

Towns County Herald

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Mayor Ordiales to step down early from office

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Hiwassee Mayor Liz Ordiales will be stepping down from her position at least one year early, setting up the need for a special election at some point to fill the remainder of her term that expires at the end of 2025.

The announcement came in the Jan. 9 regular city meeting, during which the mayor and City Council executed the terms of an agreement they negotiated via mediation on Dec. 15.

Settled in the agreement are all issues between the mayor and City Council regarding City Charter violations committed by Ordiales last year

when she inappropriately signed a pair of contracts.

Successfully mediating the dispute enables the city to avoid costly litigation and investigatory expenditures moving forward; the investigation into Ordiales' actions – on pause since mediation was agreed to – has now officially been terminated “without the need for a formal report.”

As she has maintained since the violations first came to light, Ordiales acknowledged in the agreement to having “made a mistake by failing to get City Council approval on certain contracts and by failing to obtain review of these contracts by the City Attorney.”

Ordiales and the City Council publicly disclosed the

settlement terms on Jan. 9, detailing that the mayor would resign her position “at a date that she chooses on or before December 31, 2024.”

Further, Ordiales has agreed that “she will not offer herself as a candidate for any position in any City of Hiwassee or Towns County election in 2024, 2025 or 2026.”

Ordiales was first elected mayor in 2017, and she qualified unopposed in 2021 for a second term to run January 2022 through December 2025.

Once she steps down and until a new mayor can be elected to serve the remainder of her term, the city will be run by the Mayor Pro Tempore, a position assigned by the City

Council from among its members at the start of each year.

Jay Chastain Jr., who has served multiple terms as a councilman, is the current Mayor Pro Tempore, as decided in the Jan. 9 meeting.

Next year is a regular election year for the office of mayor, so the city will be electing a full-term mayor in November of 2025.

Other terms of the agreement are as follows:

“The parties agree to cooperate in the contracting, funding and completion of the municipal projects of Paris Business Center and the replacement sewer lift station.

“Further work on the Boardwalk Project shall be
See Settlement Terms, Page 6



Hiwassee Mayor Liz Ordiales speaking with council members in the upstairs training room of City Hall on Jan. 9, 2024. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Edwards, Clemens and Sutton return to Elections Office



L-R: Election Coordinator Sue Sutton, Elections Supervisor Rachel Edwards and Voter Registrar Nancy Clemens started back with the Towns County Elections Office at the beginning of January. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
editor@nganews.com

The Towns County Elections Office has welcomed back several familiar faces, starting with Rachel Edwards, who left her position as local Elections Supervisor last year for a registrar job in the Union County Voter Registration Office.

Edwards is returning seven months after the coun-

ty hired Diandra Southern as Elections Supervisor and Brooke Henderson as Registrar, both of whom assumed their posts in June 2023 but left in December to pursue other opportunities.

Originally hired at the end of 2019, Edwards has plenty of election experience, having overseen the federal, state and local elections in 2020 that involved the Secretary of State implementing all

new voting equipment during a more contentious than usual election year when the stakes seemed elevated.

The county has also hired a new registrar, Nancy Clemens, to oversee voter registration moving forward. Clemens is no stranger to the job, having served as the local registrar in 2022 and previously as a poll worker beginning in 2020, so she is fully equipped

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Campus closures, power outages attend wintry weather

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Winter 2024 asserted itself last week following a storm system that resulted in two days of campus closures for area schools.

And this week, the National Weather Service issued a winter weather advisory calling for a chance of sleet early Monday, Jan. 15, plus subfreezing lows throughout the week.

Already, it's shaping up to be a very cold winter, with nighttime and early morning slippery road conditions possibly accompanying any precipitation that falls.

By press time Monday, the weather service had forecasted lows of 8 degrees on Tuesday night, and around 20 degrees for Wednesday, with a low of 29 degrees on Thursday night with a 70% chance of precipitation, to include possible rain and snow showers into Friday.

Friday night, the temperature is expected to drop to around 10 degrees, but according to the weather service, with the exception of Tuesday, highs should remain above freezing until Saturday, which will likely see a high near 31 degrees and sunny skies.

