

# Roquemore...from Page 1A

sure at this point aerating it and topdressing it, even for the next two or three years, is going to stop this issue from being every single spring.”

The mushy field presents potential health hazards for student athletes, who could conceivably roll an ankle or injure a knee running along the softened ground.

And now, the schools are looking to replicate the success at the baseball field down on the soccer/football field.

“We’re going to look at getting prices on what it would be to do the exact same thing to this field as we did to the baseball field,” said Berrong.

“There’s more square footage on this football field than what we had to do up there ... so I would expect that cost to be at least one and a half times the price we paid for the baseball field.”

Added Berrong, “But it may be more cost effective for us to actually end up turfing this field as opposed to spending

a couple hundred thousand dollars taking this up, bringing in new dirt, bringing in new sod, a new irrigation system, and just hoping it still works.”

Repairing the drainage issue at the baseball field cost the school system about \$130,000, and Berrong estimates that doing the same at the football field will cost \$200,000 or more, with no guarantee of solving the problem.

To install artificial turf similar to the fields at neighboring high schools in Union County and in Hayesville, North Carolina, however, Berrong says the cost would be about \$750,000.

Regardless of which option the school board decides to support, Berrong is hopeful that the problem can be fixed this summer in time for the start of football season.

Moving forward, Berrong will be gathering more information on the various options he wants to present to the board, and he’ll keep

the community posted as to ongoing developments.

The schools may be able to use SPLOST funds to cover the cost of a new field and/or irrigation system, which Berrong feels is feasible based on the high level of reimbursement the schools received for last summer’s modernization project at the high/middle school building.

“Plus, we still have another year and a half of SPLOST revenue to gain before our SPLOST runs out,” said Berrong. “The nice thing about these turf companies now is you can do seven and eight-year financing options, so that would probably be the route we would look at, so it would cost us about \$100,000 a year for seven years to put turf on the field.”

As far as the 2019-2020 football season, Berrong said he was “100 percent confident we’re going to have football coaches, and I’m 100 percent confident we’re going to have football players.”

# Bierschenk...from Page 1A

Added Bierschenk, “And we’ve got a great board that’s invested in the hospital. They’re committed to making sure the right things are done, making sure this hospital grows and succeeds, so it really is a progressive board. That’s another reason I came to this hospital.”

Originally from Nebraska, Bierschenk is a veteran of the U.S. Army and a graduate of the University of South Carolina.

He and his wife Cindy have shared a home in her native Lumpkin County for several years, which definitely played a role in their wanting to move up here full time, and the two are currently in the market for a house in Union or Towns County.

Next steps for Bierschenk are to get settled into his new role at the hospital, and he plans to leave the leadership team developed by Kelley in place

to help him continue the good work done by the hospital over the last few years.

“My vision is to build off of what the prior administration has done and grow from there,” said Bierschenk. “Union General has done a great job growing ... and we need to keep recruiting physicians into the hospital system.”

Elaborating on his vision of Union General as a health care system, Bierschenk said that, from the hospitals in Union and Towns counties to the nursing homes, clinics and physician’s offices around the area, “everybody’s going to have to work together as a partnership.”

“So, it’s going to be community health, working together to keep people out of the areas where they don’t need to be,” said Bierschenk. “How can we take care of them in the doctor’s office, the Dialysis

Center, the Wellness Center, to keep them out from the next level, whatever that is.”

Of course, Bierschenk is fully aware of the woes faced by Union General Hospital over the last few years, including a former CEO being brought up on federal prescription drug charges, and the unrelated \$5 million DOJ settlement for working with physicians outside of contracted relationships.

Nonetheless, Bierschenk said he’s confident in the hospital system moving forward, despite the increasing number of competing health care providers in the area.

The best way to compete with others, according to Bierschenk, is to offer patients exactly what they want in a local hospital system, which he believes to be great quality of care at affordable prices, excellent customer service, and a bevy of medical specialists to fill a variety of local health needs.

# Silvers...from Page 1A

Segars, “Do you know him?” “Yes,” Segars says in return, getting out of her car and calling out to him.

