

# Towns County Herald

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## TCHS ag students grow fresh veggies for school lunch

By Jeremy Foster  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

For nearly 18 years, Sabrina Garrett has been the agricultural education teacher for Towns County High School, starting at the middle school level for three years before moving to the high school.

And the Future Farmers of America adviser is always on the lookout for opportunities to get her students involved with the community.

Case in point, Garrett has teamed up with the Rotary Club of Lake Chatuge on several projects over the years, most recently through the donation of two hydroponic garden towers for growing vegetables in her class.

"The Rotary Club was wanting to promote the new modern agriculture hydroponics that they have been doing,

so they contacted Principal Roy Terry to see if we were interested in trying it out," Garrett said. "And of course, we were."

"We have tried doing it before in the past in our greenhouse, but this system works so much better because it is cleaner and easier to work with and move around. Our plan is geared toward becoming a semi-sufficient school by planting and growing our own vegetables for the entire school's use."

"So, we have been able to supply the school's cafeteria line with some fresh lettuce, chives, basil and other herbs so the kids have that free choice of organically grown food and a healthier lifestyle."

From seeds to harvest, Garrett and her students grow the veggies over the course of about six to seven weeks, at which point, it's time to dig in



Towns County High School agriculture program students outside the new greenhouse at the school. Photo by Jeremy Foster

farm-to-table cafeteria style.

"When we plant the seeds, it takes about a week or so to germinate," Garrett said. "About two weeks in, we will put them in the towers. From

there, it takes about three and a half to four weeks, and then they are ready to eat."

"We are very gracious for the Rotary Club to supply us with these towers because,

not only is it a great teaching tool for the kids, but it is also a great career opportunity for someone who is interested in plants."

"We just got a grant a

month ago for a brand-new greenhouse that we put together, because our old one was nearly 22 years old and was not working properly, so these

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## Easter Egg Hunt returns to Fairgrounds on April 9

By Jeremy Foster  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, Towns County Recreation Department and Hiwassee Baptist Association will be hosting the annual Community Easter Egg Hunt this Saturday, April 9, at the Fairgrounds.

Egg hunting will begin at 10 a.m., and the fun will contin-

ue until all eggs are found. Following tradition, children will be divided into three age groups to hunt 1,000 eggs per grouping at the lower ballfields.

There will also be five "Golden Eggs" laid out per age group that children will be competing to find and redeem for Easter baskets containing candy and toys.

Towns County Parks and Recreation Director Stuart Nichols, who has headed up the

department since September 2021, said he is having a hard time containing his excitement for the cherished local event, which is taking place the weekend before Easter Sunday.

"We decided to hold it on April 9 to give families the rest of the week to enjoy their time and get to where they are going if they are traveling out of town for the weekend," Nichols said. "And if there is a chance of

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Towns County children will undoubtedly turn out in large numbers to take part in this year's Easter Egg Hunt on Saturday.

## County employs GMASS for commercial property valuation



L-R: Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, Chief Appraiser Sonya Neal and Deputy Chief Appraiser Michael West in a March 30 called meeting. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw approved a contract with Georgia Mass Appraisal Solutions & Services, or GMASS, at a special called meeting at the courthouse on March 30.

GMASS will assist the Towns County Tax Assessor's Office with updating commercial property valuation schedules in the county as prescribed by the Georgia Department of Revenue and verified by the

Digest Compliance Section.

"They're going to be reviewing all of our commercial schedules for the county," said County Chief Appraiser Sonya Neal. "They're going to be redoing all the building schedules for commercial (buildings) as well as (commercial) land."

Continuing, "In essence, what they're doing is taking over (county commercial valuations) for this year to allow us an opportunity to get those schedules in a place that we can maintain for the future."

Bradshaw said this will allow local tax assessors to focus on their other work "so they don't get behind in any area - and it will bring everything in (the commercial) area up to date."

The amount of the contract for GMASS services is \$40,000, with a March 30, 2022, effective date. Neal said that \$7,500 of that note will cover the appraisal costs for "our low-income housing."

"(GMASS) will go in and do an income approach

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## Hospital System looks at end of latest COVID surge



By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

Union General Health System reported last week that

its hospitals were "getting back to normal" following the most recent surge of COVID-19 driven by the omicron variant, with current levels of local infection at their lowest since last sum-

mer and perhaps since the onset of the pandemic.

Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said the winter wave that started in December

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## Council discusses noise ordinance, water/sewer rates



Hiwassee City Councilwomen Nancy Noblet, Amy Barrett, Patsy Owens and Anne Mitchell in their March 28 work session at City Hall. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

The Hiwassee City Council March 28 work session returned to several familiar subjects discussed in the Feb. 28 work session and March 1 City Council meeting while broach-

ing new topics of city business as well.

Chris Hollifield of accounting firm Rushton and Company presented the city's 20-2021 audit. The main finding was that the Downtown Development Authority was spread too thin due to a lack of staff.

To help address this is-

sue, Hollifield suggested that more city officials get involved in DDA projects until additional help can be hired.

In other news, Ordiales gave a brief COVID-19 update, and with only seven cases in two weeks as of the meeting date, the novel coronavirus

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## North Carolina chase ends in Towns County, drug arrest

News Special  
Towns County Herald

At approximately 4:15 p.m. on Tuesday, March 29, the Clay County Sheriff's Office of North Carolina was involved in a vehicle chase that entered Towns County southbound on SR 17 before turning west on US 76, then continuing right onto Crooked Creek Connector.

The vehicle wrecked about half a mile later, leaving the roadway in a curve. The perpetrator was uninjured, apprehended and arrested without incident.

During the chase, speeds reached in excess of 80 mph,

and the driver attempted to crash into patrol cars during the pursuit.

The Clay County Sheriff's Office and Towns County Sheriff's Office were assisted by North Carolina State Patrol as well as Georgia State Patrol.

Sheriff Ken Henderson stated he was pleased that all agencies worked together to bring this chase to a safe conclusion with no one injured.

Michelle Lynn Dover, 48, of Hayesville, North Carolina, was arrested and charged with DUI, two counts aggravated assault, felony possession of marijuana (0.5 pounds), possession



Michelle Lynn Dover

with intent to distribute, possession of drug-related objects, and multiple traffic charges.

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# City Council...from Page 1A

seems to be definitively on the decline in the area.

“We’re probably not going to talk about COVID anymore,” Ordiales said while stressing that, “if you still feel a little not-so-secure, wear your mask, wash your hands, and stay away.”

All businesses in the city have had their licenses renewed for 2022, but 75 property tax accounts remain outstanding totaling \$9,282, and a third round of notice letters went out this week.

Progress is beginning on the sidewalk fixes requested as a result of Georgia Department of Transportation Road Safety Audits. For the most part, construction is waiting on bids.

As for the larger project at the Timberlake Plaza, the city is in a similar position waiting on GDOT’s approval of the blueprints. Proposed changes would include a one-way entrance and exit, sidewalk repairs, angle parking and curb cuts.

“We might have some money to do a couple of new sidewalks,” Ordiales said. “I’d like to see if we can put a sidewalk to go from Hiawassee Brew all the way to Georgia Vision Center.”

The decision would provide “full walkability” through the city and give those moving along the foot traffic route a safer path to traverse.

Improvements to Hiawassee continue in the form of recent changes to the Mayor’s Park. The “Men of Water” at the Hiawassee Water Department are painting the poles at the pier, and the concrete slab that will support the Mountain Ice machine has been installed.

Ella-Wassee, the pink elephant decorating the lake, now sports solar lights to be visible at night courtesy of local volunteers Michael Courey and Gordy Jones.

Students visiting from an out-of-state university on their spring break removed invasive plant species from the beach at Mayor’s Park and planted native flora to take their place.

The students take part in local beautification projects

annually in partnership with MountainTrue’s Callie Moore, formerly of the Hiawassee River Watershed Coalition.

Closer to the city, two new businesses have opened: the Hiawassee Package Store and the Tilted Bottle.

The Towns-Union Master Gardener Association, headed by Toni Smith, has turned its attention to the Town Square. Efforts include sprucing up flower beds and trimming back trees.

As for another long-term project, the annual Music on the Square lineup has been finalized, including the Fall Affair on the Square, which will take place Sep. 16 and 17.

Also in the work session, Hiawassee Police Chief Paul Smith presented the current state of the upcoming noise ordinance amendment.

“Our noise ordinance is hard to enforce,” Smith said. “We’re trying to strike a balance between having a restaurant that may want to play music or have a live band play and the peace and quiet of people who might live nearby.”

To stake out a middle ground, Smith solicited the thoughts of business owners and residents and spent time considering the ordinances of other cities. One possibility involves splitting Hiawassee’s land into “corridors” to establish individual sets of rules for individual sections.

Another option, taken from models used elsewhere, measures decibels, but Smith felt the latter option “unnecessary,” and resident feedback suggested that the method wouldn’t be particularly useful, as, for example, the traffic beside an establishment with a live band may have a greater decibel than the music, even when the latter is the subject of complaint.

