

# Towns County Herald

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## Residents adjust to 'shelter in place' as Kemp extends order

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

In recent weeks, Towns County and her neighbors have taken on the character of a dystopian novel or TV show, as more and more people forgo old social norms and begin to wear facial coverings in public to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Residents are repurposing bandanas and cloth napkins to cover their noses and mouths. Actual face masks are being worn also, from the real deal surgical type to the homemade variety stitched by hand or using old-fashioned sewing machines.

The latest health trend hasn't caught on with everyone. But at the Post Office, grocery stores, gas stations, restaurants – just about anywhere around town that hasn't closed – a growing number of people

are starting to follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's newest recommendation that even healthy people wear some form of facial covering in public.

This most recent rewriting of the collective understanding of normal life in Georgia and across the U.S. comes on the heels of more confirmed COVID-19 cases in Towns County, including a Chatuge Regional Hospital employee, as reported last week by Union General Health System.

Infections have yet to peak in Georgia, per expert health models, and people around the country continue to fall ill, with more than half a million Americans already testing positive for the potentially deadly disease, though the actual transmission figures are certainly much higher.

Furthermore, many thousands of U.S. citizens have perished from the novel coronavirus, which has proven to be particularly lethal to the immunocompromised and elderly; like so many others, last week's virus victim in neighboring Union County was a 79-year-old man with underlying health conditions.

With no COVID-19 treatments or vaccines available by press time, exposure avoidance remains the best way for people to protect themselves against the disease, with the CDC advising the following:

Wash hands frequently and use hand sanitizer; avoid face touching; apply social distancing with 6 feet between non-cohabitants; stay home as much as possible, especially when ill; wear facial coverings around others; steer clear of sick people; cover coughs and See *Shelter in Place*, Page 5A



Many residents visiting Ingles and other businesses on Saturday responsibly followed the CDC's guidance on wearing facial coverings in public during the pandemic. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

## Officer Henderson back on patrol after negative coronavirus test

By Todd Forrest  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Hiawassee Police Officer Pam Henderson never intended to become the center of Towns County's social media universe, but that's where she found herself last month when she began exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms and entered a nine-day quarantine.

Thankfully, Henderson's coronavirus rollercoaster ended with a negative test result on Monday, April 6, removing the pandemic-sized burden that was placed upon her shoulders when she started feeling ill back on Sunday, March 29.

At first, she chalked it up to her seasonal allergies, but when her fever rocketed to 103.5 degrees, she began worrying for the worst.

With her Sunday night shift approaching, Henderson contacted Hiawassee, Police and Speaker of the House recommended she play it safe and remain at home.

"The fever came on



Hiawassee Police Officer Pam Henderson

really quick, and that's what concerned me," Henderson said. "I called the chief, and we discussed it."

"After talking with him and (Mayor Liz Ordiales), we decided out of an abundance of caution that I should stay home until we could get a test worked out, even though I knew that meant I had to quarantine."

Several of Henderson's symptoms matched up with

COVID-19, while others passed for common sinus allergies, so Smith reached out to the Towns County Health Department for input the day after learning of his officer's illness.

After conducting an assessment with Henderson later in the day, the Health Department put her in touch with a testing facility in Gainesville, which recommended that she visit for testing as soon as possible.

With the closing time approaching that Monday and the testing site shut down Tuesday for a plumbing issue, Henderson had to wait until the morning of Wednesday, April 1, to make the hour-plus drive to Hall County.

Henderson described the test site as an open-air, test-up facility, where she received an uncomfortable but painless nasal swab in her car by gloved and masked testers in full protective suits.

"I just rolled my window down and they did a nasal

See *Henderson*, Page 5A

## Chatuge Regional Hospital employee tests positive for COVID-19

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

Union General Health System announced Friday that one of its employees at Chatuge Regional Hospital had tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

"The employee last worked at Chatuge on Thursday, April 2," the Health System said. "The employee had no symptoms while working (that) week. The employee was instructed to isolate and distance from other people per the (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) guidelines upon being tested."

Furthermore, Union General said it notified the Towns County Public Health Department at the time of the test, "and a positive result was returned on Thursday, April 9. The employee will not return to work until clear of COVID-19 infection per the CDC guidelines."

The Health System said it is working to notify all



Chatuge Regional Hospital in Hiawassee Photo by Todd Forrest

individuals who had contact with the employee to give them instructions on self-monitoring and offer testing based on guidance by the CDC and Georgia Department of Public Health.

"It is believed that this employee's infection is likely related to a community exposure, as no suspected or confirmed COVID-19 patients are being treated as inpatients

at Chatuge Regional Hospital," the Health System said.