It’s about this time, just before 6:56 p.m., that another dispatcher calls out a BOLO, or “be on the lookout,” for Silvers and his truck: “Dispatch to all units, be on the lookout for a small, white Toyota truck. It’s going to be occupied by a Silvers subject. The caller advised reckless driving ... caller advises pulling into the Cornerstone BP at this time on 76.”

Back at the BP, Segars speaks briefly with Silvers, who assures her that he’s fine, even after she tells him that he nearly ran her off the road a few minutes prior.

“Please, please, please, he’s taking off ... he don’t need to be driving,” Segars tells the dispatcher, who informs her that there’s a BOLO out for this truck.

Segars hops back into her car and proceeds to follow Silvers up Georgia 17 toward Hayesville, all the while pleading with 911 to stay on the line and asking repeatedly where law enforcement is: “Are they close? Oh my God, he’s going to kill somebody ... Please don’t hang up ... This is scary. Oh my God. Oh God, he’s all over the road, honey.”

They cross over the state line about three minutes after the BOLO is first issued, and Towns County Dispatch informs Segars that a BOLO has been given in Clay County, North Carolina, as well.

The rest of the 911 call is an escalating journey of terror for Segars, who becomes more and more upset with every near miss as she follows behind Silvers, alternately weeping and asking after law enforcement.

Ultimately, the call ends in Segars screams, as she witnesses the crash in front of King’s Pharmacy in Hayesville and exits her vehicle to discover Silvers dead in his truck.

“Why didn’t y’all hurry? I tried to get y’all to hurry,” says

Segars, struggling to breathe. “This can’t be happening, this can’t be happening.”

As previously reported, Silvers was driving north in the southbound lane of NC-69 when his truck collided head-on with a 2017 Honda Accord, according to the North Carolina State Highway Patrol.

His rate of speed was determined to be about 50 mph, and NC State Troopers found that only the Honda had attempted to brake prior to the crash.

Driving conditions were clear at the time, though the road was slightly damp from rain earlier in the day.

The NC State Highway Patrol has sent for a series of toxicology tests on Silvers, and the results should be available sometime in the next month, according to Highway Patrol.

Looking back on the tragic events of that evening, especially considering the deputy who passed by on his way to another call, Segars said she can’t help but wonder if the Towns County Sheriff’s Office could have done more to help.

She also wonders if the Sheriff’s Office might bear some responsibility for helping her to get the psychiatric care she feels she so desperately needs in the aftermath of the accident.

For its part, the Sheriff’s Office has said that the deputy in question was on his way to back up the only other deputy on duty regarding a potential prowler inside a home, and that the first BOLO didn’t even go out until after the deputy had already passed the Cornerstone BP.

“While we cannot possibly be there in time to prevent every tragedy, our deputies do a superb job of protecting our community with the resources available,” said Towns County Sheriff Chris Clinton. “They perform their duties at the highest levels of professionalism and they care deeply about our community and the safety of all citizens.

“Our thoughts and

prayers are with the Silvers family as they mourn the loss of their loved one.”

Some questions have arisen locally about an unrelated incident involving Silvers that occurred just 24 hours prior to his fatal crash.

This other incident took place on Feb. 22 at about 6:45 p.m., when Silvers lost control of his vehicle while negotiating a curve on Bugscuffle Road in Hiawassee, damaging a street sign and destroying a length of fence on private property.

According to footage from the body camera worn by the Towns County Sheriff’s Deputy who responded to the scene, Silvers said that he was traveling a little too fast around the curve and that the firewood he was carrying shifted in his truck bed, causing him to lose control and run off the road.

At the scene, the deputy administered two field sobriety tests: a breath test for alcohol, which came up negative, along with the Horizontal Gaze Nystagmus test, which also appeared to show no signs of impairment.

Based on the results of those tests, the deputy determined that there wasn’t enough probable cause to take Silvers into custody for more extensive alcohol and drug testing, and Silvers was allowed to leave the scene after his vehicle was freed.

Just over 24 hours later, Silvers was dead, and some people in the community have been asking why he wasn’t taken into custody the night before.

