, which

had been moved to the Towns County Senior Center to accommodate a larger than usual crowd expected to attend for the council's consideration of a loan agreement to finish the Paris Business Center.

At the start of the meeting, Councilman Jay Chastain Jr., with the support of fellow Council Members Amy Barrett and Nancy Noblet, asked that the agenda be amended to include a presentation by City Attorney Thomas Mitchell.

"Over the past couple of weeks," Mitchell began, "it was learned that the mayor had executed an amendment to the construction contract of the Paris Business Center in June that expanded the project and authorized expenditure of an additional \$1.2 million without council approval.

"The DDA had voted for the Paris Business Center project expansion in April, but it had not been approved by council. Because the city owns the property and the project is for buildings on the property, council must approve those ac-

tions. The mayor should have been aware of these requirements.

"The DDA, as the project manager, is not authorized to expand the project and commit city resources to that degree. The project expansion led in large measure to the need for a loan for which the Intergovernmental Agreement with the DDA is required."

Originally, the Paris Business Center was only supposed to cost about \$1.2 million, projected to be paid for without the need to borrow money.

But due to pandemic-era supply-chain issues and inflation in materials costs, plus the recent expansion of the project scope to include a second story for rooftop dining and other amendments not in the original plans, that figure doubled to \$2.4 million in 2023.

It was the "escalation" of the project from additions not approved by the council that prompted Councilwoman Barrett to look closer, after which she contacted Attorney



City of Hiwassee Attorney Thomas Mitchell reading from prepared remarks detailing Mayor Liz Ordiales' alleged violations of the city charter. Also pictured: City Clerk Bonnie Kendrick and Mayor Ordiales. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Mitchell to inquire if Ordiales had indeed acted outside the bounds of the city charter. He determined that she had.

Mitchell said completing the most recent version of the project would require an

additional \$1.73 million, while a second version of the project could be finished without the added story for \$1.36 million.

"To complete in what I would characterize as a 'bare bones' manner to get the

project completed, which is required by the grant documents, would be, according to conversations with the contractor over the weekend, \$1.2 million," Mitchell said. See *Contract Controversy*, Page 6

Patriotic program set for Saturday in Veterans Park

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

This coming Saturday, Nov. 11, prepare to salute the timeless banner of red, white and blue that symbolizes the freedom and liberty of United States citizens – a freedom that Americans would do well to remember is not actually free.

To honor and memorialize the many people who have dedicated their lives to preserving this liberty, the American Legion of Hiwassee invites everyone to gather at the Towns County Veterans Park at 11 a.m. to observe a patriotic Veterans Day Ceremony.

The morning will kick off with the North Georgia Honor Guard posting the colors as the American Legion Riders pull into the park on their mo-

torcycles. The local Veterans of Foreign Wars Chaplain Dwight Moss will then welcome everyone with a warm invocation.

After that, Hiwassee American Legion Cmdr. Randal Forehand, who is leading the ceremony, will introduce guest speaker Gary Ely. Ely is currently the Georgia District 9 American Legion Commander but is also a VFW and Vietnam Veterans of America member.

Since the age of 17, Ely has committed his life to serving in the United States military and has made many sacrifices throughout his long years of service.

Following his patriotic speech, the American Legion Chaplain will lead the presentation of roses to the memorial wall, a tradition to honor Towns See *Veterans Day Program*, Page 3



Always a patriotic spectacle, the annual Towns County Veterans Day Ceremony is a way to say "thank you" to all veterans and especially local veterans who attend the program. Photo by Lowell Nicholson/2017

'Fangtastic Halloween' a hit at GA Mtn. Fairgrounds



The Halloween Costume Contest at the Fairgrounds saw Eva Deyton placing first as a Mermaid; Charlie Meaders second as a Cowboy; and Amelia Post third as Fiona from the "Shrek" movies. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Halloween was a scream at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds on Tuesday, Oct. 31,

bringing in ghouls and goblins from all over Towns County and beyond for a frightfully good time.

The gates opened at 5 p.m. before sunset, allowing

local businesses and organizations to start handing out candy and other goodies like popcorn and juice before nightfall.