Below normal temperatures for this time of year have been projected at least into next



Towns County school buses didn't roll for two days last week as the system decided to implement online learning for weather-related road conditions. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

week, so be sure to bundle up and pay careful attention to road conditions.

There were two storm systems last week, one that moved in the evening of Monday, Jan. 8, bringing with it heavy winds and dropping nearly 4 inches of rain on Tuesday.

Local rivers and streams reached capacity, and multiple trees fell around the county, causing power outages, though there were no major issues to

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Debris injures child in suicide shooting at Brasstown Resort

By Shawn Jarrard
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editor@nganews.com

YOUNG HARRIS – The Georgia Bureau of Investigation assisted the Towns County Sheriff's Office with a death investigation at the state-owned Brasstown Valley Resort & Spa on Friday, Dec. 29.

GBI has ruled the death a suicide, and an 8-year-old bystander suffered minor injuries as result of the self-shooting.

“There was no evidence to suggest that the death was anything other than a suicide,” GBI said. “The victim was an employee of the resort and died at the scene.”

“A child was struck by debris from where the projectile exited the wall. The child sustained minor injuries and was treated at the scene.”

The employee shot himself in an office adjacent to the resort's dining room, and the bullet exited through the office wall and into the dining area, causing pieces of the wall to



strike the child, whose parents declined medical transport, according to the Towns County Sheriff's Office.

At the scene, the GBI discovered a suicide note written by the employee, who was a resident of Hayesville, North Carolina, at the time of his death.

The Sheriff's Office requested GBI's assistance with the case due to the nature of the incident and state ownership

of the property there at 6321 Highway 76 in Young Harris.

“Brasstown Valley is owned by the State of Georgia,” according to the resort website. “All 503-acres, the resort itself, and the golf course are property of the state. The resort and all of its recreational facilities are managed by Coral Hospitality.”

“We employ an average of 230 employees and offer a variety of occupations and career opportunities.”

Bradshaw gives courthouse, parrot-feather updates & more

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

On Friday, Jan. 12, Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw educated the Movers & Shakers on the obligations of the Commissioner's Office and offered updates on both the Towns County Courthouse project and the parrot-feather infestation in Lake Chatuge.

The SPLOST-approved and funded Towns County Courthouse renovation and expansion project is going incredibly well, Bradshaw said, announcing that the flooring and painting are complete, leaving the contractors to finish hanging signs above each department.

“I cannot wait for us to have our grand opening so (the community) can come see the courthouse,” Bradshaw said. “It is so functional, so warm, cozy and so quiet compared to the noisy courthouse we had.”

“Each department is a different department. When



Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw was happy to spend time with the Movers & Shakers during their weekly meeting at Sundance Grill on Friday. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

you go in the commissioner's wing, you are not even aware there is a whole big building (around you.)”

And while the renovations are nearly complete – Bradshaw expects the grand opening to take place sometime

this spring – he shared that in the past few months, a plan to change the courtyard, walkways and parking has been introduced.

Additional parking will be gained by adding side lots
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Settlement Terms...from Page 1



Jonathan Wilson took his oath of office as administered by City Attorney Thomas Mitchell to swear in as a member of the Hiwassee City Council on Jan. 9, with Mayor Ordiales volunteering to hold the Bible.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

suspended until the Paris Business Center is completed and sufficient funds are identified and available for the Boardwalk Project without incurring any city debt.”

The mayor and council have also agreed to “increase their two-way communication of city business,” and Ordiales has pledged not to repeat her mistake with contracts.

“Other than in emergency situations, all contracts shall be provided to the council for review at least two weeks prior to the meeting when the contract will be voted upon,” the agreement reads.

Additionally, the city will be paying half of Ordiales’ attorney fees related to the investigation ordered by the council in November, “up to a maximum of \$1,500.”

Also in the meeting, Jonathan Wilson took his oath of office and swore in as a member of the Hiwassee City Council. Wilson won election to the seat in November, and his term will run through December 2027.

