

Towns County Herald

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Patel named 2024 STAR Student for TCHS

News Special
Towns County Herald

Congratulations to Towns County High School senior Dhriti Patel, who has been named the school's 2024 STAR Student for outstanding academic achievement and performance on the SAT.

To serve as her STAR Teacher, Patel selected Shane Casey, College Algebra/Pre-Calculus teacher at Towns County High.

The Towns County Lions Club is the local STAR program sponsor, and Club President Danny Meeks was honored to announce Patel's accolade recently.

"We are very proud of Dhriti and Mr. Casey and the academic excellence they exemplify at Towns County High School," Meeks said.

Now in its 66th year, the PAGE Student Teacher

Achievement Recognition program is sponsored, administered and promoted by the Professional Association of Georgia Educators and the PAGE Foundation.

Since its creation, the STAR program has honored nearly 29,500 students and the teachers they have selected as having had the most influence on their academic achievement.

To obtain the 2024 STAR nomination, graduating high school seniors needed to achieve the highest score on a single test date of the SAT and be in the Top 10% or Top 10 students of their class based on grade point average.

STAR begins each year in participating high schools throughout Georgia when the STAR Student is named and chooses a STAR Teacher to share in this recognition.

The students and their

teachers are honored by their schools and receive special recognition in their communities from one of the more than 170 statewide civic organizations and businesses that serve as local sponsors of the STAR program, like the Lions Club.

Students then compete for school system titles, and those winners compete for regional honors. Region winners compete for the honor of being named State PAGE STAR Student. STAR Teachers continue on with their STAR Students at every level of the program.

The Professional Association of Georgia Educators honors outstanding students and educators, and encourages academic excellence through competitive programs such as PAGE STAR, the PAGE Academic Bowl for Middle Grades, and the PAGE Georgia Academic Decathlon.



L-R: Towns County Lions Club President Danny Meeks, STAR Student Dhriti Patel, STAR Teacher Shane Casey and Lion Martha Meeks. Photo/Submitted

City Council OKs Trailful fix, talks parrot-feather

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Hiwassee City Council and Mayor Liz Ordiales held a called meeting before their regular work session on Jan. 29 to discuss fixes to the alley between Trailful Outdoor Co. and the city-owned Paris Buildings, which are being remodeled into a regional business center.

At a cost of \$4,372.46, the fix will correct a long-standing stormwater drainage issue between the buildings that causes water to seep into Trailful's foundation.

Councilman Jay Chastain Jr. suggested that council members approve the spending - which they did - and noted that construction would begin when the weather permits.

Part of the fix will be to Trailful's patio for "no additional expense." Currently, the front of the deck has a flooding problem, and there is a plan in the works to better connect the runoff to a storm drain.

The council also authorized payment on an outstanding bill to Storm Construction for \$155,102.35, along



City Councilman Jay Chastain Jr. and Mayor Liz Ordiales having a discussion in the recent city work session, which took place in the Civic Center to accommodate a crowd expected to gather for parrot-feather news. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

with setting aside a proposed \$10,000 sum per voting cycle for any unforeseen expenses that may come up during construction of the Paris Business Center.

In the work session that followed the special called meeting, Callie Moore of envi-

ronmental organization MountainTrue offered an update on the invasive parrot-feather weed plaguing the southernmost part of Lake Chatuge.

Moore said that MountainTrue will be signing a contract with one of three compa-

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County commits \$100,000 to treat parrot-feather

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County is significantly closer to fighting the invasive parrot-feather weed threatening Lake Chatuge thanks to the results of a called meeting by Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw on Jan. 30 at the Temporary Courthouse Offices.

Though only a portion of Lake Chatuge's 7,000 acres have been impacted by the weed, the species is invasive and can wreak serious havoc on the ecosystem - and local economy, quality of life, and much else - if it remains unchecked.

So far, the parrot-feather has spread from just upstream of the US 76 bridge at Macedonia Baptist Church to just downstream of the Hiwassee Water Treatment Plant and Beech Cove area.

County property tax dollars cannot be used to treat the weed, so Bradshaw recently opened a checking account for donations. Already, individuals, businesses and organizations have started contributing or pledged to contribute, with \$8,450 in the account by the



In his special called meeting last week, Commissioner Bradshaw adopted a parrot-feather resolution and pledged \$100,000 in hotel-motel taxes toward treating the invasive weed in Lake Chatuge. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

time of the meeting.

A resolution adopted in the meeting put the fight against parrot-feather on paper. It stated that while federal and/or state funding may become later options, such help won't arrive in time to cover

the earliest treatment planned against the weed, slated to begin this summer.

