

# School Board, principals discuss classes amid COVID

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The Towns County Board of Education met Jan. 4 for its first regular meeting of 2021, and members discussed the spring semester, which was letting in Jan. 5 after winter break.

Most of the schools in the Pioneer RESA, of which Towns County is a member, decided last week to temporarily transition to online-only classes due to the high prevalence of COVID-19 in the area.

Towns County Schools on the other hand, like neighboring Union County, chose to start the spring semester back with face-to-face instruction on campus. Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong said that "we are not in the same situation that they are in" in terms of staffing.

Continuing, he explained how some schools like Habersham County were experiencing issues with a significant number of bus drivers, for example, having to quarantine, making it difficult to get children to school.

There are no such staffing issues at Towns County currently, and Berrong and board members want to assure the public that if a situation does arise necessitating a shift to online learning, the appropriate measures will be taken to safeguard students and staff.

"We have four total (COVID positives) in the entire system," Berrong said Jan. 4. "Three are staff and one is a student. We may have more numbers when the students come back (Jan. 5). We will have to wait and see. Currently, those are some of the best numbers we have had."

Berrong updated the Towns County Herald Friday, saying the local situation in the schools had actually improved after students returned, citing only three total positive cases



Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong

in the system, including two staff and a student.

"We do have a number of quarantines due to exposure over the Christmas break," Berrong said. "A total of 43 quarantines, with six of those being staff members."

"To keep you updated on my theory that our students are not spreading the virus the way adults are, we now have a total of 27 positive student cases for the entire year out of roughly 850 students on campus, with 36 positive staff cases out of roughly 200."

"With other schools going virtual after the break, with these numbers, I feel we made the right choice to come back to in-person learning given the data we have in our system."

Also in the Jan. 4 meeting, Elementary School Principal Shannon Moss gave a COVID update of his own regarding the number of students enrolled in online learning.

"The online numbers, as Dr. (Connie) Hobbs and I were discussing, are changing with every phone call because of what Dr. Berrong has already mentioned in the rising (community COVID) numbers," Moss said. "We are currently at 33 students

that have chosen to be online through March 11. That gives us 371 people that are in-person students.

"To my knowledge, we only have one student that has a positive case, and that occurred over the holidays. We had 16 that (were) quarantined prior to school being let out - 15 of those will be back tomorrow, which means we have one student that will be quarantined, but that can change."

Middle School Principal Dr. Connie Hobbs said some former online-only students would be returning to in-person learning this semester.

"As of this afternoon, we have 12 students at the middle school returning back on campus (from online only), so that leaves us with 23 students doing online, which is approximately 10% of the middle school population," Hobbs said.

Also during the meeting, Superintendent Berrong discussed COVID relief for the faculty and staff for the upcoming spring semester.

"The legislation ended at the end of December that was providing 10 sick days or 80 hours to non-certified staff for COVID sick relief," Berrong said. "Any individual that was either quarantined or had to be out for testing or tested positive could use those 10 days and not have to take their sick time from the school."

Added Berrong, "From the discussion with the majority of superintendents of the area, everyone is in agreement to extend those sick days through May of 2021."

The Jan. 4 meeting was the first for new Board Member Carolee Woods, who won election to the board last year. Towns County Schools will continue to monitor the COVID situation and work to make the best decisions for everyone during the final semester of 2020-21.

# Sheriff Henderson...from Page 1A

to do it." To say it was a busy first week would be an understatement. First thing Monday morning, he met with officials from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation for a biennial inspection of the Sheriff's Office.

He also opened his doors to an internal county audit to make sure he knew exactly what he was taking over, including an inventory of equipment and a review of the financials in the Sheriff's Office and Detention Center.

Next steps for Henderson include an ambitious agenda of creating an exceptionally trained and highly professional law enforcement outfit akin to what he was able to do in his nearly four decades with the Young Harris College Police Department, which he built from the ground up.

This will take time, of course, and he's asking for patience as he gets settled in and works toward implementing his plans. Additionally, Henderson said he never intends to rest on his laurels, as he considers the Sheriff's Office to be a work in progress with room for perpetual improvement.

Eventually, he wants to get the Citizens Law Enforcement Academy running again with regular classes; host drug intervention programs; provide deputies with active shooter and other training; and encourage neighborhood volunteers to participate in community policing.

