

Towns County Herald

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Publication Number 635540 Volume 96 Number 13

Wednesday, January 22, 2025

Jan. 10 snowstorm leads to extended school closure

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Sometimes, a little of something goes a long way. That certainly held true after the Jan. 10 winter storm that dumped between 1 and 3 inches of snow throughout the county, resulting in many backroads remaining icy all last week.

Citing safety as the No. 1 priority for students, Towns County Schools canceled on-campus instruction for six days, including Friday, Jan. 10, plus Monday, Jan. 13, through Friday, Jan. 17.

The daily decisions to mix in-person classes last week rested on the fact that many

bus routes remained dangerously slick in too many places from compressed snowpack, introducing a greater risk of children being injured in wrecks if buses rolled to pick them up.

Trouble areas stubbornly persisted on sideroads primarily because of shady spots not melting quickly enough and overnight lows in the teens and 20s refreezing both runoff and road ice that managed to melt.

District Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong was worried about the system's young drivers, too, who commute via personal vehicles to the High School.

"We got to where we

probably could have done a two-hour delay Friday with our buses," Berrong said. "Our buses could have probably managed because we've got veteran bus drivers.

"But the issue becomes, when you have 16- and 17-year-old drivers, and you've got 100-yard strips of road that are completely dry but then you go into a curve that's completely iced over - I just don't trust that they have the experience to be able to manage that.

"So, our concern was as much our buses as it was these student drivers who just don't have that experience in this kind of weather. And it just

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Towns County Schools had to clear a lot of snow from its campuses last week. Photo/Facebook

Towns County Fire battles another structure fire



This home on the Macedonia side of Sunnyside Road burned last week, though Towns County Fire was able to contain the blaze.

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

A medical helicopter flew a Hiwassee man to the Grady Burn Center in Atlanta after he suffered second-degree burns to his face and hands in a housefire on Wednesday, Jan. 15. No one else was injured in the blaze.

It was the second major structure fire of the year tackled by Towns County Fire & Rescue following the Jan. 3 fire at Hawks Harbor Condos.

Unfortunately, the old wooden home at 1827 Sunnyside Road - known by some in the community as "The Common Ground" - is a total loss, having been fully involved with flames when firefighters arrived on the scene.

Towns County E-911

dispatched the call at 8:43 p.m. Fire engines from Stations 1, 3 and 4 responded, as did pumper tankers from Stations 1, 2 and 4.

Firefighters hooked up to a hydrant across the street from the home and stretched three to four lines of water to the fire, knocking down the blaze and preventing it from spreading.

Fire Chief Harold Copeland said the fire began in a room built onto the back of the home that did not have access into the main structure. The accidental fire is believed to have been caused by a tank top propane heater that had been knocked over.

Multiple people inside the main part of home safely evacuated through the front door after realizing there was

a fire, and firefighters found the injured man, who had been staying in the separated room, lying in backyard snow that had yet to clear from the Jan. 10 storm.

The American Red Cross was called to assist the displaced residents, Copeland said.

Due to injuries being associated with the fire, Copeland had a fire marshal with the Georgia Office of Insurance and Safety Fire Commissioner come out the next day to assist with investigating the incident.

The chief thanks the Sheriff's Office for controlling traffic, Towns County EMS for treating the injured, the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC for cutting power to the home to

See Firefighting, Page 6

Towns County Grand Jury Indictments for January Term

The following individuals were indicted during the January Term 2025 of the Towns County Grand Jury, which met Jan. 9:

Jeremiah Lloyd, statutory rape; electronically furnishing obscene material to minors; enticing a child for indecent purposes; child molestation; terroristic threats; disrupting public school.

Dale Christopher Beavers, aka Dale Christopher Lee Beavers, three counts child molestation; three counts invasion of privacy; three counts photographing underneath an individual's clothing.

Dwight Lamont Holland, aggravated sodomy; aggravated sexual battery.

Nicholas James Lunsford, failure to register as a sex offender.