Even though Silvers apparently passed two field sobriety tests following the Feb. 22 accident on Bugscuffle Road, he reportedly had an extensive history of run-ins with local law enforcement, leading some residents to express doubt over the handling of the situation.

Memorial services were held for Silvers on Feb. 27 at Hayesville Church of Christ, and he was buried in the Philadelphia Baptist Church Cemetery in Hayesville.

# Langley...from Page 1A

with victims,” he said. “And I have two full-time investigators for four counties.

“That kind of tells you why we rely on law enforcement for the primary investigation of cases. My two investigators kind of fill in the cracks, help us find witnesses for court and that kind of thing.”

One investigator is paid under the state budget, while the other is paid under the local circuit budget. Langley said he and the senior attorneys are paid through the state, not through local taxes.

“My younger, rookie attorneys that are lower paid I put on that local budget to keep my local budget small,” said Langley. “So, I have county budgets, a circuit budget, a state budget, a grant budget.

“I also get what’s called 5 percent money, which is a little portion of the fines that I use to pay for things, and I get the money that we get from drug seizures (10 percent).

“In recent years, there’s been some controversy about city courts and probate courts not having regular professional prosecutors, so my office has contracted with a number of cities to handle their city traffic court.”

Langley said his office, in addition to Superior Court, currently handles traffic court in Cleveland, Helen and Dahlonega, and Probate Court in Union County, all on a contract basis.

At the beginning of 2018, there were about 3,000 cases pending in the Enotah Judicial Circuit, and they took in another 2,100 cases throughout the year. They were able to clear about 2,200 cases.

Any year that they can break even or clear more cases than were taken in, said Langley, is a good year.

Shifting gears, Langley stated that his goal “is what I call ‘substantial justice’ in each case.”

“Why do I say substantial justice, rather than justice?” asked Langley. “Well, the difference is, sometimes the perfect is the enemy of the good. Our system is a very good criminal justice system in many ways, but it is far from perfect.

“There are a hundred different factors that keep me from being able to administer perfect justice. One is that everyone doesn’t define perfect the way I do.

“The Rules of Evidence, the Constitution of the United States, incredibly protects



Towns County High School senior Emily Williams with Mountain Movers and Shakers Emcee Michael Borkman on March 1. Photo by Mark Smith

the rights of defendants, as it should. Our Constitution is a good one. These rights are important. And I respect the rights of defendants.

“I respect that side of the criminal justice equation, but sometimes justice is frustrating. I have to tell my young staff members, ‘Listen, we’re going to do substantial justice. We’re going to get as close as we possibly can to perfect justice. But we are not going to get there.’

“Perfect justice tempered with mercy, thankfully, is administered in the next life, not this one. We’re going to come as close as we can to justice in this life. Therefore, my goal on every case is to get as close to the right result as we possibly can, and I stress that to my staff members constantly.”

Shifting again, Langley talked about criminal justice reform.

“This criminal justice reform that’s been going on in Georgia since 2009, there is tremendous pressure to let people out of the prisons,” said Langley. “Criminal justice reform has made people unafraid of significant prison time.

“People go into drug court to avoid prison. They don’t go because they want treatment. They go in because we arrest them and I’m threatening them with prison time. But that threat, because of criminal justice reform, has grown less and less credible.

“First time methamphetamine right now, we reduce the potential sentence from 15 years to three years. That three years, they’re only going to serve a third of that. So, the maximum sentence, in reality, is only one year.

“Barbara (Honaker, North Enotah Drug Court

Coordinator) is underutilized, not because I’m vetoing people, but because only a handful of dealers are going in.

“Her problem in terms of getting people on the Drug Court is that many, many users are declining. They’re saying no. It’s 18 to 24 months of intensive supervision in which Barbara kicks out and sends to prison close to a third of the people that go in.

“The word has gotten out among the criminal community that if you go in that program and you don’t toe the line, you’ll get kicked out and sent to jail. I’d rather take straight probation, or I’d rather take my one year in prison.”

“The original design was, we were going to treat young, first-time offenders with this program, while the hardened criminals would have still gone to prison.

“Over the years, under Gov. (Nathan) Deal’s criminal justice reform, they have specifically changed that to even if a person has five or six prior felony convictions – let’s put them in Drug Court.