Prior to the start of the meeting, the mayor and council held a public hearing to review the Home Rule Ordinance Change to amend the City Charter and establish procedures via ordinance for the removal of city officers, that is, any elected or appointed official of the city.

In the meeting that followed the hearing, Council

Members Jay Chastain Jr., Nancy Noblet and Amy Barrett voted to approve second readings for the Home Rule Amendment and Ordinance, with Councilwoman Patsy Owens voting “no” and Councilman Wilson abstaining from the vote.

Mayor Ordiales objected prior to the vote, saying that, while the procedures needed to be added to the City Charter, it was her opinion – and that of three attorneys she’d spoken to – that the charter amendment in question required approval by the Georgia General Assembly.

Ordiales pointed to Georgia law specifying limitations on Home Rule powers pertaining to, among other things, “the continuance in office” of the members of a municipal governing authority, which would require this particular charter amendment to be enacted legislatively.

Councilwoman Barrett appealed to City Attorney Thomas Mitchell to ask if he agreed with the mayor’s interpretation, and he said no, clarifying that the charter already contained removal language and that the Home Rule Amendment was simply a procedural matter.

The council accepted a \$24,490 contract with Park Atlanta Homes to replace the roof at the city-owned Berong-Oakley House, expected to be completed in 90 business days. The house will be used as

a welcome center and historical site overseen by the Towns County Historical Society.

Among other business, council members approved a new Intergovernmental Agreement with the City of Young Harris for Economic Development, to include splitting the compensation of Economic Development Director Denise McKay, an employee of Hiwassee.

The new agreement replaces the former agreement that was terminated by Towns County Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw when he withdrew the county from the Joint Development Authority last year.

Under the new agreement, McKay will focus her economic development efforts on the cities of Hiwassee and Young Harris, with work on projects outside of the cities to require mayoral and council approval of the city closest to such projects.

The city also renewed its worker’s compensation insurance with the Georgia Municipal Association to the tune of \$30,331. Mayor Ordiales thanked resident Jeff Pierot, who was in attendance, for bringing the need for such insurance to her attention in the past.

Additionally, the council approved a contract with Engineering Management Inc. to conduct watershed monitoring inside city limits for the same price as last year at \$23,049.

Wintry Weather...from Page 1

EMC said. “Power restoration efforts began as soon as it was safe for crews to assess the damage and begin work, which was fairly immediately after the storm damage occurred.

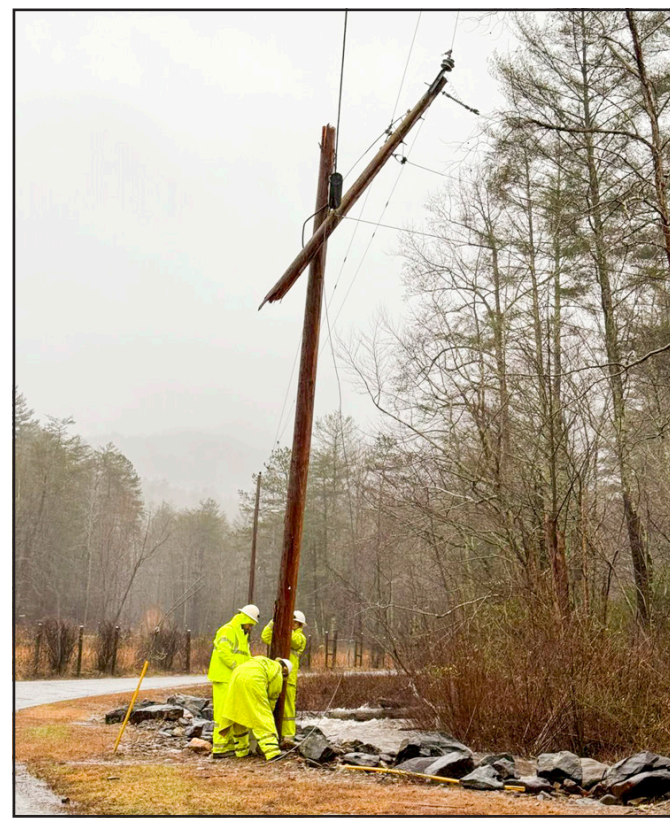
“High winds and heavy rain from the storm caused the majority of the outages. Trees were blown over that snapped lines and broke five utility poles. Each county in BRMEMC’s service territory was affected. In addition, heavy rain caused flooding to occur.”