Nicole Marie Davis, ob-

struction of an officer; cruelty to children in the second degree; two counts possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony; obstructing public passages.

Cody Michael Crane, trafficking methamphetamine or amphetamine; possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; possession of methamphetamine; possession of a Schedule II controlled substance with intent to distribute; possession of fentanyl; fleeing or attempting to elude a police officer; taillight violation.

Charles Edwin Robinson, trafficking methamphetamine or amphetamine; possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; possession of methamphetamine; possession of a Schedule II controlled substance with in-

tent to distribute; possession of fentanyl.

Brandon Neil Elliott, making a false statement; simple battery.

Caleb Avery Hughes, three counts aggravated assault; aggravated battery.

Daniel Lee Dyer, obstruction of an officer.

Robert Richard Hagen, battery, Family Violence.

Mandy Jane Fortner, trafficking in illegal drugs.

Kelsey Grace Phillips, trafficking in illegal drugs.

Adam Edward Moss, trafficking in illegal drugs.

Ella Siobhan Nichols, three counts violation of Georgia Controlled Substances Act; crossing the guard lines with drugs.

Hannah Jo Barajas, possession of methamphetamine.

See Grand Jury Indictments, Page 7

Bradshaw talks county snow response in meeting

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

On Friday, Jan. 17, Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw spoke with the Mountain Movers & Shakers about the recent snowstorm in the area. Bradshaw was originally slated to address the group in their Jan. 10 meeting that was canceled due to the winter weather that day.

"It's so good to be amongst friends again," Bradshaw said. "We are so blessed living here. I want you to know I realize that. I know we are blessed. We know what we've got, and as your commissioner, I will protect it."

Before diving into the prolonged icy road conditions from the snow, Bradshaw touched on the divisive discourse in the nation, saying that he prays for others who "talk about people when they don't know what they are talking about or just try to cause trouble."

"Yeah, I get mad, but then I think about how Jesus would respond and follow his lead," Bradshaw said. "We



Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw had a good time visiting with friends at the Movers & Shakers meeting inside the Sundance Grill on Friday. Photo by Shelly Knight

can rise above that and take the hits and take the criticism. Now, where I'm going with that is the weather.

"I have never, in my eight years as commissioner, received so many phone calls in that office over the roads - ever. Why? Because this hasn't ever happened like this since I've been there. That is how often something like this happens. This has been different.

"Our Road Department

is spot on. They work very hard. Last Thursday, the Road Department was getting ready. They were sharpening their chain saws because we expected 30 mph winds, and if that had happened, there would have been power outages everywhere.

"Other guys are putting snowplows on the dump trucks. Other guys are putting chains on the back tires of the dump trucks and making sure

See Cliff Bradshaw, Page 6

City Council approves November Regular Election



Hiwassee City Council members bowing their heads during the prayer by Acting Mayor Jay Chastain Jr. to open the Jan. 7 regular city meeting. Photo/Facebook

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

On Tuesday, Jan. 7, the Hiwassee City Council approved a resolution calling for the city's regular Municipal General Election on Tuesday, Nov. 4. The election will fill the seats of mayor and two councilpersons that are up for grabs in 2025.

Council Members Amy Barrett, Nancy Noblet and

Jonathan Wilson voted in favor of the resolution, while Patsy Owens did not vote.

Owens' decision stemmed from the fact that the usual five-member composition of the council will likely be down to just three regular members by the time of candidate qualifying in August, for the following reasons.

Currently, longtime Councilman Jay Chastain Jr. is not considered a regular voting

member because he is serving as acting mayor for the city and can therefore only cast tie-breaking votes. This means that, right now, the council only has four regular voting members.

Chastain has served as acting mayor since June 2024, when former mayor Liz Ordiales resigned. He has publicly announced his plans to run for mayor this year, but to do so,

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School Closures...from Page 1



Icy backroads were a common occurrence across the county all last week, endangering school bus routes. Photo/Facebook

wasn't worth it to us to attempt to have a half a day of school and put somebody at risk."