That said, the resolution directed that \$100,000 be drawn from the county's hotel-motel tax proceeds and paid

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Movers and Shakers host Drug Court advocates

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Mountain Movers and Shakers gathered at the Sundance Grill on Friday, Feb. 2, to learn about the North Enotah Drug Court over breakfast.

North Enotah Drug Court has serviced Towns and Union counties since 2013 and is one of four accountability courts within the Enotah Judicial Circuit.

Like the Family Treatment Court, the S.T.A.R. Court and the Parental Accountability Court, the local Drug Court is focused on reinventing clients through treatment and supervision.

Danny Hawkins, the North Enotah Drug Court Coordinator, explained the importance of drug-abuse programs using his own story as a testament to their effectiveness.

Thanks to the resources that were available to him when he was arrested for a drug-related offense, he now boasts three decades of sobriety.



On Friday, Drug Court Coordinator Danny Hawkins, right, explained the local recovery program with help from recent Drug Court graduate Ethan Garrett. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

"If I hadn't had those resources, the only option (the judge) would have had at that time was incarceration," he said. "And if you lock up somebody with a drug problem, they are going to get out at some

point, and there are two things I can guarantee: when they get out they are going to be a better criminal and they are still going to have a drug problem. That's where Drug Court comes in."

See Movers and Shakers, Page 7

Election season begins with early voting Feb. 19

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
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In-person early voting for the Presidential Preference Primary begins this month, kicking off a busy election season with the selection of political party candidates for the office of President of the United States.

Election Day for the upcoming primary is Tuesday, March 12. There will be three weeks of early voting for this election running weekdays between Monday, Feb. 19, and Friday, March 8.

Early voting will also include two weekend voting opportunities on Saturday, Feb. 24, and Saturday, March 2.

All in-person early voting will take place from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. inside the Towns County Civic Center, located in the same building as the Board of Elections & Registration Office at 67 Lakeview Circle in Hiwassee.

Presidential Preference Primary voters who decide to



Early voting will start in less than two weeks at the Towns County Board of Elections & Registration Office.

wait until Election Day to cast their ballots will need to head to their predetermined voting precinct between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. on March 12.

Towns County has two voting precincts: the Hiwassee Precinct at the Civic Center and the Young Harris Precinct in the Lodge Hall Building at

135 Murphy Street.

For people voting absentee-by-mail, ballots may be requested at the Elections Office now through Friday, March 1. Absentee ballot applications can be returned by mail, fax, as an email attachment, or in person at the Elections Office.

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United
Community

City Council Meeting...from Page 1



Hiwassee City Councilwoman Patsy Owens and Councilman Jonathan Wilson listening and taking notes in last week's work session.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

nies selected to "attack" the infestation by March.

The final decision on who will handle the parrot-feather has not been made yet because each approach is "pretty different." For the moment, there's been a greater focus on fundraising through donations and raising awareness via the informational website www.savelakechatuge.org.

Much of Moore's time at the meeting was spent answering questions, and one popular point of concern regarded the safety of drinking water that is treated out of the lake.

Fortunately, the parrot-feather hasn't spread far enough to impact the Hiwassee Water Treatment Plant, and Moore said that potential chemical treatments of the weed will be applied directly to the plants.

Ordiales reassured meeting attendees that a \$2,000 test for herbicides would monitor the water's cleanliness every quarter. Already, one test has been performed and returned negative results.

Herbicides are needed because parrot-feather "breaks up" upon physical removal, and every small piece propagates. In fact, the invasive species often spreads through this method by getting stuck in boat motors, cut up and then unknowingly released into other bodies of water.

For the moment, there are two different herbicides being considered for use, and depending on which makes the final cut, the treatment method will be different.

"(During) the systemic (treatment), for example, they have these tubes that literally come off the boat and go down, like 8, 10, 12, 15-feet deep – however far they need

to go – and they kind of inject the chemical into the plant," Moore said.

"The other (treatment) is more broad because they're trying to get all the green parts," she continued. "Once we select the plan and the company, we will post all of that on savelakechatuge.org."

It's estimated that one year of treatment, regardless of which herbicide is used, will cost about \$300,000. Moore anticipates that clearing up the problem will take at least two or three years, and Lake Chatuge may or may not require "spot treatments" before the weed disappears fully.

Another point of discussion in the work session was the Lloyd's Landing and Mayor's Park Boardwalk Project potentially being put on hold until after the completion of the Paris Business Center, which would mean the expiration of the 80/20 matching grant.

Additional discussion on this project was expected in the Feb. 6 regular city meeting that occurred after press time.