Towns County Schools made the call on Monday, Jan. 8, to close schools to in-person instruction on Tuesday, Jan. 9, implementing an online learning day for students out of an abundance of caution for forecasted heavy winds and rain.

On Jan. 9, the schools announced a two-hour delay for the next day, highlighting the chances for overnight snow and the possibility for black ice on bus routes.

Freezing rain began Tuesday evening as the storm system continued to move out of the area, and residents awoke to the first snow of winter – just enough to build tiny snowmen – with a light dusting on Wednesday, Jan. 10.

Icy road conditions along several bus routes and low morning temperatures prompted the schools to keep students



Blue Ridge Mountain EMC linemen were able to get power up and running within 24 hours for customers who lost electricity due to the storm early last week.

Photo/Facebook

home a second day for more online learning that Wednesday.

Then on Friday, a weaker storm system moved through the area, dropping additional rain and bringing with it more heavy winds and the slight

chance for tornadoes, though again, no major issues were reported locally.

For information on winter weather preparedness, visit <https://www.ready.gov/winter-ready>.

Elections Office...from Page 1

to handle the role.

Retired local schoolteacher Sue Sutton is back in 2024 as the county’s Election Coordinator in charge of poll worker training and other duties, having started as a poll worker herself for the major 2020 elections.

Most recently, Sutton helped at the office on Election Day 2023 for the countywide E-SPLOST referendum, and all three women also worked the 2022 midterm elections.

Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, who exercises fiduciary responsibility over the Elections Office, hired Edwards, Clemens and Sutton in recent weeks, and he is happy to welcome everyone aboard, especially such qualified individuals.

Filling these key roles quickly is a huge relief to the county and Board of Elections & Registration, as the

busy 2024 election cycle is just around the corner, starting with the March 12 Presidential Preference Primary, with early voting beginning next month on Feb. 19.

Edwards said she is grateful for the opportunity to return, and everyone is excited to see her – and her colleagues – once again helming the Elections Office.

“Having that kind of experience in the office is going to really be very, very helpful for us going forward,” Elections Board Chair Roy Perren said.

Added Commissioner Bradshaw, “We’re very fortunate that Rachel was able to come back; she has all the training and the credentials to run the elections coming up.”

As noted above, the 2024 election cycle will be a busy one, with federal, state and local elections up for voting.

Candidates for local elections will qualify the week of March 4 for the May 21 General Primary/Nonpartisan Election, with a runoff date of June 18 if necessary. And the big General Election is slated for Tuesday, Nov. 5, with a runoff date set for Dec. 3.

The deadline to register for the Presidential Preference Primary is Feb. 12; for the General Primary/Nonpartisan Election is April 22; and for the General Election is Oct. 7.

Each election will feature an early voting period: three weeks for regular elections and as much time as possible for runoff elections.

Active registered voters will have the option of voting at the Elections Office during early voting, in-person at their predetermined precinct on Election Day – either in Hiwassee or Young Harris – or via mail-in absentee ballot.

Bradshaw Updates...from Page 1

along the roads, and the parking lot in front of the library will be removed.

Bradshaw turned the subject to the parrot-feather infestation in Lake Chatuge, which is owned by the Tennessee Valley Authority. Parrot-feather is a particularly tenacious invasive aquatic plant that is spreading at an alarming rate across lakefront properties in the lake's south end.

Its spread could disrupt the natural habitat by competing with native plants and creating breeding areas for aquatic larvae, such as mosquitoes. It could also create drainage problems and diminish the recreational uses of Lake Chatuge, and by extension, the local economy.