Additionally, the region's steep mountainous terrain intensifies the hazard for all drivers in icy conditions – especially those carrying children to school.

"You just have many people living up on the mountains; you have too many bus routes that go up hills," Berrong said. "There's very few roads that just remain flat, and that's the biggest concern."

"And if you have curvy roads like that, there's going to be some of those that are on the north-facing side that never get sun, and when it ices over, that's not going to melt with the freezing temps we've had all week."

Thankfully, warmer daytime temperatures and regular treatment by the county Road Department contributed to a gradual decline in ice on backroads last week, but the schools remained closed out of an abundance of caution because of continued bad driving conditions.

Rain and 50-degree temps Saturday greatly diminished lingering snow and ice, but the National Weather Service has been warning of dangerously cold conditions this week, forecasting several days in a row of subfreezing temps that started Sunday night.

The weather service has also been monitoring the potential for more snow this week, with local predictions at press time Monday hovering around a 30% chance for Tuesday/Wednesday precipitation, though forecasts pointed to a more southerly snow trajectory.

But if it does snow again here, the extreme cold this week will likely make any amount hazardous for travel, and people will want to mind the 4 P's during intensely cold weather like this, that is, take precautions for People, Pets, Pipes and Plants.

Of course, at some point, the show must go on, and Superintendent Berrong felt confident last week that classes would resume Tuesday after the long weekend considering the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday on Monday, Jan. 20.

Still, he said he is prepared to cancel classes again if travel conditions do end up deteriorating beyond the point of being safe.

During the six days of closure, schools educated students in a limited yet ongoing capacity, so the kids will get credit toward the 180-day school calendar despite missing in-person classes, with no make-up days required at the end of the year due to this event.

The schools have been drawing on past experiences with at-home instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, supplementing students' time away from classes with online learning made possible due to a lack of widespread electrical and internet outages from the storm.

It has not been ideal, as in-person learning at young ages is broadly thought to be far superior to online instruction, but given the circumstances, the schools went with the best option available to students.

"Every teacher every day puts assignments into a Google Classroom," Berrong said. "Every student is assigned into a Google Classroom, so all they have to do is log into their Google account and go to each of their teachers' classrooms, and they can see their assignments there."

Not every student has internet at home, however, and Berrong said these students will be granted special dispensation to make up for the work they could not complete during the extended closure.

Many staff members had a hard time getting out of their driveways initially, so

they did not begin reporting to campus until Wednesday, Jan. 15, where teachers worked on lesson plans, prepared rooms for the students' return, and communicated with kids via online tools.

The Towns County School System was not alone in choosing to safeguard students with closures. Neighboring mountain schools also closed last week for the same reasons.

Regardless of being in good company, Berrong said that canceling classes is rarely an easy call, both from a standpoint of parents needing to work and students having basic needs met on campus.

"It's a hard decision, because we know some of these students need to be in school just to have meals, and so that pulls on you as well," Berrong said. "So, you get on that struggle where you're trying to decide, I know that we need kids in our building, but at the same time, we've got to make sure it's safe for them to get here."

"Honestly, we've not had any negative comments or feedback from parents. I think most people in this county understand our sideroads, and most of them maybe have driven them."

Added Berrong, "Towns County Schools has probably missed fewer days over the past three or four years than any other school around us. If we can be in school, Towns County Schools are in school."

"So, I feel like (our school closure decisions in recent years) maybe make people trust that. OK, we can't get to school safely if they're calling school, because they don't do that a lot."

"I appreciate everyone's patience and their trust with us with their kids, and we hope we can get started back on Tuesday and go the remainder of the year. We're going to cross our fingers for no more snow."

Firefighting...from Page 1

make the scene safer for firemen, the fire marshal for his assistance, and of course, his hardworking firefighters.

"As always, many thanks for the wonderful work of the fire personnel on the scene," Copeland said.

Chief Copeland reiterated that it has been a busy fire season. Firefighters have battled close to a dozen structure fires since Nov. 1, and the chief marvels at the fact that no lives have been lost.

