

Vaccination Clinic...from Page 1A



Clinic organizers set up privacy screens in the Gold Gym of the new Union County Sports Center to administer vaccines Friday. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

EMA Director David Dyer and his leadership team plotted the logistics in painstaking detail, enlisting the Fire Department's medical-grade firefighters in giving shots as other firefighters worked parking and controlled the flow of people into and through the building.

The nursing staff of each health department provided and prepared the free vaccinations and counseled folks with questions and concerns. And if the health departments can't keep recruiting volunteers and acquiring vaccines, they, too, are looking forward to hosting other clinics.

"This takes a lot of stress off me and (Nurse Manager Bethany Barrett) at Union County trying to vaccinate the whole county," Public Health Nurse Tiffany Zimmerman said. "And the two nurses at Towns County as well, it takes a lot of stress off them trying to vaccinate their whole county."

"This is a very good thing. It's good for the community and it's good for (these counties) to get vaccinated in a quicker way."

Additionally, Union County Government and Recreation Department employees made the Sports Center ready for the event, efficiently utilizing the bifurcated double gym facility for vaccination purposes by coordinating equipment for the various informational and other stations.

Community volunteers helped as well, staffing many of the stations in the continuous line from the temperature check at the front door, through the Gold Gym for check-in and vaccination, on to the Purple Gym for post-vaccine observation and refreshments, then out the front again.

The Union County Sheriff's Office also provided security for the event.

Everything happened like clockwork, Dyer said, with no major adverse vaccine side effects reported along the way. All who received vaccination at the Jan. 22 clinic are scheduled to return for their booster dose in a Feb. 19 repeat performance at the Sports Center.

Dyer said everyone is eager to partner again with Public Health to roll out the vaccine to as many people as possible in upcoming clinics as supplies become available, so stay tuned to unioncountyga.gov for announcements regarding future mass vaccination clinics.

"We are going to plan another one very soon," Dyer said. "This is all about how much vaccine we can get allotted to us."

Currently, early vaccinations efforts are focused

on medical workers who face greater risk of exposure; on long-term care residents and staff; all Georgians 65 years of age and older; as well as law enforcement, fire personnel, and other first responders.

Most individuals attending Friday's clinic were everyday residents of Towns and Union counties who were 65 or older, with a small number of younger caretakers also getting vaccinated due to their care duties for older individuals.

Senior Towns County resident Carole Trott was excited to receive her vaccine, as she's been doing everything in her power to avoid COVID-19 over the last year or so. She sees getting vaccinated as "the patriotic thing to do" and wishes more people would get behind the effort.

"I'm surprised that this many people came out," Trott said of the clinic. "I live in an apartment building, and there's a lot of opposition; I got nasty comments when I told (my neighbors) I was going to come get the vaccine."

Added Trott, "We all need to do this so we can get out of this. I've hardly been out of my apartment in a year. I'm very grateful to get it, and it's free, so why wouldn't you come and help out?"

Union County's Bill Parker, who is 80, was similarly grateful for the opportunity to receive the vaccine on Friday, reporting that he felt no different after receiving the shot. He believes people shouldn't hesitate for a minute to get vaccinated.

"This is very well organized," Parker said. "I'm extremely happy that they're offering this. I believe it's the thing to do and that everybody should do it... that it's good for yourself and the public."

Firefighter/Paramedic Jake Mathis physically administered vaccines on Friday, giving people shots that will potentially save their lives should they encounter SARS-CoV-2. He said people were both impressed with the operation and incredibly thankful for the opportunity.

"Everybody that comes in seems to have noticed how much planning has gone into this," Mathis said. "People are very happy to get it and feel like they're doing their part in trying to make things come back to normal."

Times have been tough for frontline medical workers during the pandemic, Mathis said, though he credits the robustness of local health care apparatus with keeping things going.

"It's definitely busier than it usually is," Mathis said.

"The hospitals are full, and everybody's just really doing their part. We're working a lot harder than we usually have to, but I think, overall, our local health system has managed it well."

Public Health and other medical professionals continue to ask for patience as vaccine supplies slowly make their way into the hands of local providers. Unfortunately, demand still far outstrips supply, which is hampering vaccine delivery efforts amid ongoing viral community spread.

At press time, District 2 Public Health was advising people that all its vaccines were tied up with existing appointments for first and second doses, meaning no new health department appointments are being made until further notice. Check with phdistrict2.org for updates.

In terms of local providers dispensing vaccine for the general public, the list is limited at this time, with all vaccinations being made available by appointment only and as supplies last.

For a regularly updated list of locations receiving vaccine shipments in each county, visit dph.georgia.gov and click on the link for the "Vaccine Orders List." People can also find vaccine providers at <https://dph.georgia.gov/locations/covid-vaccination-site>.

Synergy Health of Hiawassee continues to add patients to its vaccine waitlist at www.ngvax.com. Looking ahead, Synergy Health plans on hosting mass vaccine clinics as supplies become available.