Furthermore, he means to increase public outreach through social media, the legal organ, the Sheriff's Office website, and with direct contact between officers and residents; institute a youth outreach program with training; set up a drug/crime tip line with rewards; and much more.

As if that weren't enough, Sheriff Henderson will be busy examining internal practices office-wide in the coming months to shore up existing policies and implement new ones where needed.

Henderson is grateful to have inherited a state-certified Sheriff's Office, which he described as a major accomplishment not held by too many other departments in Georgia. As such, he aims to keep that certification and use it as one of his building blocks for continued improvement.

Again, all of this will take time, but the sheriff would like people to know that there is one thing people can count

on right away - a refreshed look to establish a new era of professionalism within the Towns County Sheriff's Office.

In the coming weeks, people will notice the newly wrapped patrol cars around town. Featuring highly visible black and white detailing, folks will know right away when they see a Sheriff's Office deputy on the road. But that's not all. He's also bringing in new uniforms for all deputies.

"We want to change the image of the Towns County Sheriff's Department," Henderson said. "We want very well-dressed deputies with nice uniforms - everybody wearing the same thing and looking the same. We want our cars to look the same."

"We want to go out there and present ourselves as professional law enforcement and well trained. I'm going to see to it that they are well trained. And we're going to present ourselves to the public in a professional manner and do our job."

"We owe nothing less to the citizens of Towns County. They deserve to have a sheriff's department that they can respect, and we're going to give them that."

Moreover, Henderson has pledged to maintain transparency with the public. To accomplish this, he said he'll be making himself available by being out there in the public eye. He's also going to uphold his campaign promise to give special attention to the drug situation in the county.

"I have said time and time again that my priority is to keep drugs away from our schools and our young folks, and I intend to do just that," Sheriff Henderson said. "I'm going to work hard day and night to make sure we've got good professional drug agents and people that are working to make sure we're doing everything that we can to take the drugs out of our county."

"I can't stop all this, I know that, but I guarantee you that I can make an impact. I don't have to have a sanctuary city for drugs in Towns County, and it's not going to be that way. I'm not saying anybody's done that; I'm just saying that's my goal and what I plan to do. So, if you're selling drugs, be looking over your shoulder, because I'm coming for you."

Henderson has installed a brand-new leadership team, though he's kept much in place from the administration of

Sheriff Chris Clinton. He's happy with the coverage available to patrol the county currently, and his office is taking applications for a couple of deputy and jailer positions.

"I've met some wonderful people here that are very eager to get to work and work with us, so things are going very well to this point," Henderson said, before turning his attention to the community. "I am honored to have been given this opportunity to be sheriff."

"I'm going to work hard every day and every night to ensure the safety of our community and our folks, and do the very best job that I can possibly do and strive every day to make sure we're making our citizens of Towns County happy and proud of their sheriff's department."

"I can't say enough about how humbled and honored I am, and how I thank God that He's blessed me and has a purpose for having me here. So, I'm not going to let Him down, and I'm not going to let the citizens of Towns County down."

New in 2021 will be the employment of a dedicated Animal Control Officer, who will work as a regular patrol deputy in addition to his animal duties.

Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw made room in this year's budget to create the position. He also earmarked money to wrap the patrol cars and buy new uniforms, and Henderson said he looks forward to working with him over at least the next four years.

"Not only is Cliff a great commissioner of our county, but he's a good friend of mine - we go back many, many years," Henderson said. "That's not to say he's just going to give the sheriff anything he wants. No sir, he is not going to do that. But he's going to work with us."

"He wants our county to be safe, he wants the drugs out of our county, and he's going to work with us to make sure that we can do the best job that we can do for the citizens of Towns County."

For his part, Commissioner Bradshaw has expressed publicly on several occasions that he is excited to be working with Sheriff Henderson and anticipates a fruitful relationship in furtherance of the wellbeing of everyone in Towns County.

# Meredith...from Page 1A

not to get violent," in reference to riots that occurred in major American cities following the death of George Floyd.

The self-described "fifth-generation Atlantan" is known for having promoted the #QAnon conspiracy using billboards in metro Atlanta, according to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. QAnon holds, among other things, that there is a secret global group plotting against the U.S.

