



Towns County Herald

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Easter event a 'spegtacular' time for families

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Everyone knows the famous saying about "neither snow nor rain" stopping the U.S. Postal Service from delivering. Well, this past Saturday mirrored that quote for families at the annual Towns County Recreation Department Easter Egg Hunt at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

Despite a late spring cold front ushering in snow for a short period of time April 9, parents and children could not be deterred from enjoying the community celebration.

Laid all throughout the baseball fields at the Fairgrounds were a total of 4,200 brightly colored and candy-filled Easter eggs spread around for children to find and place in Easter baskets.

The age groups were broken down by toddler to age 4, as well as ages 5-8 and 9-12, with over 1,000 eggs per grouping available for hunting, plus five golden prize eggs exchangeable for special Easter baskets.

Furthermore, the event featured a raffle for the parents to win an adult Easter basket, and children got to visit and get pictures with the Easter Bunny in person.

Recreation Department Director Stuart Nichols was happy to team up with the Hiwassee Baptist Association to put on the event for the enjoyment of families all over the county.

"We wish the weather was better today and sunny, but it was still an amazing feeling to see everyone come out and have fun with their families," Nichols said.

Cory Ledford, a local patron and parent who has been coming the past several years, attended the egg hunt with his son Grayson.

"We love coming to this event to see all of our friends and family, and of course Grayson loves to come and see the Easter Bunny and getting candy," Ledford said. "We think things like this are good for the community because it really brings togetherness."

Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw also turned out to show his support for the holiday celebration.

"It is so exciting to see the look on the kids' faces when they see the Easter Bunny and bring our community and children together," Bradshaw said, echoing Ledford's sentiments. "It seems like yesterday that I was bringing my boys out here, See Egg Hunt, Page 8A



Lucky young winners of the special Easter baskets at this year's Towns County Rec Department Easter Egg Hunt on Saturday. Photo by Jeremy Foster

Annual yard sale, classic car show headed to Fairgrounds



A view from the 2020 edition of the Mile Long Yard Sale, a bargain-hunting affair that is fun for the whole family.

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

People have been enjoying the warmer weather lately, despite a few lingering cold days since the start of spring, and warm weather means more family-friendly offerings to enjoy at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

It is no secret that the

Fairgrounds produces high-quality events that draw people back year after year, which is a major boon to the area, especially with an outdoor venue in the time of COVID-19.

The excitement this spring will begin with the Mile Long Yard Sale on Friday, April 22, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and return for a second day on Saturday, April 23, from 8 a.m. to

3 p.m., with no cost of admission either day.

Event sponsors include Union General Health System, Cattrell Motorsports, The Ridges Resort on Lake Chatuge, Springer Mountain Farms and the Towns County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"We want to welcome everybody to come and enjoy

See GMF Yard Sale, Page 8A

Hamilton Gardens shares native plants with Clarkesville park



Various stakeholders associated with the Hamilton Gardens met with Clarkesville officials and volunteers recently for a donation of local plants to a public park in Habersham County. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Something big happened at Hamilton Gardens on March 30, heralding the beginning of a goodwill partnership between Hiwassee and Clarkesville,

Georgia.

While working diligently that Wednesday in preparation for the start of blooming season this April, Hamilton Gardens staff shared some of their prized plants with Habersham officials to promote the good of gardening everywhere.

The exchange occurred early that morning, when volunteers from Clarkesville met Hamilton Gardens caretakers, Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds staff, and Hiwassee city officials to load up several dozen rhododendrons and azaleas to

See Hamilton Gardens, Page 8A

Renovations begin in earnest at Paris Business Center

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Renovations began April 4 on the Paris Buildings circa 1943, signaling a major step toward realizing the city's Comprehensive Plan goal of downtown revitalization.

Located on North Main Street near the Hiwassee Town Square, the Paris Buildings are named for the Paris family of Hiwassee, which owned the buildings and sold them to the city "well below market value," according to Joint Economic Development Director Denise McKay.

"The city bought the buildings almost a year and a half ago," McKay said. "We received a \$70,000 grant to do stabilization on them. We applied for the \$600,000 grant from Appalachian Regional Commission, which we were



Renovations on the Paris Buildings finally began last week. Photo/Facebook

awarded, to help us restore and repurpose them.

"The two-story building is going to be a full-service Business Development Center with incubator space in there. The other building, the single-

story building, has potential for two businesses. One will be a full-service restaurant - we're not sure who it's going to be yet. "Revenue we receive See Paris Buildings, Page 8A

Sheriff's Office arrests federal fugitive with fentanyl, meth

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

An "Operation Sting" investigation by the Towns County Sheriff's Office resulted in the April 1 arrest of Kevin Cosper - a fugitive on the run from federal and state authorities.