"Parrot-feather needs to be a community effort," Bradshaw said. "Parrot-feather is growing in the lake out here on the west side towards Macedonia. (It) is like kudzu - it spreads fast, and we understand that.

"What the people need to understand is that the Towns County Government wants to help and wants to be involved as much as we possibly can, but I cannot take money out of our General Fund - which is all of y'all's tax money - and go spend it on private property.

"I'm going to announce (at the upcoming county meeting), that the county will take donations after (Jan. 16) for parrot-feather."

Once enough money is raised, the funds will pass to another organization that will hire contractors to treat parrot-feather. Bradshaw said this is the only legal way that the county government can help reduce the parrot-feather weed.

"We can do this part of it," Bradshaw said, "and I'm happy that we can. And I want to, because we don't need parrot-feather covering our whole lake. And you know what, I'm very confident - maybe overconfident - that I feel like together, as a community, we will get this under control."

The commissioner spent the bulk of the meeting discussing various aspects of his job, which is extensive.

Several years ago, Bradshaw realized that many residents were simply not aware of what his job entails, so he has taken steps to educate the entire community - even the youth.

"It dawned on me that these high school kids have no idea about the county government, how it works or who does what," he said. "So, I called Superintendent (Darren) Berrong, and we (created) a volunteer group called the Junior Board of Government Officials.

"I meet with them early in the mornings as often as possible, and we just talk about what the roles and responsibilities are for the commissioner, the clerk of court, the probate judge and the sheriff."

While the Junior Board is a great start to creating an educated citizenry, Bradshaw also wants to get the word out to the rest of the population, which includes outreach to groups like the Movers & Shakers.

He shared several of his responsibilities, such as maintaining all government buildings and government vehicle fleets.

His office also oversees the Road Department, the Tax Assessor's Office, the Transfer Station, Transit System, libraries and even a county daycare - all things that require a lot of attention.

For instance, the Road Department is expecting to need thousands of dollars in new equipment over the coming years to keep the county roads maintained to the high standard people are used to.

Other departments under the watchful eye of the Commissioner's Office include Emergency Medical Services, 911 Dispatch, and Fire & Rescue, and his office funds the Sheriff's Office. Over his time in office, Bradshaw has helped to oversee changes at all of these departments.

EMS boasts what Bradshaw refers to as, arguably, "the best" ambulances around. With a new rotation, EMS consistently has two ambulances on call and extra employees to aid with emergency calls.

At the 911 Office, updated technologies, such as digital touchscreen radio systems, have improved the department tremendously. New mapping technology, the ability to text 911 and many other improvements have the 911 Center preparing to expand its workspace.

The Fire Department has recently added a small, \$200,000 truck that is equipped to reach places that larger trucks cannot, as well as an additional standard truck to compensate for countywide growth.

As far as Animal Control, Bradshaw highlighted some drastic improvements

that have taken place since he took office seven years ago.

Back then, Animal Control was not its own department; it consisted of two Road Department employees. Today, Animal Control is run by the Sheriff's Office and is treated as its own department.

Other changes to the Sheriff's Office include the renovation of the Towns County Jail and bringing an additional School Resource Officer to the local school system. In the past seven years, the jail has been painted and remodeled to prioritize the safety of those in custody.

"There is so much involved in this job, but the main thing is setting policy and ordinances for the county, and setting the millage rate (for property taxes)," Bradshaw said. "We have to make sure we have enough money coming in to cover all the expenses. The commissioner is responsible for setting the budget for (all departments)."

Once the budget is set, however, it is up to each department head to manage their share. What Bradshaw continues to manage, however, is the liability insurance, health insurance and benefits packages for government employees - a job that he takes very seriously.

"Right now, on retirement for county employees, we match up to 4%," Bradshaw said. "Midsummer, we're adding 2% more to (expand that to) 6%, so that will help our employees a lot.

"Another thing we have done for our employees every year since I've been in office ... we have given them a 50 cent an hour raise across the board. That doesn't sound like a lot of money, but each time you do that, that's \$150,000 (to cover all employees in a year).

"(Multiply \$150,000 by seven years), and your millage rate has not been raised - so we're taking care of our employees."

