

# Towns County Herald

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## #Hikeawasse campaign brings AT hikers to town

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

The City of Hiawassee and the Downtown Development Authority have teamed up to create #Hikeawasse, a collaborative effort with local businesses and volunteers to put the city on the map as a welcoming paradise for Appalachian Trail hikers.

#Hikeawasse has experienced tremendous success so far, with many hikers having already taken advantage of the free shuttle service between Hiawassee, Dick's Creek Gap and Unicoi Gap.

Running March 1-April 30 in its inaugural year, the initiative is designed to capitalize on the busy start of the northbound thru-hiking sea-

son, which, due to favorable weather conditions, always begins around early spring at Springer Mountain near Dahlonega.

Dick's Creek Gap east of Hiawassee and Unicoi Gap to the south are two nearby trailheads that see many hikers passing through each year, and while hikers have always made their way into town, the city has decided to make Hiawassee a bona fide AT destination to attract even more visitors.

Pronounced "hikeawasse," the fun-to-say effort kickstarted summer of last year when the owners of Trailful Outdoor Co. approached City Hall about the possibility of doing something to better promote the city as a trail-

friendly town.

"They came to us and said, 'We think that (Rabun County) is pulling a lot of our hikers to go to Clayton, and we want them to stay here,'" Mayor Liz Ordiales said. "And we do want that, because it's a great economic development driver for us."

"Hikers stay at the hotels, go to Ingles, eat at our restaurants, use the outfitter stores for their needs, pick up packages at the Post Office – and we want them to come here."

Before too long, a joint City/DDA volunteer committee formed to get the ball rolling on the idea, and under the leadership of Committee Chair Monica McKenna, #Hike-

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Appalachian Trail hikers on March 6 enjoying the first of many Mayor's Mondays with a cookout and networking on the Hiawassee Town Square.

## Recognitions abound in March School Board meeting



TCHS Principal Roy Perren with 2023 STAR Teacher Ken Camp and STAR Student Will McConnell in last week's School Board meeting.

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

In their March 6 regular meeting, the Towns County Board of Education received a special treat courtesy of the Parent Teacher Student Organization, which prepared a dinner in the Campus Media Center in advance of School Board Appreciation Week in Georgia, to run March 13-17.

Additionally, Elementary School Principal Shannon Moss gifted each School Board member a blanket, and between Middle School Principal Dr. Connie Hobbs and High School Principal Roy Perren, each member also received an umbrella and a \$25 gift certificate for the school store.

Also recognized in the meeting were 2023 STAR

Student Will McConnell – a senior at TCHS and the son of Board Chair Stephanie McConnell – and his chosen STAR teacher, Coach Ken Camp.

"To be STAR Student, you need the highest SAT (score) in one sitting of anyone in the class. You've also got to be in the top 5% (grade percentage) of the class," explained Principal Perren, who

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## Seabees celebrate birthday with annual Military Ball



U.S. Rep. Andrew Clyde, center, being thanked for delivering the keynote address in the March 4 Seabee Military Ball, pictured here with his wife Jennifer Morgan and Seabee Island X-3 Cmdr. Keith Hunter.

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

YOUNG HARRIS – After more than 80 years of service to the United States, the Navy Seabees continue to stand tall, proud and ever capable. The 81st birthday of the organization was celebrated with a Military Ball on March 4 courtesy of the Island X-3 Georgia Navy Seabee Veterans of America.

The ball occurred at the Ridges Resort, specifically behind the Oaks Lakeside Kitchen. With a silent auction, 50/50 raffle, snacks and dinner, drinks, dancing and, of course, a meaningful reflection on all that it means to be a veteran, the event had plenty to offer.

Island X-3 Cmdr. Keith Hunter welcomed veterans of all branches as well as their families before Christian Junior Reserve Officer Training

Corps cadets from the Mountain Area Christian Academy posted the colors.

The National Anthem and Pledge of Allegiance followed, along with each cadet holding out a corresponding flag for the recognition of military branches.

Island X-3 Chaplain Richard Hoibraten led an emotional presentation of the Missing Man Table, reading

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## House Bill 87 gives MECHS hope for school's future



By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

A timely new bill making its way through the Georgia General Assembly is poised to save Mountain Education Charter High School from having to close its doors to students next year.

MECHS began in 1993 with a unified site for Union, Towns and Fannin counties, and it has grown tremendously over the last 30 years.

Today, MECHS serves the educational needs of students across 18 sites in 22 North Georgia counties, giving dropout youths and those at risk of doing so a second chance for success in life.

A Georgia law that went into effect two years ago has threatened the very existence of the school, but thankfully, lawmakers have been working with MECHS to provide a solution, and school officials are optimistic they will be able to

carry on without disruption for 2023-24 and beyond.

The solution? House Bill 87, introduced by House Education Committee Chair Chris Erwin at the start of the current legislative session. The bill has crossed over for consideration by Georgia Senators for an expected vote by the last day of the session on Wednesday, March 29.

If HB 87 passes without major changes and Gov. Brian Kemp signs it, the "Non-traditional Special Schools Act" will right a wrong that occurred when the General Assembly attempted in 2021 to correct a funding quirk that saw too much money going to the state-chartered school.

As one of three "State Special Charter Schools" in Georgia – and the first of its kind in the nation – MECHS has been the beneficiary of more money than it needs to operate, enabling the school to build up a sizeable reserve fund close to 95% of a single year's

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## TCSO retrieves equipment, searches for theft suspect

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

On Thursday, March 9, Towns County Sheriff's Office investigators received a tip in reference to a Cat 305E excavator stolen out of Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Investigators located the equipment at a residence on Bugscuffle Road, where one of the suspects ran from deputies into a wooded area.

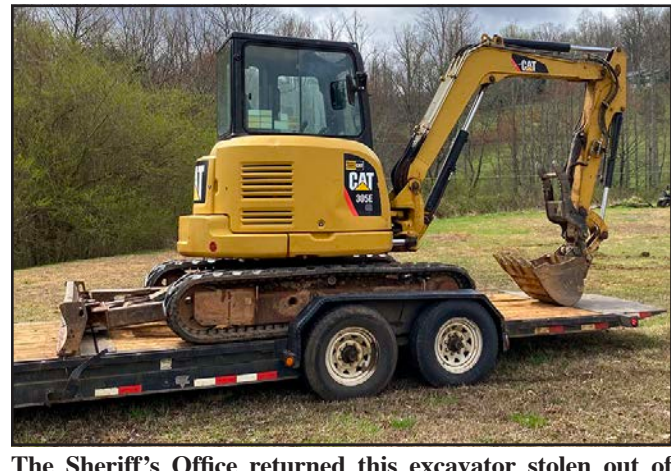
The Sheriff's Office drone was called out to assist in locating the subject near Macedonia Bridge on US 76 East, but heavy rain impacted drone operations.

The suspect has been identified as Brandon Scott Anderson, 35, of South Carolina, and he was still at large at press time. He is wanted for felony theft by receiving stolen property.

During a vehicle search, methamphetamine and a 9mm carbine were confiscated, and Terrie Eugenia Miles, 27, of Liberty, South Carolina, was arrested and charged with felony theft by receiving; felony possession of meth; and felony possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony.

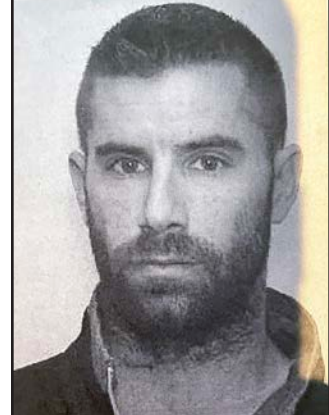
The stolen Cat 305E, valued at \$58,000, was returned to its owner.

Sheriff Ken Henderson commends the outstanding investigation into this case, which



The Sheriff's Office returned this excavator stolen out of Spartanburg, South Carolina, to its rightful owner last week.

Photo/Facebook



Brandon Scott Anderson  
Wanted

is still active and ongoing. There is no connection to recent local arrests related to other construction equipment



Terrie Eugenia Miles

theft cases. All individuals are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

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# MECHS ..from Page 1A

operating expenses. “We were being given more per student than what we actually expended, so our fund balance blossomed,” said MECHS Director of Community Outreach Roger Fitzpatrick. “You’ve heard the saying that ‘tall grass gets mowed,’ and because of our fund balance, we got the attention of folks.”

Reacting to the disproportionate funding scheme, Senate Bill 153 – signed into law May 2021 – changed the amount of state funds received per student in the three special charter schools to arrive at a proportionate distribution relative to other schools, and MECHS was fully on board with this reform.

But after SB 153 initially passed out of the senate, House legislators added a requirement that special charter schools be authorized under the local school districts that offer their facilities for use by MECHS, versus authorization coming from the State Charter Schools Commission.

This proved to be unworkable when none of MECHS’ partnering districts signed on as “authorizing local school systems,” meaning that, without a fix, MECHS would lose its charter and have to shutter once the current charter expired after June 30, 2023.

Fitzpatrick said no one blames individual school systems for not wanting to authorize MECHS at the local level. After all, there are many unknowns around what such a relationship would entail.

“If you are a single-county entity and you want to authorize a locally approved alternative charter school as a start-up, that would be a much simpler thing,” Fitzpatrick said. “But we’re currently operating in 18 counties all across North Georgia, so would we have one local ap-

prover, or would we have to get all 18 local approvers?”

“Then, there’s the whole money issue and governance issue and who’s responsible – just way too many questions that had yet to be answered.”

And in the two roughly two years since SB 153 passed, those questions have yet to be answered despite behind-the-scenes efforts toward clarity.

Fortunately, legislators have been persuaded to save the day by administrators, educators and community supporters who have written letters to newspapers and communicated directly with state lawmakers, hence the introduction of HB 87, and none too soon.

The new bill passed the House unanimously last month, an important victory for the effort, as it was the House that initially made the changes that would potentially doom MECHS.

Now, Fitzpatrick believes strongly that, as long as key provisions contained in HB 87 survive the senate, MECHS, too, will survive.

Essentially, HB 87 would allow MECHS to reorganize as a “completion special school,” a new category of school that would let MECHS retain its state charter while enabling funding through local school districts.

“The legislature recognizes that we are making an impact in the lives of so many students,” Fitzpatrick said. “We’ve graduated over 5,000 students in our existence, so that’s 5,000 lives that I would suggest have been changed for the better.”

Currently, all students learning at MECHS are enrolled there, so the school gets money directly from the state for their education.

But if the bill becomes law without substantial changes to the House version, as a compromise with the intent

of SB 153, the new House bill would result in students being divided into two categories for funding purposes.

Students over 18 will be considered direct enrollees of MECHS, with funding to come directly from the state; students under 18 will stay enrolled with their local school systems while receiving their education through MECHS as “program students.”

“So, we would function as a program, and we would have to send an invoice to the local school system for those students. In turn, they would have to pay us,” Fitzpatrick said. “It involves local school systems at least in the funding mechanisms for students that we serve that fall into that category of ‘program student.’ And we can make that work.”

Plenty of details will need ironing out locally, but MECHS would have a year to implement all the provisions in HB 87 if the bill proves to be a success.

“As we come across things that maybe were unforeseen, unintended consequences or maybe just difficulties, the main sponsor (of HB 87) has indicated he would be open to hearing suggestions,” Fitzpatrick said. “Not that there’s a guarantee that changes would be made, but he would at least be open to listening.”

Much is at stake here.

MECHS offers students a unique educational experience based around mastery learning and scheduling flexibility, so pupils who would otherwise drop out are instead afforded the ability to work at their own pace and attend as needed in the evenings to accommodate other obligations such as work or family care.

It is incredibly important for at-risk students to have access to second-chance opportunities like those provided by MECHS, as the attainment of

a high school diploma is well established as a key factor in a young person’s success.

There’s even a silver lining to this whole dramatic process having transpired in the first place, as HB 87 contains seed money funding to encourage the establishment of similar second-chance schools around the state.

Ultimately, MECHS could one-day serve as a model for success for the rest of the nation if more Georgia school districts adopt the approach and the benefits become apparent enough to convince neighboring states to similarly expand their own options to help struggling students.

“The big deal here is for every student to have an opportunity at a quality education that really fits their needs,” Fitzpatrick said. “And if the local school system is able to meet the need, then they need to stay there, because the traditional model of school system is the primary vehicle for every student in the state.”

“But I guarantee you, in every community, there are students that need something a little bit different, and that’s where we step in.”

## Towns County Lions Club Contributes to Cook Family



L-R: Sara & Blake Ledford and Lions Pres. Ronnie Whelchel

At a recent meeting, the Towns County Lions Club contributed \$500 to the fund for Makenna Cook’s medical expenses.

Makenna’s church, Meadow Grove Baptist in Hayesville, began a GoFundMe Internet page called Miracles For Makenna to go toward paying her mounting

hospital expenses for extensive and expert treatment and care.

Blake and Sara Ledford, who own Daniel’s Steakhouse in Hiwassee, began a dynamic fundraising campaign and included a video on their Facebook page which led to the Lions’ involvement. Through their energetic ef-

forts, the Ledfords have raised over \$7,500 to help Makenna Cook, age 24, who is a native of Young Harris & currently resides in Blairsville. The Ledfords have also provided free food service from Daniel’s to supplement the fundraising program.

For more information, please contact the office at Meadow Grove Baptist Church at 828-389-9444, or Sandy at Daniel’s Steakhouse at 706-896-8008, or her employer, Peachtree Dental Services, at 828-837-2113.

## National Silver Smokey Bear Award



Mark Wiles, Wildfire Mitigation Specialist, was presented with a Towns County Firewise Coalition plaque by Frank Riley (and Smokey), acknowledging his receipt of the 2022 National Silver Smokey Bear Award.

The award is the Nation’s highest wildfire prevention honor and recognizes Mark’s 40 years of dedicated service towards wildfire prevention and public awareness here in Georgia and throughout the Nation. T(Mar15.A5)JH

## Club 66 Veterans and Associates

Club 66 Veterans and Associates is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization located at 2641 State Hwy. 66, Young Harris, GA is a Veterans Thrift Store and a Club (Bar) downstairs.

The Thrift Store hours are Wednesday through Saturday from 10 AM - 4 PM. Club hours are Tuesday through Saturday opening at 2 PM. For more information call 706-379-3774.

The Thrift Store accepts gently used items and is looking for volunteers. We are not affiliated with any other organization. NT(Mar15.Z2)CA

# Military Ball...from Page 1A



A ball wouldn't be a ball without dancing, and guests of the Military Ball earlier this month made sure to cut a rug after the dinner and program. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

celebrating the meaning of each item as representative of the servicemen and women who did not return from battle.

A banquet accompanied the ball, giving guests time to break bread with one another before Rob Mawyer took to the front of the room to talk about the upcoming Appalachian Veterans Memorial Park. To be located at Meeks Park in Union County, the project will provide a regional outdoor venue for reflection on veterans and those currently serving their nation. The project arose, Mawyer said, when it became apparent that a larger space was needed to host activities like Veteran's Day services.

Now that Union County Commissioner Lamar Paris has dedicated an acre of land for the park, the biggest hurdle is raising enough funds to build it. Of the \$200,000 projected cost, about 10% has been met, but a smaller piece of that goal is the \$60,000 mark needed to break ground.

U.S. Rep. Andrew S. Clyde of Georgia's Ninth Congressional District, himself a 28-year veteran of the U.S. Navy, served as the keynote speaker that evening.

Fitting for an event cel-

brating the founding of the Naval Construction Battalion, Clyde was himself a Seabee, having experienced three combat deployments in Iraq and Kuwait.

After thanking the gathered veterans for their time, Clyde discussed how important he felt it was to "push the conservative agenda" and reassure how seriously he was taking current events in Washington, D.C. as well as his dreams for a better system.

"(Being a congressman) is a privilege that I do not take lightly," he said, "because now more than ever, we need to navigate the ongoing challenges facing our country and to ultimately get our country back on track from the disasters of the current administration.

"And that's why I believe God placed me exactly where He did, for such a time as this. From combat to Congress, I have fiercely fought for what's right," he added to immense applause.

Clyde relayed the conservative struggles he has perceived with bills and various pushbacks from Democrats in Congress.

"Our fight was to break Washington D.C.'s status quo," Clyde said. "To end the top-

down dictatorial leadership. To drain the swamp in the House and install transformational changes to fundamentally alter the institution of Congress, ensuring that the People's House actually works for the people again. And that's exactly what we accomplished.

"From bringing back a 200-year-old Jeffersonian single-person motion to vacate the chair, which held the Speaker of the House accountable to the members who elected him, to allowing members 72 hours to read a bill before it can come to the floor for a vote."

In short, Clyde said it meant "no more of, 'You have to pass the bill to find out what's in it.'"

After Clyde's address, guests sang along to the Song of the Seabees, ringing in the battalion's 81st birthday with a massive cake and, later, dancing under the flashing lights of DJ Bill Grove's table.

Ultimately, the evening was commemorative not just for its greater meaning, but for the interpersonal relationships it fostered and for the chance it gave veterans and their loved ones to come together and celebrate their service and their country with like minds.

# #Hikeawassee...from Page 1A



AT hikers are loving the free #Hikeawassee shuttle service to town from Dick's Creek Gap and Unicoi Gap six days a week. wasse was born.

The partners involved have printed up promotional materials advertising "Hiawasse Hiker Services," with flyers available at Springer Mountain and online.

In addition to the services outlined by Mayor Ordiales above, Hiawasse offers hikers phone charging stations, Wi-Fi access, laundry and pharmaceutical services, ATM access and more.

And hikers who come across the promotional materials can scan a QR code with their cellphone to pull up a detailed map of hiker-friendly locations all throughout the city, with the QR code enabling both

ease of access and storage.

"We started (the shuttle service) Monday through Friday, but there's a need for Saturday, so we've been doing Saturdays, too," Ordiales said. "They come to town, and every Monday, we do Mayor Mondays.

"That's when I go out there and grill some hamburgers and hotdogs for the hikers. This last Monday we had 40 hikers there."

Residents will have undoubtedly noticed the #Hikeawassee logo, which features prominently on yard signs at businesses around the city as well as on new vinyl, weatherproof stickers that have

popped up in various businesses to promote the campaign.

Stickers are hot items for hikers having to lug their possessions, as they make for lightweight, affordable keepsakes. So, not only is #Hikeawassee bringing people to town, but it's also providing a brand-specific sellable item to boost what's available to buy in local businesses.

With its unified and consistent branding, #Hikeawassee has the potential to spur a great word-of-mouth campaign, too, as people from all over the country and world hike the trail, opening the doors for Hiawasse to build a truly far-reaching reputation as a can't-miss stop for trail hikers.

"It's just really neat," Ordiales said. "It's a good opportunity for the city to draw more people in, have them here on the square, and let them take off from here. I mean, they've been walking forever, so they love sitting here and just talking with each other."

Except for Sundays, the free shuttle service runs three times daily to Dick's Creek Gap and twice a day to Unicoi Gap, made possible by the dedication of volunteers who drive in shifts. The shuttle is an old bus that was donated by Towns County Transit and fixed up by the city.

# School Board Meeting...from Page 1A

himself had been a STAR Student in the 1960s, shortly after the project's inception.

For his part, McConnell said Coach Camp was "the reason why I'm standing here today," and he graciously accepted the trophy and certificate handed to him by Perren.

In turn, Camp said McConnell possessed "the best combination of intellect, humility, and work ethic that I've seen," noting that he was honored to have been chosen as his pupil's STAR Teacher.

Following graduation in May, McConnell will attend Georgia Tech with plans to earn a degree in computer science.

Regarding awards, Towns County Elementary was recognized as a "Distinguished School" for the school's efforts in improving school climate via the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Program. Principal Moss received the award from Jason Kaup of Pioneer RESA.

Out of the 181 school districts in Georgia, only 23 have a Distinguished School, and Towns County is now one of those districts.

According to the Georgia Department of Education, a Distinguished School is any facility that makes "significant progress in improving student achievement and/or signifi-



TCES Principal Shannon Moss receiving the prestigious Distinguished School Award from Jason Kaup of Pioneer RESA. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

cant progress in closing the achievement gap."

In the Principal Reports portion of the meeting, Moss spoke about the recent Read Across America Week March 2-6, which introduced kids to the fun of literacy with events like "Wild Hair Day," with the week culminating in "Character Day" and "Pajama Day."

Hobbs revealed that Middle School FBLA Sponsor Jason McClure had tested students at the state level, and one eighth-grader will be advancing to nationals this summer after placing second for his "elevator speech."

"I didn't know what an elevator speech was," Hobbs said. "It's where you intro-

duce yourself very quickly, in the amount of time it would take you to enter an elevator and leave, so it's like a really quick 30-second introduction of yourself."

As for Towns County High, Principal Perren revealed some important news regarding TCHS sports achievements and student involvement in the community, such as when high schoolers went out to the Mayor's Park to plant a tree for Arbor Day with Master Gardener Joan Crothers.

The Towns County Board of Education meets the first Monday every month starting at 6 p.m. in the Campus Media Center.

# New Trinity Baroque Concert at John C. Campbell



New Trinity Baroque

On Sunday, March 19 the Brasstown Concert Association (BCA) will present New Trinity Baroque, one of the nation's leading early music ensembles, in Keith House on the John C. Campbell Folk School campus.

Specializing in vocal-instrumental music of the 17th and 18th century, NTB's repertoire ranges from chamber to orchestral, from cantatas to operas, and its styles from Renaissance to Classical.

Its musicians perform on period instruments appropriate to the time the music was com-

posed. In 1998 NTB was established as an ensemble of international musicians and for over two decades has continued to work closely with national and international artists. The group maintains an active touring schedule throughout the U.S. and Europe, presents educational events, and has a dozen CDs to its credit.

"Spring and New Trinity Baroque will arrive in Brasstown together. I can't think of a better way to welcome the season than with New Trinity's superb music, specially

given the lively acoustics of Keith House," comments BCA Artistic Director Rosemarie Kelischek.

New Trinity Baroque will perform at 2 PM on Sunday, March 19 in Keith House at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, NC. Tickets are \$20 for adults, \$10 for students of any age registered at any venue, and are available at the door; no reservations required.

For information call 828-389-4210 or 828-835-6470 or email brasstownconcertnews@gmail.com.