Cosper, 34, of Baldwin, has been charged locally with

possession of methamphetamine, possession of fentanyl, possession of THC oil, possession of marijuana and possession of drug-related objects.

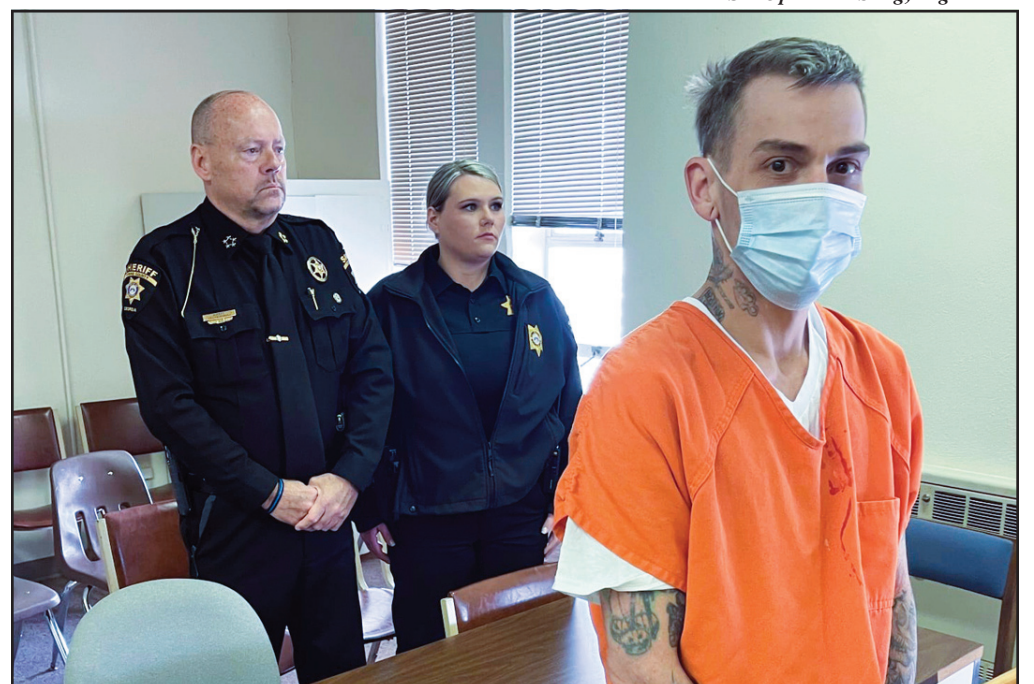
Following his arrest, it was determined that Cosper was a fugitive from justice wanted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

He was one of 48 people

arrested and charged in 2020 for violating the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization (RICO) Act after an 11-month investigation called "Operation Taking Care of Business," which was undertaken by the FBI, GBI and Appalachian Drug Task Force.

That investigation yielded the seizure of approximately

See Operation Sting, Page 8A



Kevin Cosper during a first appearance in the Towns County Courthouse last week, escorted by Sheriff Ken Henderson and deputies. Photo/Facebook

2 Sections 16 Pages

Lake Levels
Blue Ridge 1,683.87
Chatuge 1,922.04
Nottely 1,770.56



Inside
Arrests 2A
Church 3B
Classifieds 6B
Opinion 4A
Legals 7B
Obits 4B
Sports 6A

SPORTS
BASEBALL
4/14 vs. Copper Basin
SOCCER
State 1st Round
Girls @ Armuchee
4/12 5:30 PM

April Library Events

Reece Farm Opens April 13

Child Abuse Prevention Month

See page 5A

See page 7A

See page 8B

Egg Hunt...from Page 1A



Egg hunters traveled from all over the county to get in on the family-friendly Easter fun April 9. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

and this always brings back a lot of fond and very special memories for me as a father.

"It is such a fun, fun day for the children and the parents, so we are very fortunate to have the Hiawassee Baptist Association to help us with this, and we

appreciate our very hard-working Parks and Rec Department also for being side-by-side to accompany everyone together to make this happen for our community.

"This event grows each year in participation because

of all the great people in our community involved, and I just want to say thank you to everybody for representing exactly what the word 'community' really means."

Easter Sunday is April 17.

GMF Yard Sale...from Page 1A

the two days of walking around in the great weather and finding neat treasures for yourself and enjoying good food with us," Fairgrounds Event Coordinator Shannon Baldwin-Nguyen said. "The best part is that admission is free, so the only thing people will be spending money on is their food and drinks or their treasures.