Bradshaw prioritizes his employees, even going so far as to spend federal COVID-relief money to boost their earnings rather than make visible changes

in the community.

"It has been my goal since the day I got elected to get our employee salaries up," Bradshaw said. "Three different times, we have been able to give our employees a check.

"This last (time), we gave \$500 to all our (full-time) employees on Thanksgiving and Christmas, and part-time (employees received) \$250. Before that, I think it was \$2,000 per employee and \$1,000 for part-time, and the same before that.

"I could have taken that money ... and built something, did something (or gotten) up in front of (the community) to shine - I don't do that," he said. "I'm not a Facebook guy; I'm not a fluff guy. I want to work. I love what I do, and I want to be the best commissioner that I can be."

Although future developments could prevent county employees from receiving bonus checks in the future, Bradshaw hopes that he will be able to continue the tradition.

Other projects he plans to oversee in the near future include working with the Recreation Department to install a splash pad at the Towns County Beach and erect a pavilion with public restrooms near the pickleball courts; providing portable speed monitors to slow down traffic; and replacing the entrance signs to the county.

Bradshaw also shared that the Georgia Department of Transportation has approved the installation of central turning lanes along various sections of US 76, including at Papa's Pizza, Asiano Restaurant and the Mason Tractor area, which should make the highway much safer.

This process is set to begin in 2026 and is currently projected to cost between \$6 million and \$7 million.

Also in the meeting, the Movers & Shakers took a moment to honor local nonprofit Summer Heat of Towns County for their win in the Sheriff's Office Christmas Parade float contest. They also congratulated local Firefighter Dominick Barbanera on his Fireman of the Year Award.

Towns County Lions Club Delivers the Prize Guitar



Martha Meeks, Emory Brown, Danny Meeks



The Towns County Lions Club's new year began with sensational, stupendous, super and sure success as the first bi-weekly meeting of 2024 on January 9 brought in another new member and a well-received progress report of the 2024 Georgia Mountain Fair schedule by Fair Board President Matt Turpin.

Brenda Swanson started what will become a new tradition of catering the meeting with a definitely delicious dinner that provided generous portions and even take home extras that the Lions thoroughly enjoyed.

Club President Danny Meeks officially inducted our newest member, Christmas Parade Float Coordinator Extraordinaire Scott Benson, who was sponsored by his wife, Kelly Benson, which was preceded by Matt Turpin's detailed presentation on the 2024 Fair schedule.

Club Secretary Martha Meeks also revealed that the

2023 Fair and Lions prize autographed guitar signed by every star performer who appeared at the Anderson Music Hall last year had been delivered to the drawing winner, Emory Brown from Smyrna, GA.

The Towns County Lions want to again thank all the Fair concert fans who bought guitar

drawing tickets last year and we certainly appreciate, encourage and welcome your continued valuable contributions and support again this year to fund our annual Towns County High School scholarship project.

Our next concert is Nashville Superstar Chris Jansen on January 27, 7 PM. See you there!

Quilters Guild January 23rd meeting

By Patricia Christ

The Misty Mountain Quilters Guild meets on Tuesday, January 23. Sign-in begins at 12:30 p.m. and the general meeting commences at 1:00. We will meet in the Fellowship Hall of First United Methodist Church, 938 GA-515, Blairsville, GA. Everyone is welcome, especially new and potential members.

Last month's meeting was a luncheon to celebrate camaraderie and the end of busy year that included a record-breaking quilt festival. Our meetings are a fabulous way to meet local quilters, exchange ideas and give back to the community. The Misty Mountain

Quilters Guild donates quilts throughout the year to various charitable groups, including quilts of valor for veterans, nursing homes, childrens facilities and shelters.

MMQG has more than 160 members, hailing primarily from Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Florida. Our mission is to educate, share, promote and keep alive the craft and traditions of quilting. We love new members.

If you are interested in quilts or want to learn more about quilting, come check us out! To learn more, visit our website at <https://www.misty-mountainquiltguild.org> or email mmqginfo@gmail.com.