Towns County Firefight- See *Fangtastic Halloween*, Page 16

USFS contains Sims Branch Wildfire off Bell Gap Road

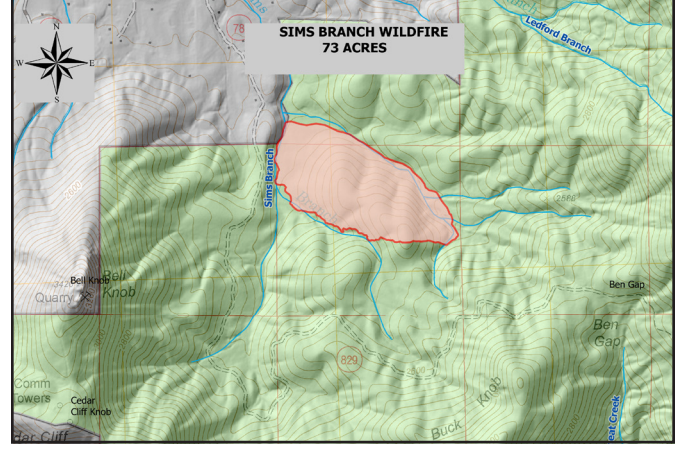
By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Firefighters with the U.S. Forest Service worked last week to contain a 73-acre wildfire that was discovered on Wednesday, Nov. 1, off Bell Gap Road at the northwest base of Buck Knob behind Bell Mountain.

"The fire is currently 60% contained," said USFS Public Affairs Officer Steven Bekkerus on Friday afternoon. "The fire is not expected to grow, as containment lines have been created.

"No structures are threatened at this time; however, firefighters are aware of several homes and other values at risk in the vicinity.

"Firefighters will continue to monitor it to ensure it does not reignite as more leaf litter falls. A cause for the fire has not been determined at this



This topographical map shows the extent of the Sims Branch Wildfire on U.S. Forest Service Land inside Towns County last week.

time." Dubbed the "Sims Branch Wildfire," the blaze comes during a time of drought in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest.

"Much of the Chatta-

hoochee-Oconee National Forest is in severe to moderate drought, with low humidity levels," Bekkerus said. "Rain is not in the immediate weather forecast; therefore, See *Sims Branch Wildfire*, Page 3

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Hiawassee man arrested in shooting, barricade incident

News Special
Towns County Herald

On the evening of Monday, Oct. 30, the Towns County Sheriff's Office received a call concerning a 31-year-old Hiawassee male receiving treatment at Chatuge Regional Hospital for a gunshot wound to the head.

An investigation quickly revealed that Melvin Linn "Bubba" Masters Jr., 45, also of Hiawassee, was the perpetrator.

As the Sheriff's Office served arrest warrants on Masters, he barricaded himself inside a garage with a handgun at an address on Kimsey Cove Road.

Deputies surrounded the garage, and Sheriff Ken Henderson negotiated with the suspect for approximately three hours.

In the course of the negotiation, the suspect was distracted, which allowed a Towns County deputy to tackle and disarm him, and he was arrested.

During the arrest an amount of methamphetamine laced with fentanyl, which field-tested positive, was confiscated along with drug paraphernalia.

The barricade situation came to a safe conclusion without anyone being injured.

Sheriff Ken Henderson

is proud of his deputies for their performance in a tense situation, saying, "This was a fantastic job by all our deputies."

Masters was arrested and charged with felony aggravated assault; felony possession of methamphetamine; felony possession of a firearm by a convicted felon; possession and use of drug-related objects; obstruction of an officer; and probation violation.

He is being held without bond at the Towns County Detention Center and is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

The victim, who was released from the hospital last week, is an acquaintance of



Melvin "Bubba" Masters Jr.

Masters, and the shooting occurred after a disagreement between the men. The dispute is still under investigation, but it does not appear to have been drug-related at this time.

Veterans Day Program...from Page 1

County veterans who have passed away.

"Our American Legion Chaplain will hand each (person who has sponsored a veteran) a rose as their name is put on the wall," Forehand said. "It's just something to tell the families that we care. We've got seven names going on the wall this year."

Those seven brave veterans whose names will be memorialized in the Towns County Veterans Park are Robert L. Crawford, Mack H. Cunningham, Myron E. Grizio, David E. Jakab, Dale

R. Venters, Shirley P. Sonnenfeld and Thomas Wright.

After that, all of the organizations involved in the ceremony will come forward to place a memorial wreath in front of the podium in the "laying of the wreaths."