"We have people from all over Georgia and North Carolina coming to participate and several different food vendors to choose from, so we know everyone will be excited and have fun like they have come to know here at the Fairgrounds. We cannot wait to see you there."

Also opening that weekend will be the return of the Rhododendron Festival celebrating the bloom season at Hamilton Gardens, to run the weekends of April 22-24, April 29-May 1, May 6-8, May 13-15 and May 20-22.

And the fun will keep rolling Friday, April 29, and Saturday, April 30, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. both days, as the Memory Lane Classic Car Show returns for a second outing following 2021's debut success.

The car show is sponsored by Memory Lane Classic Car Museum, the Convention and Visitors Bureau and Jacky Jones, and it will feature prizes to be raffled off and live auctions, music, food, arts and crafts, and a swap meet, with tickets being \$10 per day and kids 12 and under entering free.

Vehicle registration will be \$30, while vendor registration is \$50, and \$100 for food vendors.

Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason said the event will kick off with a welcome party Friday night at the top of the hill at 6 p.m. in the Rhododendron Hamilton Gardens pavilion.

"We already have almost 100 cars now pre-registered for the show, and we will also have a raffle for a chance to win a 2021 Intrepid 8-by-24 enclosed car trailer built by Homesteader that is a dual axle with third door, to be drawn on the 30th," Thomason said. "Tickets for that drawing are \$20 each or 6 for \$100."

That Saturday will feature live music nearly all day long, with Surrender Hill playing from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and Scott Low from 2-4 p.m. at the car show. Josh Turner and Mo Pitney will perform later that night from 7-10 p.m., with hard tickets available for purchase at \$47 plus fees.

For more information on tickets, becoming a vendor or registering a classic car, visit the Fairgrounds at 1311 Music Hall Road in Hiawassee or call 706-896-4191.

Hamilton Gardens...from Page 1A

take back and revitalize Pitts Park in Clarkesville.

Hamilton Gardens, the botanical jewel of the North Georgia Mountains, boasts the largest collection of rhododendrons in the Southeast with over 400 different varieties and at least 1,500 individual plants spanning 20 acres of trails.

Although the garden is open for visitation all year, it sees most of its visitors during the annual Rhododendron Festival every spring, opening this year April 22-24, then celebrating the remainder of the bloom season April 29-May 1, May 6-8, May 13-15, and May 20-22.

Over the mountain, 40-year-old Pitts Park sits beside the Soque River, which has gathered silt and become shallower in the past 15 years.

As a result, heavy precipitation forces water to rise beyond the bank in Pitts Park, and flooding has caused the drowning of several of the park's plants, many of which dated back to when the land was originally donated to the City of Clarkesville by the family of Sam Pitts.

"It is the most visited park in the county," said Clarkesville Mayor Barrie Aycock, noting estimates of between 15-20 daily visitors, even throughout the winter, and as many as 500 people during "big events" and festivals.

Tom Grundy, a volunteer

for Clarkesville's beautification projects, recently rediscovered his passion for the park.

About 30 years ago, Grundy planted 150 azaleas in Pitts Park but ended up moving away from his hometown until about six months ago, when he returned to Habersham County and once again began to nurture his green thumb.

"It's just a great idea to carry on the legacy (of the park)," said Grundy as he helped to load potted rhododendrons into the back of a sheltered trailer to protect the valuable flora from "wind burn."

As it stands, 30 of Grundy's azaleas are still alive in a "safe zone" that is far enough away from the river to escape severe flooding. This safe zone is where the plants transplanted from Hamilton Gardens will be placed and monitored for their continued wellbeing.

The survival of these plants is important to Hamilton Gardens, after all: were a disaster to strike the gardens inside the fairgrounds, there would be hope for a comeback.

Towns County Attorney Robb Kiker helped to facilitate the garden exchange through his wife Angelia Kiker, who is a member of the Clarkesville City Council, and he explained such a recovery process, which is known as "sourcing."

"If something were to happen here (at Hamilton Gardens), like if you had a storm

event or a blight or something, you now have some of the native plants somewhere else that you could source back if you needed to," Kiker said.

Angelia Kiker explained that the partnership would benefit both gardens and provide an additional advantage in terms of biodiversity and ecological balance.

"We have the Mountain Laurel Festival and very few mountain laurels left," she said, expressing interest in sourcing laurels from Hamilton Gardens as well.

The festival's namesake, the mountain laurel, is a pink- and white-blossomed shrub closely related to Hiawassee's own rhododendrons. Both plants fall into the heather family, which also includes blueberries, azaleas and cranberries.