On the subject of the upcoming City Council meeting, Sandy Bradshaw and Brad Baso will be appointed as new members on the Downtown Development Authority Board to replace people who left recently.

Following conversations with Economic Development Director Denise McKay, Tamela Cooper has decided to return to the DDA and complete her term, due to expire in August 2026.

In the meantime, McKay is set to speak with at least two other people – Joelle Kinsey and Bill Trapp – about potential interest and availability

when it comes to joining the organization following their recommendation by the council.

Council members previously held a first reading for a Home Rule Amendment to the City Charter to allow for the creation of procedures to remove city officers for cause, but the mayor said in the work session that she has decided to veto it because she believes it violates Georgia law regarding Home Rule Powers.

Georgia law places limitations on Home Rule Powers, forbidding Home Rule actions "effecting the composition or form of municipal government authority, the procedure for election or appointment of the members thereof and the continuance in office and limitation thereon of such members."

"I think absolutely that we should have that procedure in place, but I think we should follow the home (rules) the way it is written in the state laws of Georgia to do it," said Ordiales, noting that the issue would be revisited in the Feb. 6 meeting.

If Ordiales is correct, then the proper way to introduce the procedures would be to have the charter change submitted to the state for approval by the Georgia General Assembly, instead of a simple local change. This method would take considerably longer to enact.

In the January regular meeting in which the first reading took place, City Attorney Thomas Mitchell disagreed with the mayor's interpretation, saying the charter already contains removal language and that the Home Rule change would simply add specific removal procedures.

Called County Meeting...from Page 1



Parrot-feather has been a hot topic in recent months as concerned residents and business owners have petitioned the Commissioner's Office for action.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

to MountainTrue so that an environmental company can go ahead and take action as soon as possible. There will be no ad valorem tax dollars paid "for this purpose."

Hotel-motel tax revenues are set aside for the "promotion of economic development and tourism in Towns County," and in 2022, the Georgia Department of Economic Development reported that tourists spent \$96.6 million here, with visitors generating \$6.3 million in state and local taxes.

Considering Lake Chatuge is a main draw of tourism, anything used to combat a threat to the lake's ecosystem falls under valid use of the funds.

MountainTrue, a 501(c)(3) organization focused on environmental protection, will act on behalf of the county and other constituents by using the funds to have the parrot-feather exterminated over time.

As mentioned at the Hiwassee City Council's January work session, MountainTrue will be partnering up with one of three companies to treat the invasive weed with an appropriate herbicide.

MountainTrue has raised \$81,000 for the project, and Western Regional Director Callie Moore said that there's been a pledge for an additional

\$28,000.

She credits the success of quick fundraising to www.savelakechatuge.org, a partnership between the organization and area stakeholders to raise awareness of the issue.

The initial treatment plan is expected to cost about \$300,000, with a couple years of treatment likely to be needed to eradicate the weed.

As of Feb. 2, about \$260,000 had been raised altogether toward that goal – a phenomenal success of fundraising by a dedicated group consisting of individuals, businesses, organizations and local government officials working together to solve the problem.

"Extra" funds will go toward preventive measures, like installing boat washing stations, putting up signs to educate the public about parrot-feather, buoys to warn

boaters about its presence, and "spot treating" any stubborn spots or surprise infestations.

Moore estimates that while treatment will hopefully start this summer, the plans likely won't come to fruition until next winter. In the meantime, it's important to plan and prepare, and that's why a meeting with the Tennessee Valley Authority, which owns the lake, is still in the works.

"I did talk to TVA today," Bradshaw said. "They're going to do the public meeting at the end of the month at Foster Park ... It's (Feb.) 26, 27 or 28." He added that the Georgia Department of Natural Resources will likely be present at the meeting as well.

To donate and learn more about parrot-feather's impact on the local environment, visit www.savelakechatuge.org.

Movers and Shakers...from Page 1

Hawkins continued by debunking a common misconception that Drug Court is just “a slap on the wrist” for people suffering from addiction. The recovery process is long, demanding and challenging for folks trying to make major life changes for the better.

Currently, the program is a minimum of 24 months, which includes five phases of treatment and six months of aftercare.

During those two years, participants are required to attend five nights of evidence-based treatment programs during the week, such as moral reconnection therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy, and an outside community meeting on the weekends.

Those community meetings could range from traditional 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, or even church.

Participants are also required to wake up between 5 and 7 a.m. every morning to find out if they need a drug screening that day, then must be back home by their 8 p.m. curfew. Surveillance officers conduct checks to make sure they are abiding by the rules.