The American Legion Post 23 will lay the first wreath, followed by the American Legion Post 23 Auxiliary, VFW Post 7807, VFW Post 7807 Auxiliary, the American Legion Riders, the Sons of the American Legion, the Marine Corp League Unicoi Detachment 73, and finally Club 66.

To close the ceremony, local singer Becky Jake will perform for guests alongside the Towns County High School Band. Madison Hinkley will signal the retiring of the colors with a playing of "Taps" before American Legion Chaplain Scott Drummond delivers the dismissal blessing.

The annual Veterans Day observance is incredibly important to local veterans, as Forehand explained.

"Being a veteran – Vietnam era and up – celebrating Veterans Day and celebrating

veterans (to let) them know that we care is just huge," Forehand said. "When you realize that less than 1% of the population of the United States fights for the freedoms of everybody and is willing to sacrifice their life for your freedom, it's big."

"And we need to thank all the veterans we can. For my group and I to be able to put this on is a great honor."

Towns County Veterans Park is located just inside the entrance to Towns County Schools off US 76. In case of inclement weather, the ceremony will be held in the VFW Building at 1329 Sunnyside Road.

Sims Branch Wildfire...from Page 1

fire danger is expected to last for several more days, possibly weeks."

Due to the drier than usual conditions, Towns County Fire Chief Harold Copeland issued a burn ban notification last Wednesday to residents signed up for the county's CodeRED Emergency Alert System.

People who have not signed up for local emergency notifications may do so by visiting <http://www.townscountyga.org/emergency-alert-system.html>.

"The Forest Service asks the public to assist firefighters and prevent wildfires," Bekkerus said. "If you must have a campfire in the outdoors, please make sure your campfire is completely out and cold to the touch before it goes unattended."

For more campfire safety tips, check out <https://smokeybear.com/>.

"Every year, wildfires burn across the U.S., and more and more people are living where wildfires are a real risk," Bekkerus said. "Nearly 45 million homes abut or intermingle with wildlands, and more than 72,000 U.S. communities are now at risk."

"Residents can make their own property – and their neighborhood – much safer from wildfire. There are steps that homeowners can take to reduce the risk, with the most important efforts occurring on and immediately around the home."

Bekkerus pointed residents to <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/firewise> to "learn what actions you can take to reduce your risk of loss

by preparing for wildfires and becoming fire adapted."

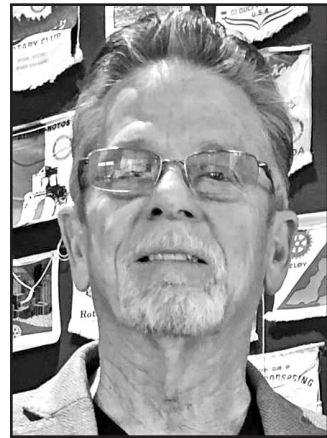
Towns County was an early adopter of the Firewise Program, being No. 1 in the state for Fire Adapted Communities and in the top among the nation as well. There are many local resources available to residents via Towns County Fire & Rescue: <http://www.townscountyga.org/fire---rescue.html>.

"Since we have implemented the Firewise Program, the number of fires in Towns County has been significantly lower than other surrounding counties that do not have a Firewise Program," according to the county website.

In other fire news, Chief Copeland said Saturday that the smoke seen in the area over the weekend was coming from fires in Fannin County as well as fires in North Carolina.



Lake Chatuge Rotary Club Meeting

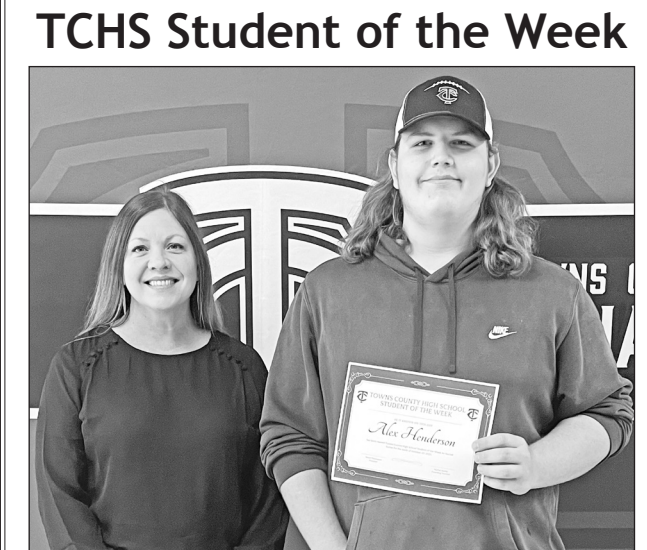


The Lake Chatuge Rotary Club met on October 31, 2023, at noon, at Brasstown Valley Resort. Jeff Shaw, a local published author, was the speaker.