"If not for the grace of God and the time element being good, we could have already easily had anywhere

from four to six possible fatalities in the county," Copeland said, referring to recent fires having taken place during waking hours as opposed to when people are normally asleep and less likely to notice them.

The fire chief said that home heating remains the leading cause of winter fires, and that people should be extra careful to make sure whatever they are using to heat their homes is safe and in proper working condition.

Particularly cold air moved into the region Sunday night that was expected

to keep temperatures below freezing well into the week, and Copeland said that, in addition to being mindful about heating, residents should take special precautions regarding the possibility of frozen pipes.

During frigid weather – especially temps in the single digits with subzero wind chills – as forecast this week – Copeland recommends that people keep a faucet or two running small streams of water to prevent pipes from bursting amid prolonged periods of cold.

"When it gets this cold, you have to remember the 4 P's – pipes, people, pets and plants," Copeland said.

Cliff Bradshaw...from Page 1

we have gas, oil, salt and sand.

"Mr. Clyde Shook is the Road Superintendent who has been there about 40 years. He's seen a few snows, and I think he knows what he's doing. The first thing they do is hit the hill between the hospital and the nursing home because they are constantly transporting people.

"Next, the hospital parking lot for the helicopter. Then they hit the highest elevations first – Ramey Mountain, Harris Heights, Young Harris Mountain, Frog Pond, and a few other places in the county you may not be aware of.

"Three trucks running. I know this because I was in the dump truck with them all day into the night. And let me tell you, coming off Ramey Mountain in all that snow and ice – if you're not a Christian, you might be after that. They do a fantastic job, and I'm really proud of them.

"The way it's been different this year is the darn cold temperatures. They have made four and five trips on the same roads. It warms up in the day and then refreezes at night, and we start all over again.

"There is nothing you can do with ice. Please understand that. The sun doesn't hit some of these shady spots. It's not going away for a long, long time."

Bradshaw said his office was already looking at the next week very closely, with extended periods of subfreezing temps and potential forecasts of additional snow on the horizon.

"Snow blades wear out and they need replacing," Bradshaw said. "Chains wear out fast, and they're expensive. They need replacing. Yesterday we ordered 30 more sets. We had to call all over the country to find them, too. We got 25 tons more salt, too, in preparation.

"All of this to say we have a great team of employees who work very hard, and many wear multiple hats. The county did give raises this year. We gave a \$1 per hour before the first of the year and then another \$1 after the first. We did that to retain employees and keep the good employees we have.

"Good employees offer good services. We've got

a great team, and we want to keep them. We have not raised your taxes, haven't had to raise them and been able to absorb all of the inflation. I give all that to God. And I'm very proud we've been able to do that.

"Looking at the future for the county, we're building a pavilion next to the pickleball complex with working bathrooms. We received a grant to build a splashpad at the beach. We will be doing a facelift for the Tax Commissioner's building – both interior and exterior need work.

"I love our county and I'm proud of our county. Let me say this; if you ever hear anything that doesn't make sense or doesn't sound right, just come talk to me. That's all you've got to do. I love our community very much and I want to protect it. I appreciate the opportunity to work for you. Thank you so much."

To receive weather and other emergency alerts related to Towns County, people can sign up for the CodeRED notification system at <http://www.townscountyga.org/emergency-alert-system.html>.

City Council...from Page 1

he must resign from his council seat when he qualifies for the mayoral election in August, per the city charter.

Once that happens, Councilwoman Noblet will have to step up from her position on the council to similarly lead the city as mayor pro tempore, at which point she, too, will no longer be considered a regular voting member.

A majority of the council, or at least three members, acts as a quorum needed to do business, and with the chance of the council dwindling to three regular members in August, Owens was concerned about a situation arising in which a quorum might not be possible through December.

With the successful vote to call the election, qualifying has been set to run Aug. 20-22 between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 1 p.m., and 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. Hopefuls for mayor and councilperson will need to file their notices of candidacy with

the City Clerk at City Hall during this time.