As far as the drug screens go, participants are required to pass if they want to stay in the program. If they fail and admit to their fault, however, they will be subjected to escalated sanctions.

This means that at first they may be required to do something as small as write a paper, but persistent behavioral issues could land them in jail right alongside the other participants who failed the drug screen but wouldn't admit their mistake.

Hawkins was proud to share that out of the over 24,000 drug screens his program has done, only 183 have come back positive, or roughly 0.76%.

Ethan Garrett, the most recent graduate from the North Enotah Drug Court, contributed to that number during his first trial with the program. Initially, he wasn't committed to his recovery and tried to aban-

don the program.

When they gave him another chance, however, he decided to give it his best shot. So when he failed a drug screen, he displayed complete honesty.

“That's one thing that changed my life – taking accountability for my own actions and being honest about stuff,” said Garrett, who attended the meeting on Friday. “That is the best thing that you can do.

“A couple of months after I passed my first drug test, my kids got to come home, and it changed everything. I started coming to class and applying myself.

“Quickly, I saw how much of a blessing the Drug Court is, because not only am I (now) 20 months clean, but I've gotten my kids back at home. They've gotten their father back.”

In addition to reuniting with his family, Garrett has been able to get a stable job and focus on leading others down the path of recovery.

“I am still going to meetings,” he said. “I don't have to, but I (want to) be able to give back to someone what I received.”

Garrett is one of 184 people who have participated in the North Enotah Drug Court, 16 of which are currently participating.

In the North Enotah circuit, people who have completed the program have a recidivism rate of only 8%. This statistic and the people it accounts for, like Garrett, are proof that Drug Court is making a difference in the local community.

The Drug Court is run by a team of local humanitarians including Hawkins, Superior Court Judge Buck Levins, a District Attorney's Office representative, a Public Defender's Office representative, an outside treatment provider, a probation officer and several case managers.

Admission into the program is only granted to individuals who have been charged with a drug-related felony and do not have a violent criminal history, do not have trafficking

charges and are not sex offenders. They must be at least 18 years old and meet the clinical criteria for a substance-abuse disorder as well.

They must pay a \$35 participation fee each week, which goes toward funding the program. Other sources of funding include state and federal grants, and even more money will be available with the creation of an outside 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

In addition, Hawkins works closely with Redemption Point, a housing program in Blairsville for men, and a women's program in Hiawassee.

Under current housing market conditions, it is nearly impossible for a person to survive on a minimum wage salary, making it extremely difficult for program participants to get back on their feet.

These housing programs focus on lifting the burden of finding a safe, affordable place to live during recovery. Hawkins hopes to continue harnessing those kinds of resources for his clients with the support of community members like the Mountain Movers and Shakers.

Annual Memory Heart Fundraiser to Help Feed Homebound Seniors



Memory Heart

Help support our Meals On Wheels Program by purchasing a Memory Heart that will provide a meal to a homebound senior in our community. The cost for a “Memory Heart” is \$5. That will cover the cost of a meal to be provided to a senior in Towns County.

On one side of the heart, it reads “Your wings were ready, but my heart was not.” The other side of the “Memory Heart” reads, “In Memory of” with your loved one's name.

The hearts will be displayed on our Memory Heart Tree located in the Towns

County Senior Center during the month of February, then will be sent out with a meal to a homebound senior in our community.

To purchase a “Memory Heart”, you can mail a check with your loved one's name to Towns County Senior Center at 954 North Main Street, Hiawassee, Georgia 30546, or you can visit the Senior Center from 8 AM – 4 PM. You can make checks payable to Meals on Wheels.

All proceeds go to the Meals On Wheels Program in Towns County. Buy a heart and share a meal!

Early Voting...from Page 1

Voters returning absentee ballots can use the official drop box inside the Elections Office during early voting hours, mail them back in plenty of time to be counted after polls close on Election Day, or drop them off in person at the Elections Office through 7 p.m. on Election Day.

There's still time to register to vote in this election for people who have yet to do so, with a deadline of Monday, Feb. 12. Voter registration occurs inside the Elections Office.

Sample ballots for the Presidential Preference Primary can be found inside this edition of the newspaper.

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

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.

The big General Election is slated for Tuesday, Nov. 5, with a runoff date set for Dec. 3.

April 22 is the voter registration deadline to participate in the May 21 General Primary/Nonpartisan Election, and Oct. 7 is the deadline to register for the Nov. 5 General Election.

Residents may visit <https://mvp.sos.ga.gov/s/> for voter registration status, mail-in application and ballot status, poll location, registration information on file with the county, sample ballots for upcoming elections, provisional ballot status and more.