Chatuge Regional has been designated a "clean facility," Hospital Administrator Leslie Daniel said, noting that all regional Health System patients requiring local hospitalization for positive or suspected cases of COVID-19 are transported to Blairsville's Union General for treatment.

See *COVID-19*, Page 5A

## Secretary of State postpones primary election until June 9

News Special  
Towns County Herald

Citing state law, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger announced on April 9 that he was postponing the Statewide General Primary/Presidential Preference Primary Election until June 9.

Raffensperger's decision came after Gov. Brian Kemp extended the current public health state of emergency until May 13. Lt. Gov. Geoff Duncan and Speaker of the House David Ralston concurred in the governor's extension of the state of emergency.

"Due to the governor's extension of the state of emergency through a time period that includes almost every day of in-person voting for an election on May 19, and after careful consideration, I am now comfortable exercising the authority vested in me by Georgia law to postpone the primary election until June

9," Raffensperger said. "This decision allows our officials and county election officials to continue to put in place contingency plans to ensure that voting can be safe and secure when in-person voting begins, and (it) prioritizes the health and safety of voters, county election officials and poll workers."

Throughout this crisis, the Secretary of State's office has been in close contact with county election officials across the state.

In recent weeks, the reports of mounting difficulties from county election officials, particularly in Southwest Georgia, grew to a point where county election officials could not overcome the challenges brought on by COVID-19 in time for in-person voting to begin on April 27.

Additionally, current modeling by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



Brad Raffensperger and by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation projects the COVID-19 pandemic in Georgia will peak around April 24, only days before in-person voting was scheduled to begin.

While challenges will certainly remain on June 9, these additional three weeks

See *Election*, Page 5A

## Easter Bunny delights children with driving tour of county

By Jarrett Whitener  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

This year's annual Easter Egg Hunt was canceled due to the novel coronavirus, so in order to give families something festive to enjoy over Easter Weekend, the Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce teamed up with the Easter Bunny for a driving tour of the county on Saturday, April 11.

Since the shelter-in-place order went into effect April 3 and people began social distancing even before that, events in the area have been canceled to keep the community safe from COVID-19.

That's why it was so important for the Easter Bunny to make its way through the county, starting in Young Harris greeting children who stood outside their homes waving and shouting excitedly in return.

After circling around the city, the Bunny rode the streets of Hiawassee as well to give as



The Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce coordinated with the Easter Bunny this year to visit kids while social distancing during a special driving tour of Towns County Saturday.

Photo by Jarrett Whitener

many Towns County children as possible the opportunity to say hello while social distancing.

"We borrowed United Commune's Easter Bunny," Chamber President Candace Lee said. "This was

Crystal Wagner's idea, and we are happy to do this."

Wagner also works with the chamber, and she wanted to have something for local children to enjoy in this time

See *Easter Bunny*, Page 5A

## Gowder, Heaton sentencing delayed again to May over virus



By Linda Erbele  
Towns County Herald

Due to ongoing concerns about the novel coronavirus, federal sentencing for former

hospital CEO Mike Gowder and Blairsville-based physician James Heaton has been rescheduled once again, this time to May 28.

Both men were originally scheduled to be sentenced for their prescription drug crimes on March 25, though that hearing was postponed for the same reason to April 21, and now, to the end of May. They remain free on bond.

The co-defendants were convicted on Oct. 24, 2019, when a jury of their peers found

them guilty of more than 100 counts apiece in the federal prescription drug case.

Their convictions were the culmination of an extensive multi-agency investigation that began in 2015 and resulted in their February 2016 arrests in Union County.

Former Emergency Room Director David Gowder – Mike's brother – was originally a co-defendant in the case. He pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge Richard W. Story on March 15, 2019, to

prescribing oxycodone to a patient without a legitimate medical purpose.

He remains free on bond awaiting sentencing, which was previously set for March 23, though it, too, was postponed due to the pandemic. A new hearing date had not been set by press time.

For one reason or another, the nearly five-year-old case has been plagued with multiple delays.

After being arrested in 2016, the men were indicted on

state charges by a Union County grand jury in 2017 – David Gowder in April, and Mike Heaton in July. They were then named as co-defendants in a federal indictment unsealed in April 2018.

Following David's guilty plea, Mike Gowder and Heaton were re-indicted March 19, 2019, as co-defendants. Their trial was set for April, but new evidence introduced by federal prosecutors shortly before the trial resulted in a reschedule to Oct. 8.

It was delayed again because one of Heaton's attorneys was defending another client in a high-profile murder case in DeKalb County. Jury selection finally began Oct. 15, 2019, followed by seven days of testimony that concluded in Oct. 24 guilty verdicts.

Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley has said his office would make a decision regarding prosecuting the state's charges based on the outcome of the federal trial and sentencing.

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