As noted above, the Hamilton Gardens Rhododendron Festival will span five weekends from April 22 to May 22. Hours of activity will be 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., featuring a variety of craft demonstrations, gardening seminars, live musical performances and plant sales. Admission will be \$5.

"I tell you, during the blooming season, this is one of the prettiest places anywhere in the world," said Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw that morning, clearly anticipating nature's colorful display in the coming weeks.



This lovely pink azalea bush is one of many that will be on full blooming display during the upcoming Rhododendron Festival later this month. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Operation Sting...from Page 1A

50 kilograms of methamphetamine, half a kilogram of heroin, 20 firearms, \$70,000 in cash and six vehicles.

On the run from federal agents and law enforcement since December 2021, Cospier was hiding out in Towns County and was in the process of setting up a dangerous local drug operation when he was apprehended earlier this month, the Sheriff's Office said.

The circumstances under which Cospier became a fugitive after initially being taken into custody in 2020 were not known at press time, with a request for comment by the GBI still outstanding as of Monday.

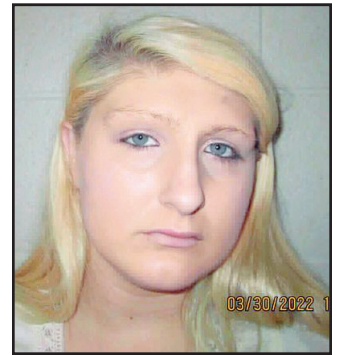
Cospier made a first appearance April 6 in the Towns County Courthouse in reference to his local drug charges and was escorted under tight

security provided by the Towns County Sheriff's Office. He was transported to Hall County April 7 to face his RICO and fugitive-from-justice charges.

Sheriff Ken Henderson stated that the Sheriff's Office has disrupted a significant drug operation, thereby preventing fentanyl and methamphetamine laced with fentanyl from being sold in the surrounding communities.

One of the most dangerous and potent drugs on the market, the fentanyl that was confiscated during this arrest could have potentially caused the overdose of over 500 people, Henderson said, further stating that he is proud of the dedication and long hours of his drug investigative unit.

"We must send a message that our county is not the



Hailey Raeann Akins place to deal drugs," Henderson said.

In a separate "Operation Sting" arrest from March 30, the Sheriff's Office apprehended Hailey Raeann Akins, 24, of Marble, North Carolina, charging her with felony possession of heroin, felony possession of heroin with intent to distribute, and probation violation.

Paris Buildings...from Page 1A



L-R: Paris Business Center stakeholders Maggie Oliver, Tyler Osborn, Denise McKay, Steve Harper and Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales. Photo by Mark Smith

from that is going to help us support the Business Development Center. There's a potential for another small business - we're not sure what that's going to be yet - so the rent or leasing we receive will help us keep our Business Development Center open.

"For the last eight or nine months, we have been working on the silent portion of our fundraising efforts, where we've gone out and talked to private donors to let them know what we're doing and how we're doing it. And what we're doing here in the city - this is a small picture of what's going on in Towns County as a whole.

"We've developed a strategy for economic development, and the county and both the cities adopted that. Young Harris has created a plan for downtown/community development. Hiawassee has their strategic plan in place. All these tied together help us create an environment that's conducive to growth in a way that complements the re-

gion and the area.

"So, when we did our business plan for the Paris Business Center, we presented it to the Appalachian Regional Commission. They liked it and sent it to the State of Georgia. Then (the state) sent it to the federal government, and they said, 'This is needed for our area.'"

"And that's how we got the \$600,000 grant from ARC," McKay said. "In the last nine months, we've been able to raise \$280,000 through private donations. That shows that we have the community's support, and that they also believe in what we're doing.

"Now, we're going into the public portion of our fundraising. Our goal is \$1.5 million all total, and we're a little over the \$1 million mark now."

Continuing, "With the business center, I already have seven clients right now that we're currently working with. Even though our doors aren't open, we have seven clients that we are assisting with their

businesses.

"We have a tremendous amount of community support. We're really excited about the money that we've raised, and now that we're starting to go with the public - just in the last week we've received \$1,500 in donations."

Mayor Liz Ordiales said she believes the business development aspect of the Paris Buildings will be "the catalyst to turn our downtown around."

"This is in the center of town, and it's going to make the biggest difference to our strategic plan," Ordiales said. "We have a strategic plan that we worked on for over a year, and the goal was downtown revitalization.

"I really think this will be the catalyst that is going to (bring the plan together). Our hope is to have the buildings ready for occupancy by the first quarter of 2023."

For more information or to donate to the effort, call 706-896-2202 or email McKay at dmckay@hiawassee.gov.