To qualify, candidates must be over 21 years of age and have lived in the city for at least the preceding 12 months. Candidates must also be registered voters. Qualifying fees are \$72 for councilperson and \$780 for mayor. Fees must be paid at time of qualifying.

Council Posts 1 and 2 held by Barrett and Owens respectively are the council seats up for election this year. The mayor seat is technically vacant, being filled temporarily by Chastain until the next election.

As noted above, the 2025 Municipal General Election will take place on Tuesday, Nov. 4. As city elections are decided on a plurality vote, a tie is possible. In the event of a tie, a Runoff Election will be held on Tuesday, Dec. 2.

Following the election, the winners will be sworn into

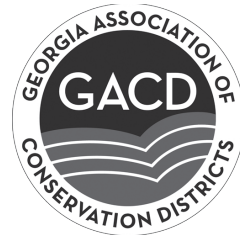
four-year terms that start on Jan. 1, 2026.

Importantly, given the scenario of Chastain running for mayor, as long as Barrett, Wilson and Owens can maintain their duties on the council, the city will be able to conduct business as usual through December, after which the council will be refreshed to at least four members.

The Towns County Herald did not know at press time if Councilman Chastain's unexpired term ending Dec. 31, 2027, would be added to the Municipal General Election should he resign to run for mayor this year.

A special election could still be called this year to fill the remainder of Ordiales' unexpired term as mayor, which was the original plan before the Towns County Board of Elections decided last year not to hold city elections while focusing on the busy 2024 presidential election cycle.

Graham to represent Blue Ridge Mountain Soil and Water Conservation District



Cody Graham of Blairsville was elected on November 6, 2024 to represent Union County on the Blue Ridge Mountain Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD). He will serve the Conservation District for a four-year term beginning January 1, 2025.

Cody is a second generation farmer who works alongside his father-in-law and business partner of B&B Farms. B&B Farms is a stocker cattle operation processing over 1,000 head of cattle every year for the beef industry. Together they farm approximately 500 acres of pastures and hay fields. In addition to beef cattle, the farm produces its own supply of hay. With so many cattle moving through the farm, it is necessary to implement soil and water conservation practices to maintain a successful operation.

To maintain optimal hay and grazing pastures, fields are terraced to control water erosion. Low lying areas in the pastures use pipes and drains to keep the areas well drained.



Cody Graham

Stream bank restoration has been implemented for washed out banks as needed. Automatic drinkers are utilized in some of the pastures with no running water. Fences have been installed to assist with rotational grazing. The farm has installed both gravel and concrete pads to manage heavy use areas, specifically for feeding time. Nutrient management is a big part of managing the soil and hay production. To maximize hay production, the farm uses no-till drilling to reseed the pastures as needed. The farm takes yearly soil samples to optimize hay and grazing production. In addition to maintaining the soil and water, it is necessary to manage the wildlife on the farm to protect the

cattle.

Cody's family enjoys helping around the farm and caring for their small flock of chickens that provide eggs for the family. He is instilling the love of farming and agriculture in his family. Everything done on the farm is teaching them how to care for natural resources and how to run the farm and family business. Cody previously worked 6 years with the University of Georgia's Georgia Mountain Research and Education Center in Blairsville, GA. Cody looks forward to sharing his knowledge about the cattle and hay industry with the Blue Ridge Mountain SWCD and other farmers in the community.

The Blue Ridge Mountain Soil and Water Conservation District is a unit of state government that directs natural resource management programs in Union, Rabun, Fannin, and Towns Counties.

The District works with farmers, landowners, homeowners, and with other units of government to educate and actively promote programs and practices that support the conservation, and use and development of soil, water, and related resources.

More information can be found at www.gacd.us/blue-ridgemountain.