Jeff was a law enforcement officer for many years. He has always dabbled in writing, but recently has focused on it more seriously, publishing several books, often drawing on his experience in Law Enforcement. His first book, "Who I Am" dealt with his law enforcement career, and the situations he encountered. He has written several other books, such as "Lieutenant Trefant", "Leann and the Clean Man", and "Broken". His books are available at bookstores nationwide, and by mail on Amazon.

If you would like more information about joining the Lake Chatuge Rotary Club, you can call Cathy at 706-897-2072 and arrange to visit one of the meetings.

TCHS Student of the Week



Rachel Surles and Alex Henderson

The TCHS Student of the Week is junior Alex Henderson. English teacher and yearbook adviser Rachel Surles states: "Alex has truly impressed me over the past three years of having him as a student in English class. He has really stepped up academically by embracing challenges, adding insightful commentary to class discussions, and maintaining a high average in an honors course. He adds a unique edge to my classroom which is participated not only by me, but also by his peers. He is jack of all trades, balancing rigorous academic classes with both playing football and participating in the band. He is genuine and has a heart of gold. I am so proud of his progress from freshmen year!"

Alex's favorite subject in school is math as he enjoys working with numbers and solving problems. After graduation, he plans to attend the University of Florida or Georgia Tech to pursue a degree in Aerospace engineering so he can work on building airplanes, helicopters, and rockets for the military or Boeing. Outside of academics, Alex plays on the offensive line for the TCHS football team, plays the tuba in band, and competes on the Academic Team.

Contract Controversy...from Page 1

With remaining grant funds of roughly \$231,000, this third option would require the city to co-sign a loan for the DDA in the amount of \$969,215.99 – a financial arrangement that, again, was not discussed when the city and DDA first started planning the Paris Business Center.

As of the meeting, a total of \$830,765.94 had been spent on the project, to include major federal and state grant funds, as well as significant fundraising contributions by the Hiawasse DDA to the tune of \$276,000 in donations by the public.

Terminating the project now would require the city to pay \$821,970.99 to cover work done to date and reimburse grant funds that have already been used.

“And that figure does not take into account any of the donations that have been made (through the DDA) for this project,” Mitchell said.

Should the council reject a loan to finish the project, the city would be in a position of having to pay back nearly the equivalent of the “bare bones” loan amount anyway while also leaving the buildings to languish uncompleted and jeopardizing future grant opportunities, Mitchell said.

That is why Council Members Chastain, Barrett and Noblet said they felt like the mayor had them “backed into a corner,” because they were unlikely to support co-signing a loan for the project otherwise.

As such, council members directed Mitchell to draw up loan terms and an amended construction contract for the “bare bones” option and signaled that they would likely vote to complete the project as cheaply as possible in their Nov. 7 regular meeting, which occurred after press time.

“Hopefully, we can get something going with the buildings, because I don’t want to lose grants for the city,” Noblet said. “If anybody wants to lose grants for the city, they can walk out the door, because that’s not what we’re here for. We need grants, we need money, we need funding, like anybody else.”

Even without the added second story, extra funding would have to come from somewhere, as costs have gone up dramatically since the initial planning. That does not, of course, eliminate the need for the council to vote on any additional expenditures to be committed by the city.

In light of what has been uncovered – including the alleged unauthorized use of LMIG and SPLOST funds to pave the mayor’s home road on Bradshaw Lane – the three council members will be seeking an investigation as authorized in the city charter.

“Based on the mayor exceeding her authority with regard to city funds and property, they have also inquired into the possible steps to remove the mayor,” Mitchell said, noting that he did not believe the legal requirements for removal had been met per established case law.

Added Mitchell, “Council Members Chastain, Barrett and Noblet each requested that I discuss with the mayor whether she would resign. I spoke with the mayor late Sunday afternoon about these matters.”

“She is not prepared to resign at this time and understands the council members’ need for an investigation and that an investigation will likely occur.”