Smith’s own idea was met with positivity by those in attendance.

“I’m thinking more along the lines of (setting a limit) past a certain hour; 11 p.m., 10 p.m. – things like live music need to cease,” Smith said. “And then other times, or other locations,

if you can hear a noise from 200 feet away, it’s really too loud.”

Smith went over the nuances of noise duration, source and frequency, and a lengthy discussion followed. The chief said he would write up a draft of the ordinance, which was expected to be available for the council to hold a first reading of during this week’s regular meeting.

Introduced toward the end of the March 28 work session was the subject of rising water and sewer rates.

Previously, a past Hiawassee City Council voted to increase rates by 2.5% per year, but it was not strictly enforced and did not carry over into the official ordinance’s design. The mayor proposed that rates increase corresponding to Social Security increases.

“I thought it would be fair if we just said, ‘OK, whatever the increase is, that’s what we increase our water rates,’” Ordiales said, elaborating that, when Social Security rates go up each July, water rates will also increase by a minimum of 1% or maximum of 5%.

It’s worth noting that the average rate increase in Hiawassee over the past 10 years has been 1.9%.

Feedback was fairly positive, with the council’s unanimous agreement that the ordinance was fair and unavoidable due to the rising costs of upkeep and chemical treatment across the nation.

Officially, the new rates will be introduced in July, but Ordiales wanted to begin discussions now so that residents would not be caught off guard.

Discussions on the upcoming budgetary process have begun, with the council receiving a handout with details in the March work session. A budget public hearing will take place April 25, with a first reading expected May 3 and a second reading and adoption set for June 7.

In the April 5 regular city meeting, the city was expected to pass the “dual reading, one meeting” Home Rule Amendment to allow the council to hold two readings and adoption of ordinances in the same meeting instead of over two months if the council is in full attendance.

# Fresh Veggies...from Page 1A

new plants are certainly going to be top of the line.

“We would really like to expand on the hydroponic growing in the future so we can produce weekly rather than every two months. That way, we can give to our cafeteria and feed the kids daily.”

In terms of other classroom projects, Garret said she and her students are working on building book marquees to promote literacy in the schools.

“The elementary, middle and high schools will each get one,” Garret said, “and we hope to get one for the general community to put up in the Rec Center so we can target not just kids but people of all ages as well.”

“We also have our state convention coming up in April where we have students (Casey Galloway and Konner Davis) getting their FFA degrees through their (Supervised Agricultural Experience) projects, which is a huge honor.

“And we will be continuing to take care of the Carter Family Cemetery as our FFA community service and class project.”



One of the hydroponic garden towers donated by Lake Chatuge Rotary to Towns County Schools to grow vegetables for cafeteria consumption. Photo by Jeremy Foster

People may contact Garrett at 706-435-8265 or sgarrett@townscountyschools.org to get more information on the

high school ag programs, to donate, or to get involved in other ways, like volunteering on community projects.

# GMASS...from Page 1A

(appraisal) on those low-income housings, because they do have to be treated separately,” she said.

The purpose of separate treatment of low-income housing for appraisal purposes is because the state has restrictions on the amount of rent the owners of these properties can charge, which affects valuation.

Occasionally, in a case where the state does not agree with the county’s low-income property valuation, a Board of Equalization/Chief Hearing Officer hearing or a Superior Court hearing will be called to settle the matter and determine a valuation.

In the case of a Board of Equalization/Chief Hearing Officer hearing, a per diem cost of \$750 for a GMASS appraiser would be incurred. In the event of a Superior Court hearing, a per diem cost of \$1,000 for a GMASS appraiser would be incurred. Per diem expenses would be in addition to the GMASS contract fee.

From a cost standpoint, Bradshaw said it is less expensive to hire GMASS to do this

work than to hire new local appraisers to do it, and there’s not enough commercial property in Towns County to warrant creating a separate commercial division in the Tax Assessor’s Office.

“So, economically, for the taxpayers, this is a more feasible way to approach the issue than to put more staff over (at the Tax Assessor’s Office),” Bradshaw said.

The whole reason behind the commercial property update in Towns County is to stay in compliance with the Department of Revenue in light of the recent escalation in property values, and to stay ahead of the

Digest Compliance Section.

According to the Department of Revenue website, “Georgia property (commercial or residential) is required to be assessed at 40% of its fair market value.” There are a few exceptions that are not applicable here.