People utilizing ngvax.com will receive immediate confirmation on the website that they have successfully signed up for the waitlist. Vaccine registrants will be notified once an appointment becomes available, so there's no need to call the office to verify.

More than 1.1 million combined Pfizer and Moderna vaccine doses have been allocated and shipped in Georgia, with a little over half of those having been administered to date. Vaccine recipients are still being asked to follow COVID best practices.

In terms of COVID-19 testing, District 2 Public Health recently contracted with MAKO Medical to take over testing for its health departments starting Jan. 22.

Appointments for free Public Health COVID-19 testing can be made at <https://mako.exchange/splash/GAMakotesting/>. Testing will take place in Hall County at 2500 Allen Creek Drive in Gainesville.



The Purple Gym side of the Sports Center featured drinks and snacks for people waiting out their obligatory post-vaccine observation period. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Burnette...from Page 1A

identify those involved in the child pornography trade.

Created by the U.S. Department of Justice, the ICAC Program was developed in response to the increasing number of children and teenagers using the internet, the proliferation of child

pornography, and the heightened online activity by predators searching for unsupervised contact with underage victims.

Anyone with information about other cases of child exploitation is asked to contact the Georgia Bureau of Investigation Child Exploitation

Unit at 404-270-8870.

Tips can also be submitted by calling 1-800-597-TIPS(8477); online at <https://gbi.georgia.gov/submit-tips-online>; or by downloading the "See Something, Send Something" mobile app.

Bradshaw...from Page 1A

The \$300,000 figure is just an estimate for now, Bradshaw said, noting that his office will know the actual number once the 2020 audit has been completed come summertime.

"If anything, I feel like it'll be more than that, not less than that," County Finance Director Andrea Anderson said. "We're being very conservative with the figure of a little over \$300,000."

As to the "how" of such stellar budgetary management, especially during the pandemic, Bradshaw reminded people of the spending freeze his office put in place after COVID-19 hit, wherein he committed to "only buying things or spending money on things that we had to have."

"Basically, we just haven't spent very much money, other than just the everyday things that you have to spend money on," Bradshaw said. "So, we're going to continue with that because we don't know how long COVID's going to last."

"We know the vaccines are coming out, and we feel like that's going to help. We don't know what the future holds, with a new president coming in and with COVID and everything, so we're going to continue our spending freeze for several months until we start seeing the light at the end of the tunnel very clearly."

Bradshaw pointed to several 2020 savings, including withholding money for impromptu departmental requests, canceled training trips, a postponed dump truck purchase, and not paying for the full year of Colwell Probation Detention Center crews for lawn care and litter cleanup.

"The Road Department helped save the county a lot of money this last summer by cutting grass and weed eating at all the government-owned buildings, where normally the detainees will do that," Bradshaw said.

Residents are fortunate the Road Department has been able to pick up the slack, since Colwell Probation is not allowing their crews to work during COVID, though Bradshaw said it's not sustainable for his department to keep up these duties while also maintaining roads and more.

"It'll be too much of a strain on them to ask them to do that summer after summer unless we hire a lot more people at the Road Department to do

only that," Bradshaw said. And while the county didn't have a choice at the time, Bradshaw hopes that the COVID situation is such that he can resume contracting for detainee crews to do this work.

Also helping in 2020 was nearly \$500,000 in coronavirus CARES Act funding, though last year's budget benefited from more than just savings and CARES Act money.

Surprisingly, sales taxes and hotel/motel taxes were up also, with people taking to the mountains as their getaway destination of choice in a time when travel has been largely restricted due to COVID-19.

Taken together – savings on expenditures, the CARES Act monies and increased revenues – Bradshaw said he did not have to dip into county General Fund reserves for another year running, leaving those at a healthy \$4.9 million heading into 2021.

Bradshaw meant to use some reserves last year but didn't need to, so he plans to draw down on those some this year, as "it's not right to hoard the taxpayers' money." He'll be maintaining a "rainy day fund" of about three months' operating reserve, focusing the rest on county services.

Some items of interest in the 2021 budget include money to re-open the Mountain Regional Library in Young Harris; the addition of a dedicated Animal Control Officer at the Towns County Sheriff's Office; and a 50-cent per hour raise for county employees that went into effect Jan. 1.

As previously reported, the \$11,265,590 balanced budget for 2021 is \$90,600 higher than the 2020 proposed budget and utilizes about \$1.1 million of the total \$4.9 million in current General Fund reserves, with 2021 beginning reserves being up \$900,000 over the 2020 fund balance.

Looking ahead, Bradshaw aims to reproduce similar budget savings in 2021 while acknowledging that there are a lot of uncertainties still with the virus continuing to make people sick.

"We plan to and hope to, but you never know what the future holds," Bradshaw said. "We will work very hard to come in under budget again."

Added Bradshaw, "I'm just very thankful that the county is in the financial shape that it's in. We have been working very

hard, and I'm very thankful for (County Clerk) Linda Hedden and Andrea. We work on this all the time – this is not something we just do at the end of the year.