Mitchell said his role as city attorney precluded him from being involved in the matter beyond the initial input he had already provided, so the council will be hiring an outside attorney to get the ball rolling on an investigation and financial audit.

Both the mayor and the entire council agreed that an investigation was warranted, and information on next steps was expected to be made available in the city’s Nov. 7 regular meeting.

“It just blows me away that something like this has happened,” Chastain said. “It makes me question what else has happened.”

Added Chastain, “Not knowing what happened, we’ve got to look to the future, if there’s any other contract going to come back and bite us – if the state comes back and says, ‘You’ve violated this contract, we want our money back.’”

“We’ve got to be prepared for that. We’ve got to protect the city, and we’ve got to protect the city taxpayers’ money.”

Some of Ordiales’ rationale for signing the Paris Business Center contract without

council approval came out in a heated exchange between her and the three council members that Monday.

Because the city has an agreement in place with the DDA to manage the city-owned property, Ordiales said she believed at the time that council approval was not necessary to sign the contract amendment.

The mayor also said she had attempted to keep the full council informed about what was going on at the Paris Buildings, but that Chastain, Noblet and Barrett had ignored her many attempts, adding that they shared responsibility in making sure the correct process was being followed.

Further, she stated that the council had received monthly updates on the process from her and Economic Development Director Denise McKay, and that the rooftop addition had been brought up in past council meetings.

“Even if you brought it up, we know that you have to put it before us for a vote. You never did,” Barrett said.

“Well, why didn’t you say anything? Because I did not know that. Why didn’t you say anything?” Ordiales said.

“You didn’t know that?” Noblet asked, incredulous, to which Ordiales responded, “I did not know that, because I thought the DDA was managing that project.”

Plans to develop the Paris Buildings have been in the works for many years, dating to before the city purchased the property in 2019 for the purpose of promoting local development and tourism as part of the city’s strategic planning, with Ordiales being a particular champion of the effort.

According to calculations by the mayor, a percentage of available SPLOST dollars already allocated to economic development – in addition to rent from businesses that will be occupying the center – would fully pay for the loan so that no property tax dollars would have to be used.

Regarding the paving on Bradshaw Lane, Ordiales said the road, which provides access for 10 residences in addition to her own, “has been on the list to be approved for seven years,” and that the city road crew simply paves “the worst roads” as they make the list.

“We have been improving roads throughout the city for seven years, and we have never, not once, asked for paving approval from the city,” Ordiales said. “Is it wrong? I don’t know, but it’s never happened, and we’ve never had a problem. Now it’s a problem because it’s a road I live on.”

DDA Resignations

Allegations of “bullying” by Mayor Ordiales also cropped up in the meeting, specifically regarding the push this year for the expanded rooftop dining area that caused project costs to get “out of hand” above and beyond COVID-19 pandemic-era economic conditions.

Tamela Cooper, who served on the DDA Board until resigning Oct. 17, asked Ordiales to clarify who wanted the additional rooftop space. Ordiales said the DDA had requested and approved it.

Hiawasse DDA Program Manager Steve Harper interjected, telling Ordiales, “I know this might cost me my job right now, but the fact of the matter is, the DDA did not want that rooftop bar, did they?”

Cooper and Harper were among the more than 70 people attending the meeting, and they spoke from the audience, as did others.

Harper said that no one at the DDA wanted to expand the project because it was “too expensive,” but that Ordiales “came in here and laid down the law.”

“You basically forced the DDA to approve it – they didn’t want to approve it,” Harper said.

When Ordiales said that the rooftop expansion had not been her idea, Cooper relayed that, at the time, the mayor told them that if the DDA was unwilling to move forward with the addition, she would start firing people and replace them with individuals who would.

“That’s exactly true,” Harper said. For her part, Ordiales deferred to the upcoming investigation to clear things up.

The morning after the meeting, Harper resigned from his position as DDA Program Manager.

“Unfortunately, and as much as it pains me to say it, my decision to resign was motivated entirely by recent actions of the mayor, the de-

tails of which will no doubt be brought to light in the coming days,” Harper told the Towns County Herald last week.

“It pains me because I love so many of the things (Mayor Ordiales) has done for this city,” he continued, “like getting us out of debt, sticking to the Strategic Plan, and starting Mayor Mondays during the #Hiawasse shuttle runs, just to name a few.”