How to create "Fun Art Not Fine Art" hosted by Tri-County Women's Connection Friday, February 7th

Ladies! You are invited to join us for "fun art", great food, door prizes and our speaker's motivating story. All this takes place on Friday, February 7, 2025, from 11 AM-1 PM at the Pat Haralson Memorial Civic Center, 165 Wellborn Road, Blairsville. Doors open at 10:30 AM. Bring your family and friends - they will be glad you did!

Delish LLC Catering will prepare a scrumptious lunch of Honey Roasted Chicken with Sweet Potatoes, Spinach Salad with Raspberry Vinaigrette, Cranberry Apple Cobbler, coffee, tea and water.

For all "wannabe" artists who are intimidated by a blank canvas, The ART Studio of Georgia in Blairsville is the perfect place to gather, create and paint "Fun Art Not Fine Art". Melissa Ray, owner since 2022, hosts in-studio and on location "fun art" paint parties for you, your friends and family. The ART Studio of Georgia not only offers these in-person classes, but also "Paint From Home" kits, stuffed animal making kits and more. On location paint parties are offered at your home, school, community center or business.

The ART Studio of



Melissa Ray

Georgia was voted Best of Georgia 2024 in Art Studios and Workshops by the Georgia Business Journal! The studio is located at 178 Brackett's Way, Suite 4, Blairsville. For more information, visit their website theartstudioGA@gmail.com.

Melissa will bring a pre-traced canvas, paint brushes and paints so every guest can paint a few brushstrokes to help create a lovely piece of fun art. Make your reservations now!

Our Guest Speaker, Cathy Johnson from Marietta, says that "Sometimes your life is going one way, and then

through circumstances beyond your control, it starts going another way - can you relate?" Cathy can and will share her story of struggles and tragedy: "What Stays Together When Life Falls Apart". She was raised in the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia and moved to Georgia in 1993. Ken and Cathy have been married for 40 years, raised two adult girls and have two grandchildren. Don't miss this inspiring story!

For reservations, e-mail Jocelyn at jowabow@aol.com OR text or call Jane at 706-633-7868. The cost is \$20 which includes the program, lunch, coffee, tea, water and dessert. Reservations and payment are due by January 31. Pre-pay with check (payable to TCWC) and mail to Judy Teague, 3245 Mulky Gap Road, Blairsville, GA 30512. If you are paying for other guests, please include their names.

Since the 1980's, the Blairsville Tri-County Women's Connection in affiliation with Stonecroft has planned and hosted events for women that provide a positive, upbeat time of fun, food and friendship. We look forward to connecting with you!

Grand Jury Indictments...from Page 1

Kevin Lee Parson, possession of methamphetamine.

Dexter Rickey Shelton, aka Ricky Dexter Shelton, two counts possession of a firearm by a convicted felon.

Levi Aaron Campbell, violation of Georgia Controlled Substances Act; possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony; driving under the influence (less safe) (drugs); driving under the influence (controlled substance); driving under the influence (less safe) (combined influence); driving without a license; operation of an unregistered vehicle; drugs not in original container; failure to wear a safety belt; distracted driving; operating a vehicle without insurance.

Katherine Joanne Derby, three counts serious injury by vehicle; driving under the in-

fluence (per se); driving under the influence; driving under the influence (less safe) (combined influence); improper U-turn.

Kenneth Ray Lightbourne, aka Kenneth Jarate Lightbourne, three counts obstruction of an officer; two counts aggravated battery; simple battery; disorderly conduct; public drunkenness.

Casey Don Allen, cruelty to children in the first degree; battery, Family Violence; tampering with evidence.

Tiffany Nicole McNabb, trafficking methamphetamine or amphetamine; possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; possession of methamphetamine; possession of marijuana with intent to distribute; possession of marijuana, more than an ounce; two counts possession of a con-

trolled substance; possession of drug-related objects.

Zachary Seth Ramsey, aka Zackary Seth Ramsey, criminal damage to property in the second degree; criminal trespass.

Ryan Patrick Dotson, battery, Family Violence; cruelty to children in the third degree.

Ronald Scott Bouchard, terroristic threats.

The above individuals have been charged only and are presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

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