"At least once a month, we're seeing where each department's at and looking at what we need to do. Do we need to tighten up? Do we have a little extra money to buy a lawnmower for the rec department, for example?"

"This is something that is on my mind all the time. It's the taxpayers' money, and I take it very, very serious. We want to make sure we're very frugal with it and that we use it in ways that are the highest and best needs for the citizens."

Also in the Dec. 28 meeting, Bradshaw hired Hayes, James and Associates Incorporated to conduct the civil engineering for the Towns County Courthouse renovation and addition project, to be paid for with voter-approved SPLOST-backed bond monies.

The contract will be no more than \$29,700, and Bradshaw said he was negotiating to get the price down ever further.

"They will do all the surveying out here, laying out the corners, all the water runoff, and grades," Bradshaw said. "The addition will be two stories, so they'll be getting the grade right to make sure the floor levels (of the connected buildings) are the same."

As for next steps, Bradshaw said once Hayes, James and Associates completes civil engineering, CPL Architects can finish drawing up the plans the county will be using to seek construction bids for the \$8 million project.

The commissioner makes no promises but is optimistic that construction can begin in 2021, with building of the addition expected to take about nine months, and the renovation of the main courthouse to take another nine months thereafter.

Separately, Bradshaw said he wants to encourage people to continue wearing masks, social distancing and limiting gatherings to help curtail the spread of COVID-19.

"And I ask people to pray for all the sick people and the people that have lost loved ones," Bradshaw said. "I've had a lot of friends in the hospital with COVID – it's worrisome."

Kyle Oakes...from Page 1A

in 2020. But it hasn't been easy maintaining a 3.9 GPA while also having to practice football upwards of six days a week.

"There were some days," Oakes said, looking back on the season, "I would come home from practice and be so tired, I would sit down to just relax for a little bit and end up falling asleep."

"Then I would wake up and realize that I had homework to do or a test to study for, and I would have to stay up late making sure that I got all my schoolwork done."

"It's a lot of work, time and effort, but I am trying to have the best chance at going to college after high school."

And with his selection to the ScoutSMART All-

Academic Team, Oakes has increased his chances even more by putting himself in a position to be seen by people searching for talent.

According to <https://highschoolfootballamerica.com/2020-georgia-scoutsmart-all-academic-team>:

"Using its proprietary system, ScoutSMART gives high school football student-athletes a ScoutSMART FIT Score that analyzes a players' stats, on-field skills and academics. ScoutSMART then provides the information to college football coaches, at all levels, around the nation."

Additionally this season, Oakes was nominated for the Atlanta Falcons High School Man of the Year Award, which

is modeled after the prestigious Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year Award given to a player on each professional team.

One player from each high school football team is nominated every year, and Coach Roquemore nominated Oakes for his leadership, hard work, mental toughness and unselfishness, he said.

Once all the nominations are in, a committee of Falcons football players and team executives gather to select a winner. And though Oakes was not chosen, he said being nominated for the award meant a lot to him, and he thanked Roquemore for considering him a worthy candidate.

Be sure to catch Oakes on the basketball court this season.

Bridgework...from Page 1A

in October of 2018," GDOT Project Manager Robert Lunsford said. "We have been on this pretty much for a year... The old bridge was outdated and needed to be replaced."

"It is strictly a bridge replacement project. This has nothing to do with the (upcoming Young Harris Bypass), although the new bypass will go across where the concrete walls and fence are, and that will be the crossing for the Young Harris Bypass."

In 2019, GDOT finished replacing the bridge at nearby Crooked Creek, which was also built in 1940, and Lunsford noted that, in both places, the quality of the concrete was simply deteriorating.

The lane shift at the new Brasstown Creek Bridge went into effect sometime on Jan. 19, and moving forward, residents of Byers Creek Road and other nearby neighborhoods will want to be on the lookout for further changes in the coming months.

While the project is reaching completion, traffic will be altered multiple times to give workers uninterrupted space to remove the old bridge and finish connecting to the new portion of the highway.

Lunsford is hoping the project will be wrapped up by the end of June, though it may be sooner if the weather is cooperative and there are no delays.



This substantially larger new bridge is replacing its 80-year-old counterpart on SR 66, which was deemed "structurally obsolete and functionally deficient" as far back as 2001. Photo/GDOT

"The contract completion date is June 30 of this year," Lunsford said. "We will be finished taking the old bridge out. We have a little bit of work to do at the end of Byers Creek. There will be a little bit of a short, timed detour from Byers Creek, and a letter will go out for the closure."

"We just hope to be done by June 30, and we are running a little bit ahead of schedule, so hopefully we will be done before then."

With cooperation from drivers and people taking proper safety precautions, the team behind the project is confident the bridge will be a success without any major inconveniences for everyday traffic.

"We just want people to drive safely and watch out for the workers while all this is going on," Lunsford said.