“The city made the decision to purchase these buildings before I even moved up here. I remember reading about it when I came to visit my mother about five years ago. I was honored to have been placed on the Paris Business Center project, and still deeply believe in its mission.”

“But sadly, things have changed. They have spiraled out of control, and the only way I could let the mayor know how unacceptable things had become was to resign.”

In his resignation letter, Harper leveled additional allegations of behind-the-scenes bad behavior by the mayor, including accusing her of “repeatedly (misrepresenting) financial positions,” and saying she has “very inappropriately screamed at and berated both (Denise McKay) and me, as well as members of the City Council and the DDA many times.”

“She forced us to begin work on the PBC before we had the funds in place, which neither Denise nor I wanted to do,” Harper wrote, pointing to a potential scenario in which the current financial predicament could have been avoided if construction had simply waited for appropriate funding.

“She would constantly tell us that if it didn’t get started right away, then ‘I’m going to lose my s---! I’m going to lose my s---!’” he continued.

Responding to his resignation letter, Ordiales wrote, “I’m very disappointed in your decision to resign, Steve. You are incorrect on many items but neither here (nor) there. I accept your resignation and wish you all the best.”

As for Cooper, she said that she remained unaware Ordiales had signed the contract without council approval until a day or two before the Oct. 30 meeting, so that aspect was not the reason she stepped down from the board two weeks prior.

“I resigned because I was not OK strapping a loan/line of credit to the residents of the city for this project,” Cooper said. “When this project was supported by grants and donations, I was for it and the potential it had for our city and county.”

According to Cooper, the letter of intent from the bank states that the city would have to raise property taxes to cover the loan if the DDA was unable to maintain the debt service – something Cooper could not support.

“Liz assured us it would be paid with SPLOST funds, but I personally could not make those numbers work,” Cooper said. “I am not against nor dislike Liz or the board. I just can’t potentially raise taxes on the people for this type of project; that’s not who I am.”

Drainage Problem Fix

One bright spot from the discussions was the apparent commitment by all elected officials to finally fix a long-running water drainage issue at the Paris Buildings that has caused damage over the years to the adjacent historic building occupied by local outfitter Trailful Outdoor Co.

Trailful owners Rob Sollie and Eric Champlin appeared in the meeting to discuss their plight. When their lease expired this summer, they were told they either needed to buy their building or it would be put up for sale. So, to keep the business in place, they decided to pursue a purchase.

Drainage has been a problem at the Paris Buildings for a long time but grew worse when construction started there a couple years ago, resulting in rainwater being redirected to collect in pools at the front of Trailful and flood the business’ crawlspace from accumulation in the shared alleyway.

When the business owners went to secure a purchasing loan, an inspector found major structural damage in their building’s foundation walls, including a 15-foot section of support beam that had almost completely rotted. Restoration will be extensive, requiring close to \$200,000 to fix.

At first, this was not a deal-breaker for the self-funded businessmen, as they



Hiawasse City Council Members Jay Chastain Jr., Nancy Noblet and Amy Barrett have requested an official investigation of recent actions by Mayor Liz Ordiales. Photo by Shawn Jarrard



More than 70 people attended the meetings held by the City of Hiawasse on Oct. 30, with multiple people attendees speaking on the contract controversy involving the mayor. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

wanted to retain their location and continue improving the building. And they had been assured by city officials for some time that the drainage issue would be resolved with the Paris Business Center renovation.

Their plans became shrouded in doubt, however, when they learned last month that most of the City Council did not appear to be in favor of borrowing money to finish the center, which would potentially prevent the root cause of their water problem from being addressed, thereby making

any restoration investment impossible to justify.

The couple is on a tight timeline to purchase the building, and they asked council members to commit to fixing the issue regardless of whether they decide to fund completion of the business center project. To that end, Champlin and Sollie provided a drainage fix estimate of \$10,000.

Councilwoman Noblet said she wanted to ensure that Trailful’s business was protected, even if it meant pulling from the city’s general fund for the Paris Buildings’ drainage

fix. All city officials agreed, and a solution to the drainage problem was expected in the Nov. 7 regular meeting.

Champlin and Sollie said they were relieved to receive the city’s verbal commitment on Oct. 30, calling the support they’ve gotten throughout this ordeal, including from everyone in the community, “phenomenal.”