“It used to be our success rate for graduates was 90 plus percent. Now, it’s down to the 70s or low 80s because we put more hardened criminals into the program.”

Langley said the “pressure has been released” on criminals to go through the Drug Court program because, even if he sends them to prison, they will probably be paroled out very quickly.

Just prior to Langley’s presentation, the very talented Towns County High School senior Emily Williams, who, among many other endeavors, competes in the Future Business Leaders of America program, gave a surprise speech to everyone’s delight.

# Hering...from Page 1A



The Charles Suber Banquet Hall of Young Harris College was packed for the 11th Annual Watershed Gala on Feb. 28. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

“I probably don’t need to tell most of you why Brenda Hull was a nominee for the award,” said Moore. “She is one of these people that, everything she is doing and involved in, she tries to find a way to tie in the Watershed Coalition.

“Ever since I met her in 2004, there are so many things that could be listed that she has done or helped us with, and most of them are initiated by her.”

The local Trout Unlimited chapter received a nomination for the work they do with the Adopt-A-Stream program.

“Chattahoochee-Nantahala Chapter 692 Trout Unlimited are also very active in the Watershed Coalition,” said Moore. “For years, several different members have been super active with the Adopt-

A-Stream volunteer monitoring team.”

Added Moore, “The chapter as a whole has supported the Watershed Coalition, and we did a joint project on Bull Creek a couple of years ago to improve water quality there, and they also have provided us help with the youth education activities.”

The recipient of the 2019 Holman Water Quality Stewardship Award was Dave Hering of Towns County, who gave a speech while a slideshow of his work was displayed for the audience to enjoy.

“When I first got involved with the Watershed Coalition, I knew very little about water,” said Hering. “You turn on the spigot and brush your teeth and take a drink or whatever, but as far as problems with water, we are very fortunate that in the

area we live in we don’t have many problems.

“Could the water be improved? Absolutely, and it is very much so the job of the Watershed Coalition to make that happen. So, when I got involved in the Watershed Coalition, the first thing I did was try to educate myself a lot about water.”

Hering used his business skills and training to help figure out the financials of the organization and how to help them get additional funding over the years.

Following the speech, the group held a live auction to conclude the night of celebration.

For more information on the Watershed Coalition, visit HRWC.net.

# Last chance to enter Top of Georgia Speech Contest

The Towns County “Top of Georgia” Speech Contest held its initial meeting and training session Thursday, February 28th, at the new Senior Center in Hiawassee.

Although this year’s contest is sponsored by the Republican Party, we welcome all participants, grades 6-8 in a Junior Division and 9-12 in the Senior Division from various school systems: home school, public and private schools in the Towns County area, are included. Our goal is to give these children the ability to speak confidently in front of people and to use this training to further their own goals as

they proceed further with their educational aspirations.

The subjects of the speeches are not determined by the GOP but by the students themselves. The mentors or teachers come from various backgrounds in the county and are there to help educate the participants in their delivery not indoctrinate them in any particular mindset.

The training sessions will be held, every Thursday evening at 6 PM, at the Senior Center from February 28th – March 28th, culminating in the finals on Thursday, April 4 at 6 PM at the same venue.

We will still be accept-

ing new students after the beginning session until the second session, March 7th.

A student, in each division, has the opportunity to receive a prize of \$400 for placing first, \$300 for second, \$200 for third and \$100 for fourth; These total \$2,000 as prize money, which indicates the support and interest the community has in this endeavor and for the students of Towns County.

If you have any questions regarding becoming a contestant, please feel free to contact Betsy Young at TCGOPChair@gmail.com or 904-382-1912. TCMar6.F35H

# Lee...from Page 1A

The accident occurred just over the precipice of Swanson Mountain, aka Young Harris Mountain, heading back down toward Young Harris, according to authorities.

No charges are expected to be filed in Lee’s tragic death, according to authorities.

The Georgia State Patrol investigated the accident, and the Towns County Sheriff’s Office, Hiawassee Police Department, Towns County Fire Department and Towns County EMS also responded to the scene.