So, for example, if a property was assessed at \$100,000 in 2012 and now has a fair market value of \$200,000 in 2022, if the county tax assessor has not reassessed the property since 2012, then the county would be out of compliance with state standards and liable for fines and penalties.

This is what the commissioner and the county Tax Assessor’s Office are endeavoring to avoid.

# Egg Hunt...from Page 1A

inclement weather, then it will give us a chance to make a rain check.

“This egg hunt has been going on for as long as I can remember, and to me, the biggest and best thing about this is the community interaction between the department and the children and families in our great area.

Everybody loves candy and Easter egg hunting, so this is just a fun way for everybody to get together and enjoy nature.

“I feel that it is important

to provide opportunities like this for families in our community because it is unfortunate that not every family has the means to have a big special occasion to engage in, or they may not have families at all, so this is for everyone to feel welcome. It is totally free, and we want everyone to show up.

“I would like to thank the General Manager of the Fairgrounds Hilda Thomason, Towns County Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw and the Ha-

wassee Baptist Association for all coming together to make this possible.

“This is a super and fun way to connect the community and enjoy some moments outside of everyday life, and we just want to see smiles on all of the children and people’s faces that leave there that day.”

For more information or to help volunteer with the event, contact Nichols at 706-896-2600 or tcrecreation2600@gmail.com. Nichols can also be found weekdays at the Towns County Recreation and Conference Center located at 150 Foster Park Road in Young Harris.

# COVID-19...from Page 1A

’21, peaked in early February, and tapered off by mid-March was now effectively over, much to the relief of Health System staff.

The recent surge ended right around the start of spring, Barnett said, and as of Thursday, March 31, Union General was treating a single COVID inpatient and had not had a new positive case in five days.

Thankfully, beyond a brutal first wave in 2020, the residents of Union County and Chatuge Regional Nursing Homes have experienced no further COVID outbreaks, which Barnett credits to successful ongoing vaccination campaigns.

As to whether the region has experienced its last pandemic surge, Barnett said only time will tell.

And while omicron increased regional levels of illness, hospitalization and death – particularly among the elderly and some middle-aged individuals – the latest wave proved to be milder than the first winter wave of early 2021 and much milder than the delta surge last summer into fall.

Delta, for instance, resulted in 442 hospitalizations

and 51 deaths in the regional health system, while omicron brought about half those figures with 222 hospitalizations and 27 deaths in local hospital facilities.

Even though omicron was less devastating overall, a life lost is a life lost, and three significant waves of illness occurring in the span of a year plus ongoing cases of “long COVID” have affected everyone at home and abroad in countless tragic ways.

Of note, the Health System has seen just one pediatric hospital admission for COVID-19 over the entire pandemic, and that child – a local infant – was quickly discharged, with omicron presenting no more of a danger to area children than earlier variants.

A separate strain of omicron known as BA.2 is spreading in countries that already experienced omicron surges, including in the U.S., and it is possible cases may start to rise again due to the apparently more infectious strain, though that does not appear to be happening yet regionally.

According to data from the Georgia Department of

Public Health, as of the end of last week, just 1.9% of tests in Union County and 4.8% of tests in Towns County had come back positive over the previous two-week period – declining metrics for both counties.

Demand for COVID testing is currently low; however, the Department of Public Health’s drive-thru site at Union General Hospital will “continue operating as normal,” with “no changes expected at this time” and no timetable as to how long testing will remain available, per DPH.

COVID vaccines are widely available at local pharmacies and Health Departments, and though efficacy against severe illness and death appears to have dropped amid omicron, Barnett said the vaccines continue to provide protection, with roughly 70%-75% of recent hospitalizations being among the unvaccinated.

The hospital has observed strong immunity from prior infection, but Barnett still urges everyone to get their vaccine if they have not done so already and to receive a booster dose if eligible.

For now, Barnett said the hospital will continue doing what it has always done – serving the medical needs of tri-state area residents.

“We are working on our expansion projects – our new medical office building and our new tower,” Barnett said. “And we’re excited to be focusing on keeping folks well and treating people for the usual illnesses as opposed to so much of our focus being sidetracked with COVID specifically.

“We are planning on Chatuge Regional Hospital having a Health Fair in May. We haven’t been able to have a Health Fair in a couple of years, so we’re excited about, again, getting back to what we want to do in taking care of the community.

“I feel like people have put their wellness aside (from fear of contracting COVID in public and health care settings) and maybe not taken as good care of themselves as they normally would (in terms of diagnostics and elective procedures). So, we want to help people get back on track.”