The Oct. 30 proceedings were livestreamed over the City of Hiawasse Facebook page. Other business from that evening will appear in an upcoming edition of the newspaper.

Fangtastic Halloween...from Page 1

ers were stationed at the front to give out plastic fire hats, though Fire Chief Harold Copeland was not among them. Instead, he and Jenny Rhodes went all-out this year, grabbing the eyes of parents and kids alike as they walked around greeting guests.

Rhodes was the Beauty to Copeland's Beast, and the Disney-themed duo stopped to pose for several photos among the decorated streets and swirling leaves.

Some of the most impressive Halloween props were homemade this year, as was the case with Brasstown Manor Senior Living Community's bewitching cauldron. Jessica Merritt created some convincing bubbles by using clear Christmas ornaments.

Merritt then attached light strings to the inside of the ornament bulbs with hot glue to add an eerie twist, making them appear incandescent against the dim, multicolored light of their booth's surroundings.

Meanwhile, County Coroner Tamela Cooper and her husband, Marvin Cooper, once again handed out candy, enjoying the cheerful surroundings that their line of work so often lacks.

"It's a good, fun time for us, too, because most of what we do is sad," said Tamela Cooper. "It's a good time to see people and not have grief on the brain."

The Coopers noticed that there were fewer attendees this year than in past iterations of the event. One theory proposed by Tamela in particular included surrounding communities holding Halloween celebrations on the same night, though the weather may have been a factor as well.

Despite the chill, those who attended definitely enjoyed themselves, especially if they went out in warmer costumes. Fursuiter "Ruckus," a vividly colored hyena, had plenty of protection from the cold beneath the layers of a homemade costume.

"I think it's just great to see people showcase their personalities and the things that they like - express themselves," he said.

Tiffany Leech was keeping an eye on her niece Harper, who was proud of her substantial candy haul that night. Before moving to Towns County, Leech lived in Woodstock, and while she remembers when Hiawassee's Halloween celebrations occurred on the square, she prefers the experience at the Fairgrounds far more.

"This is actually extremely better," Leech said. "It's much safer, and then this year ... there weren't as many people here. And you know, people were able to just bounce around and be themselves."

Young Max Osborn said he had a wonderful night out,



North Mt. Zion Church had plenty of fun activities for kids during its Fall Fest on the Hiawassee Town Square Oct. 28.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

having experienced plenty of laughs due to his interesting costume. Osborn raised a stink with an inflatable outfit in the likeness of a certain emoji, and his grandfather Mike got tickled as he relayed one reaction.

"It's been very popular. One woman thought it was a Hershey Kiss, and I had to correct her. 'No, it's not a Hershey Kiss,'" Mike Osborn chuckled. "His dad got it for him."

"I just wanted to be an inflatable for Halloween," said Max, peering out of a mesh window in the front of the costume.

Speaking of costumes, the Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce helped to host a contest for youngsters in various age categories this year.

For ages 0-4, winners were Canbree James in First Place as a Cabbage Patch Kid, followed by Termite Man in Second Place and an adorable Pooh Bear in Third Place.

In the 5-7 age category, Eva Deyton placed first as a Mermaid; Charlie Meaders won Second Place as a Cowboy; and Amelia Post earned Third Place as Fiona from the "Shrek" movies.

Children in the oldest age group placed as well, including Reagan Thompson as Jigsaw for First Place; Carter Robertson as Jessie from "Toy Story"; and Emily Gibson as Wednesday Addams.

Contest prize donations came by way of Marina Station Water Park, VIP Cinemas, Loaded Cow Ice Cream, the Towns County School store, Blazin' Scoops Ice Cream, Hiawassee Family Dental, the City of Hiawassee, Windstream/Kinetic, and Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce.

Maybe this year's "Fangtastic" Halloween Celebration at the Fairgrounds wasn't the warmest on record, but it was still certainly enjoyable if the positive reactions of critters and characters of all ages is anything to go by.

Of course, the candy-themed festivities got started early this year, with Towns County Sheriff Ken Hender-



As Beauty and the Beast, Jenny Rhodes and Harold Copeland were crowd-pleasers at this year's "Fangtastic Halloween at the Fairgrounds."

Photo by Lowell Nicholson



Sheriff Ken Henderson was happy to shake hands while handing out candy during the TCSO-sponsored First Responders Trunk-or-Treat on Oct. 28.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson