

Coronavirus...from Page 1A

Folk School representatives are in the process of contacting students and instructors who attended classes March 8-14 “to inform them of the positive COVID-19 test result for the dance attendee (who was not a student).”

Responding to the likelihood of community spread last week, the municipalities of Murphy and Andrews in Cherokee County, North Carolina, imposed curfews with misdemeanor fines or imprisonment for would-be offenders, foreshadowing a new – hopefully temporary – normal.

In a better turn of events, the Towns County Elementary School teacher transported to Gainesville on March 15 with a suspected case of the virus tested negative, though the situation remains as serious as ever in the region and abroad.

Unlike any other moment in recent memory save for 9/11, people are witnessing a social, political and economic transformation of countries across the planet, with all signs pointing to still more sweeping changes to come as the novel coronavirus continues to spread.

In an unprecedented coordinated response, here in the U.S., local, state and federal governments nationwide have been in constant contact to implement a regular series of measures designed to combat the enemy at the gates: the highly contagious COVID-19.

This virus has proven to be particularly dangerous to the elderly and people with underlying health conditions, as it causes potentially deadly respiratory problems like pneumonia for vulnerable populations, though most virus victims appear to exhibit only mild symptoms before recovering.

Already, there’s a candidate vaccine in trials, and President Donald Trump expressed his optimism recently over the repurposing of an anti-malarial drug as a treatment

for the disease. Other potential treatments are in the works, with further testing required for all options.

Prevention, of course, is the best protection, which is why the following public health mantras should be familiar to all by now, especially after last week, when the president and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention unveiled the “15 Days to Slow the Virus” campaign to hamper human-to-human transmission:

Work and do school from home. Wash hands frequently. Avoid touching faces. Sneeze or cough into a tissue or elbow crook. Disinfect regularly used items and surfaces. Stay home when sick. Steer clear of gatherings of 10 or more people. Don’t shake hands. Maintain at least 6 feet between people, etc.

“Even if you are young or otherwise healthy, you are at risk and your activities can increase the risk for others,” the White House said in its messaging. “It is critical that you do your part to slow the spread of the coronavirus.”

The numbers of positive COVID-19 diagnoses are increasing as expected, and this is very likely a good thing for the time being, serving as a real indicator that testing is becoming more available around the country during the pandemic.

And many health care officials believe the U.S. is making gains in its efforts to flatten the curve of infection, which will ultimately be achieved if the country is able to distribute the number of positive cases more evenly over time.

There remains a question, however, of whether or not the most advanced health care system in the world is prepared for widespread illness requiring hospitalization, even with a flattened curve.

As COVID-19 cases continue to rise, it’s possible that many hospitals will struggle to meet the demand

of patients needing intensive care, i.e. the use of hospital beds and ventilators, though stakeholders at all levels are planning around the clock to address any potential issues there.

This is one of the reasons several states, like California and New York, have instituted shelter-in-place orders requiring “nonessential” businesses such as restaurants, bars and entertainment establishments to close, and for people to stay in their homes unless going out for supplies or medical reasons, all with an eye toward slowing the virus’ spread.

First responders and businesses performing other “essential” services, like convenience stores, pharmacies and grocery stores, are being allowed to carry out their work under such orders.

It is conceivable that Georgia could implement a similar measure at the state level. In fact, Gov. Brian Kemp held a COVID-19 news conference after press time Monday, and there was speculation beforehand that he may call for greater restrictions on public gatherings and businesses.

Even the president could attempt to issue an order telling people to stay home, though he said recently he didn’t think that was necessary. But that, too, could change in time, as so much has already.

To address current supply shortages of vital medical gear and equipment, much of which China has historically produced for the U.S. yet had been prioritizing for use by its own hard-hit population until recently, President Trump invoked last week the Defense Production Act of 1950.

This act allows the federal government to direct private industry to produce supplies deemed necessary for a national emergency response. Face masks and other medical supplies, including ventilators, could be made in this way for distribution among the various states.

As far as keeping communities up to speed on the virus, the Georgia Department of Public Health is now updating its COVID-19 Daily Status Report twice each day, at noon and 7 p.m.

The report contains the most current numbers of virus cases and deaths in Georgia, as well as a county-by-county breakdown of positive cases and how many tests are being conducted in the state. This report can be found at <https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-daily-status-report>.

Towns County had been spared the news of a local case of the virus by press time, though that is likely to change any day now – and could have by the time people are reading this. That’s how quickly developments are coming to the American public, as the 24/7 news cycle continues to breach its televised confines to take over the realities of everyday citizens’ lives.

In-house testing is not currently available in Towns County, though Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett of Union General Health Systems said Chatuge Regional Hospital has been collecting samples for weeks to send for testing by commercial labs and the Department of Public Health.

All locally collected samples – the number of which was not immediately available – had come back negative by press time, meaning people testing negative but presenting with novel coronavirus symptoms had actually contracted some other circulating illness.

Due to a limited supply of collection kits, the only people currently being tested are symptomatic individuals who have either been to an affected area or had contact with an infected person/someone suspected of having COVID-19, according to District 2 Public Health.

Healthy people do not need to be tested. A doctor will determine if a patient meets the testing criteria, so people should call their doctors if they suspect they may have contracted the virus.

The Department of Public Health has established a drive-up collection site in Hall County to take test samples from residents who meet the criteria.

Test results are currently taking a few days to a week to come back, and regardless of whether or not sick people have this particular disease, they are being asked to self-quarantine and recover at home unless ill enough to require hospitalization.

A federally established public/private partnership will allow for commercial labs to coordinate with big box stores for space to enable drive-through sample collections, which should increase the rate of testing soon, thereby giving

the public a better idea of overall infection rates.

The tests should be covered by insurance, and individuals without insurance who cannot afford one will be able to get tested for free, according to the Department of Public Health.

Union General Health continues to plan for the possibility of a large-scale outbreak in the county, with contingencies in place to treat people outside of the hospital utilizing various resources to expand its triage area.

“We’ve got a whole pandemic/flu plan that we would implement,” Barnett said, adding that, “if we had widespread illness and we were overwhelmed with a surge of patients,” the hospital would utilize resources like the local Emergency Management Agency to set up tents and assist in additional ways.

“But we’re not to that point,” Barnett said.

She is urging people with symptoms to also call 1-866-PUB-HLTH, or 866-782-4584, where they will be able to find additional testing resources should they meet the current requirements.

“If they are sick enough to need care, then we are happy to take care of them,” Barnett said. “Otherwise, it’s best just to take care of yourself at home, isolate at home, until your illness passes. It’s recommended that you stay home and isolate yourself for at least 72 hours after your symptoms resolve.”

For now, like other institutions, Union General has put its hospitals and nursing homes in Union and Towns counties on lockdown to the general public until further notice to keep the virus from spreading among patients and employees in those facilities.

And many other local procedures have been altered as a precaution over the virus, including the cessation of in-person visits at the Towns County Detention Center, and the closing to the public of City Hall offices in Hiwassee and Young Harris, which are reachable by phone and email.

To keep essential services going, for instance, the Sheriff’s Office is responding to emergency calls as normal, but it will be handling non-emergency calls by phone “as situations dictate, i.e. general questions of an officer by the public.”

Amid a host of other operational amendments aimed at slowing the spread of the virus, the Sheriff’s Office is screening both arrestees and staff for COVID-19 symptoms at its facilities, and it has implemented a telecommunications program “to host meetings with county department heads and other agencies through the internet.”

Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw has closed the courthouse and county offices, though county employees are still reachable for service.

“To limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus, county offices will be closed to the public effective Monday, March 23,” Bradshaw said in a statement. “Employees will be reporting to work and available by phone.”

The following county departments/areas have already been closed and will remain so until further notice: Bell Mountain Observatory; the Recreation Center, including indoor pickleball; the Senior Center, excluding the Meals on Wheels Program; Towns County Transit; and the Mountain Regional Library System.

“Anyone in need of Food Pantry services, please call 706-896-4783 and leave a message,” Bradshaw said. “Someone will return your call, and help will be provided.”

For regularly updated information about ongoing county services, visit www.townscountyga.org.

Bradshaw and Towns County Emergency Management Agency Director Brandon Walls hosted a department head/local leader meeting at the courthouse last week, in which they discussed the various aspects of responding to coronavirus.

The bottom line is this: county first responders are continuing to take the threat of the virus seriously, and extra precautions are in place to protect EMS workers and others from exposure during responses to medical calls, including E-911 Dispatchers.

One of Walls’ primary tasks as EMA director is outfitting public safety personnel to keep them safe, thereby allowing him and his fellow first responders to keep the public safe.

“Paramedic Blake Taylor has assisted me with developing personal protective equipment

Arrest and Fire Reports

Local law enforcement provides the following information for publication. Names are spelled as they were when received from the law enforcement agencies. It is important to remember that the following individuals have been charged only and are presumed innocent until such time as they are found guilty by a court or enter a guilty plea. Addresses of persons under arrest are no longer available from Sheriff’s Office.

ARREST REPORT	
Towns County Jail Sheriff-Chris Clinton	
3/21/20	Paul Livingston Lowe, age 52 DUI - alcohol, Failure to drive w/in single lane, Open container in vehicle
3/20/20	Charles Edward Robinson, age 58 Probation violation
3/21/20	Timothy Lee Allen Shaffer, age 29 Giving false name, address or birthdate to law enforcement, Poss., manu., distrib., etc., VGCS, Possession & use of drug-related objects (4 counts), Possession of meth, Probation violation
3/22/20	Hailey Margaret Dyer, age 21 Driving w/out valid license, Failure to drive w/in single lane
3/17/20	Jessica Leigh Grindstaff, age 29 Public drunkenness
3/17/20	Kyla-Ann Marie Meigs, age 21 Driving while license suspended or revoked
3/20/20	William Wade Scott, age 43 Serve weekend
3/21/20	Michael Jared Wiggins, age 18 Driving w/ learners permit w/out license, Marijuana - possess less than 1 oz., Possession & use of drug-related objects, Tail lights, Unlawful possession of 20 oz. or less of low THC oil

Two-week hiatus for Mountain Movers and Shakers

Due to Coronavirus concerns, the Mountain Movers and Shakers will not meet for the next two weeks.

Everyone please be safe. There is no cause for alarm, but it seems the country is taking a two week timeout, self-quarantining and limiting contact without any government prodding. Major League sports, from tennis to baseball, is suspending, delaying or cancelling seasons altogether.

Many entities in Towns County are suspending operations for two weeks at least. Please share any information you gather regarding any Coronavirus disruptions.

Do you belong to a local organization or are you an elected official with information that affects our commu-

nity? Then why not join us and fill us in on what’s going on! Everyone is invited to come hear what our weekly guest speakers have to say, and we have always had a few minutes for impromptu speakers with pertinent information.

Everyone is invited for conversation, information and breakfast with the Mountain Movers and Shakers. Our non-partisan group meets at 8 a.m. every Friday at The Sundance Grill, a great place to meet, and the food is really good and reasonably priced.

So come join us. You are sure to find interesting speakers, championship caliber youth, and a fine group of friendly mountain folk!

Like us on Facebook: Mountain Movers & Shakers.

Clean Sweep Week April 19-25

Towns County annual “Clean Sweep Week” goes from April 19-25, 2020, which includes Earth Day, the 22nd. We hope you and your group have already planned on your pickup area and obtained TVA marked bags. These specially marked bags can be picked up at the Towns County Courthouse, Hiwassee and Young Harris City Halls, Chamber of Commerce, and T.C. Public Library.

J.C. Berrong is in charge of the cleanup again this year and he is having a meeting on Monday, April 6th at 9 a.m. at the gazebo on the Hiwassee Towns Square. Please be a part of this good-citizen-campaign to clean up our little part of the county.

After your pickup, take a photo of your pile of bags

along with your volunteers, and take to or email photo and number of bags to the Chamber; take the bags free of charge to the Transfer Station on Sunnyside. Towns County Chamber of Commerce phone is 706-896-4966 or email dacelee@brmemc.net.

Prizes of \$200 will be awarded for the most bags brought in by an individual, a church, and a business, club, or organization. Prizes will be presented at a celebration dinner sponsored by Commissioner Bradshaw on Tuesday, April 28th, 6 p.m. at the Recreation & Conference Center on Mining Gap Road (Foster Park).

Sponsors of the 2019 Clean Sweep Week are T.C. Civic Association, T.C. Chamber, T.C. Commissioner’s Office, and TVA.

Republican headquarters to be closed through March 31

In light of the recent coronavirus pandemic, which started as a threat in China and exploded into arguably the most significant global event in modern history, the Towns County GOP will be closing the doors to its headquarters at 3921 Hwy. 76 in Young Harris, effective Saturday, March 21 at noon through March 31 and then we will re-evaluate the situation and act responsibly.

While we believe that

this will be in the best interest of our community, it was not an easy decision to make. Please take this time to stay with your loved ones and follow the CDC guidelines.

We plan to reopen on Wednesday, April 1. While that is a day normally reserved for jokes and laughter, we will spend the days leading up to it in prayer. Thank you for your support.

Republican Party of Towns County, Inc.