"I sincerely believe the New World Order, Cabal, Deep State - whatever you want to call it - wants society to devolve into a race war so that it's much easier to take over," Meredith told the Towns County Herald at the June 5, 2020, BLM rally.

According to court documents shared by the A.J.C., FBI agents approached Meredith at his D.C. hotel on Jan. 7, 2021, where he was found to be in possession of "hundreds of rounds of ammunition" and two firearms - one of them the same style rifle he'd brandished in Hiwassee.

He told the agents he knew the firearms were not allowed in D.C., so he'd put them in a trailer attached to his truck located in the parking lot of the hotel, court documents show.

Meredith then revealed that he'd been to the nation's capital for a previous rally in November and that he had attended a protest outside of Gov. Brian Kemp's residence in Georgia as well.

Furthermore, he admitted to sending text messages to friends and showed them to the FBI. One of these texts read that he was "thinking about heading over to (Pelosi's) speech and putting a bullet in her noggin on Live TV [purple devil emoji]," court documents show.

Among the other

messages Meredith sent was one in which he claimed to be "headed to DC with a shit ton of 5.56 armor piercing ammo," and another saying he was going to "run (Pelosi) over while she chews on her gums," court documents show.

After one of his friends admonished him for threatening Pelosi, Meredith responded that he was, in effect, waging "psychological warfare."

"I've been on the radar for a while now, they (know) I'm harmless," he'd said, just as another exchange saw Meredith predicting that "within 12 days, many in our country will die."

Meredith told a friend who had expressed concern that he was "locked in my hotel room...high [smiley] face with hearts emoji]." During the consent search of his room, federal agents seized "a box of suspected THC edibles and a vial of Testosterone Cypionate/Propionate."

Pertaining to his charge of "making interstate threats to Speaker Nancy Pelosi," Meredith was using a cellphone in D.C. to send text messages on Jan. 7 to "an individual located outside of Washington, D.C.," court documents show.

He may also be facing charges from D.C.'s Metropolitan Police Department, which ran a records check Jan. 8 and found that Meredith did not possess a registration for any firearm in the District of Columbia.

CNN reported Friday that Meredith was being detained "at least until a court hearing next week."

Three more men were charged Saturday, making 16 people at press time facing federal charges in relation to the events at the Capitol.

Approximately 40 people have been arrested and charged in Superior Court as well, for

offenses including but not limited to "unlawful entry, curfew violations, and firearms-related crimes."

"The lawless destruction of the U.S. Capitol Building was an attack against one of our nation's greatest institutions," Acting U.S. Attorney Michael Sherwin said Friday. "My Office, along with our law enforcement partners at all levels, have been expeditiously working and leveraging every resource to identify, arrest, and begin prosecuting these individuals who took part in the brazen criminal acts at the U.S. Capitol."

"We are resolute in our commitment to holding accountable anyone responsible for these disgraceful criminal acts, and to anyone who might be considering engaging in or inciting violence in the coming weeks, know this: you will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."

Other complaints have been submitted regarding the Jan. 6 riot, and investigations are ongoing to uncover everyone who was involved.

"Today's charges are just the beginning of the FBI's ongoing efforts to hold those responsible for the criminal acts of violence and destruction that unfolded during the U.S. Capitol Building breach on Jan. 6," FBI Director Christopher Wray said. "To be clear, what took place that day was not First Amendment-protected activity, but rather an affront on our democracy."

"The FBI, along with our local, state and federal partners, is committed to ensuring that justice is served. We will continue to aggressively investigate each and every individual who chose to ignore the law and instead incite violence, destroy property and injure others."

borders is a world without citizens; a world without citizens is a world without the rights and privileges that attach exclusively to citizenship.

Rights and liberties exist only in separate and independent nations; they are the exclusive preserve of the nation-state, where the just powers of government are derived from the consent of the governed. Does that sound familiar to you? Our founding Fathers had it right, so lets dig in and make the maintaining of our Freedom a high priority.

A Patriot Reflection is presented weekly by www.joshuaswarriors.org.

# Deadly Fire...from Page 1A

Bureau of Investigation.

"The Towns County Fire Department requested our help to investigate this fire which completely destroyed a double-wide mobile home," Insurance and Safety Fire Commissioner John F. King said Monday. "Upon arriving at the scene, authorities found one deceased male and one deceased female. One additional male escaped with minor injuries."

"State and local authorities will release the identities of the deceased when they become available."

The fire is under investigation by Commissioner King's State Fire Investigations Unit, the Towns County Sheriff's Office and Towns County Fire. Residents with helpful information on the case should call the State Fire Investigations Unit at 1-800-656-2298.

Towns County Fire Chief Harold Copeland said his department was able to have someone on the scene within five minutes of being dispatched by Towns County E-911 about a quarter past 5 a.m. Friday.

The area is a more secluded part of the county off Owl Creek Road that doesn't have fire

hydrants, which generally makes firefighting more difficult, as water must be manually trucked to a blaze.

Fortunately, Towns County has cultivated good working relationships with nearby counties, so Union County and Clay County, North Carolina, fire units responded to the scene to offer mutual aid.

"Upon arrival, the first volunteer there reported (the home being) 50-60% involved (in flames)," Chief Copeland said. "It was super-hot, melted a couple of my guys' helmets down as they went into the door as far as they could to apply water."

Copeland described the fire as "brutal" and said it took more than an hour to knock down, after which he contacted Holcomb Construction of Hiwassee to bring in equipment to remove roofing and other debris to excavate the home and locate the fire victims.

As always, he's grateful for everyone involved, including the State Fire Marshal's Office, Towns County Sheriff's Office, Towns County EMS, Union and Clay County fire departments, and the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC

for quickly disconnecting power to the property.

And of course, Chief Copeland said he would like to express gratitude for his own Towns County Fire & Rescue Department.

"Engine 1, Tanker 1, Engine 4, Engine 5, and Engine 2 all responded (from Towns County)," Chief Copeland said. "I have to always give kudos to our department. I can't say enough about how our volunteers performed - wonderful as always. I'm very proud of them."

"I want to thank Towns County EMS for transporting the subject that was in the house. A second med unit came to assist in case anything happened to us, but we had no injuries, and we're blessed there."

Towns County Fire & Rescue is a combination career/paid-on-call department consisting of six stations and approximately 60 members.

All stations are equipped with engines that carry a minimum of 1,000 gallons of water, and all engines are equipped with a 1,250 gallons-per-minute pump or greater. Each station has a tanker truck to accompany the engines.

# Mayor Gibby...from Page 1A

is happening in Young Harris and why we don't have more businesses, restaurants, retail and housing. We took a very practical approach to planning from the beginning.

"When I first started in 2009, we were in a downturn in the economy. We put a lot of money into infrastructure, and as everybody has heard me say, we have increased our capacity in water and sewer. That in large part was to get ready for what is about to happen in the valley, the building and all of that."

Mayor Gibby has made it her goal to prepare the city for upcoming growth, to include the impending Georgia 515 bypass of the city, which will bring a new dynamic to the downtown area.

A large part of recent development planning has been credited to Economic Developer Denise McKay, who for the last two years has been helping the mayor, City Council and

community discover ways in which Young Harris can expand responsibly.

With this knowledge, Mayor Gibby hopes to bring more businesses to the area over the next couple of years. Of course, the mayor is grateful for her constituents, many of whom have assisted with development plans at community meetings.

"This is an incredible community that enjoys coming together, enjoys being together,

not just at festivals when we get together, but this community treasures the valley," Gibby said. "Whether they have grown up here or whether they have moved here, most people that are here want to protect this valley."

"I am incredibly thankful that they allow me to continue doing this and serve them. It is because we all work together and we are here at this moment and I got this award, and this award is for all of us."

# Weekly Patriot Reflection



## If You Can Keep It

Have we passed the apex of freedom in our country? Eric Metaxas, in his book, "If You Can Keep It" states that America is not

a nation bounded by ethnic identity or geography, but rather by a radical and unprecedented idea, based upon liberty and freedom for all. He goes on to caution that it is nearly past time that we reconnect to that idea. If we don't, we may very well lose the very foundation of what made us exceptional in the first place.

Let me quickly cite just one example of how our freedoms are being compromised. In 2016 former Secretary of State John Kerry made this statement at a commencement address. "Americans must prepare ourselves for a 'borderless world.'" We will have lost our identity and freedom for what? A world without