

Towns County Herald

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Budget, Christian elective proposal highlight meeting

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Towns County Board of Education held its first Public Budget Hearing on April 1 along with the regular meeting and work session.

During the Budget Hearing, School Finance Director Myra Underwood revealed that “we are projecting about a \$2 million increase,” referring to costs across the board for Fiscal Year 2025. The biggest chunk of those expenditures come from paying salaries.

Gov. Brian Kemp has proposed a \$2,500 increase to all certified teaching staff,

with additional staff salary increases or certificate increases potentially occurring if an educator earns a higher degree.

Combining both non-certified and certified staff, additional salary payments for the upcoming year come out to \$811,000.

The schools will fully absorb the increases for their 106 non-certified employees, which will vary based on each employee’s experience in the system, as the School Board and Board Office believe it unfair to give raises to only some school employees.

That said, the School System will receive state fund-

ing for most of its 100 certified staff members. The state only pays for a minimum number of teachers specified in its Quality Basic Education funding formula, leaving schools to cover additional staff they need locally.

“I really can’t give you a definite figure on what our QBE is going to increase until we get some more information from the state,” said Underwood, explaining that the details lie in the local fair share of expected contributions.

Quality Basic Education is a formula used for determining the funding of public education in Georgia schools

wherein every district receives state funds based on the number of students enrolled and their needs.

A certain amount of state funding is subtracted, however, based on each district’s local 5 mill contribution from property taxes, meaning that as property values increase – as has been the case here – the proportion of revenues provided by the state decreases.

The next biggest budget increase comes in the form of state health benefits. For certified staff, that’s a hike to \$1,580 monthly for employees’ health care, to eventually
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District Attorney Jeff Langley is leading a nonprofit effort to promote Christian education as an off-campus, elective course in local school systems. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

DDA provides progress report on Business Center

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority met for its regular meeting on April 9 to discuss updates to the Paris Business Center, DDA officer positions and more.

First up, Economic Development Director Denise McKay reported on DDA finances. The current balance of the general fund is \$23,318.88; restricted funds are \$11,713.15; unrestricted funds total up to \$11,605.73; and the fundraising account has \$78,649.66.

McKay said that \$1,000 was taken from restricted funds to go toward the Save Lake Chatuge project to combat the invasive parrot-feather weed.

As construction continues at the Paris Business Center, the expected opening time of September remains the same, and McKay and Babette Dunn of the DDA visited Atlanta recently to look for furniture to fill the center.

“If you look at the buildings, one looks like it doesn’t have a roof at all right now, but they are working on it,” McKay said. “We should have a roof on the Business Center itself hopefully within the next two months.”

DDA officers were named at the April 9 meet-

ing. Peggy Gardner and Tyler Osborn were selected as chair and vice chair respectively, and board newcomer Paul Smith was named treasurer, while City Council representative Amy Barrett will serve as secretary.

The organization’s bank cards will be updated with signatures from the new officers by United Community Bank.

City Council members voted to fund Dunn’s proposition for a city business map “hidden” in a handy QR code. As part of the #Hikeawassee initiative, the program costs \$2,210 to set up and would be posted around the city at local

businesses, likely as posters that visitors can scan.

“So, in a nutshell, the QR code would be developed to point to a map of the city that would highlight all of the city’s licensed businesses in town,” explained Dunn at the past work session meeting when first introducing the idea.

Dunn unpacked the idea as a “three-part plan,” with the map itself forming the first layer of a guide to get around Hiawassee. The second part involves an index listing businesses that may not appear on the map, primarily those outside
See DDA Business, Page 6



Hiawassee DDA Board Members Babette Dunn and Tyler Osborn in their April 9 regular meeting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Memory Lane Car Show gearing up for April 26-27



Memory Lane Classic Car Show Committee members and other local stakeholders held an organizational meeting last week to finalize plans for the show. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

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Automobile aficionados, start your engines and get ready for the Memory Lane Classic Car Show coming April 26-27 from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. at 1311 Music Hall Road.

On April 9, Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason held an organizational meeting to make sure everything was

hashed out so the show can go off without a hitch.

Technically speaking, the fun starts with a Memory Lane Kick-Off Party on Thursday, April 25, featuring the Nathan Morgan Band from 6-9 p.m. as part of the Eller Holler Concert Series.

Also available at the Kick-Off Party will be six-seater tables for \$225. The price includes a meal with two bottles of wine per table along

with concert tickets; so far, 20 tables have been nabbed. Even if one isn’t up to attending with other guests, \$40 will grant an individual seat and meal.

“We’ve still got time for you to buy a table, but as it gets closer, I’ll have to turn in a head count to Happy Hawg,” Thomason said. “He’ll prepare a little extra for walk-ups ... but not (for) like 100 people.”

Music will factor greatly
See Memory Lane, Page 7

Hamilton Gardens blooms with Rhododendron Fest



Head on over to the Hamilton Gardens between now and May 12 to see the lovely spring blooms among the Southeast’s largest collection of rhododendrons. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

News Special

The monthlong annual Rhododendron Festival started this past weekend at the Hamilton Gardens inside the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, to last through Sunday, May 12, with plenty of entertainment and spring bloom viewing on offer.

Festival hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and 12-4 p.m. on Sundays, giving residents and area visitors alike seven days a week to marvel at the “Jewel of the North Georgia Mountains”

over the next several weeks.

Admission to the festival is free, with garden tours available for \$6 per person or \$10 from a cart.

Daily special features include plant sales, tours and featured artwork for sale. Guests can check out the “Pageant of the Masters” art exhibit each Saturday of the festival from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., with seminars and classes available on Sundays.

“Spend a day in the most beautiful part of North Georgia

– Hiawassee and the stunning Hamilton Gardens,” implores georgiamountainfairgrounds.com. “This magical botanical garden is filled with native wildflowers like trilliums, shooting stars, trout lilies, and more than 1,500 rhododendrons and native azaleas, making it the largest collection in the Southeast!”

The courtyard of the gardens will be open for brunch and lunch Saturdays and Sundays from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., to
See Rhododendron Festival, Page 6



Open houses allow Enotah CASA to connect with public

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – Advocate Supervisor Gina Bennett describes Enotah CASA open houses as events “where we invite members of the community to come in and get to know who CASA is and what we do.”

And that’s exactly what happened on Thursday, April 11, on the top floor of the Union County Community Center.

Organized to begin at noon so potential recruits, CASA organizers and volunteers could all sit down to share a lunch catered by The View Grill, Enotah CASA’s open house served as a casual, laid-back introduction to everything the organization stands for.

Court Appointed Special Advocates, or CASAs, work tirelessly across the country to act as the voices of children in compromised home situations. At their core, they fight for the best interests of abused and neglected kids in court.

Enotah CASA serves the North Georgia counties of



Enotah CASA Executive Director Della Lago was excited to share information about the rewarding work her organization does in the April 11 open house. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Union, Towns, Lumpkin and White, and, like their nationwide counterparts, the local organization is composed primarily of volunteers. Right now, there are about 60 of them, but CASA is always searching for more.

“With April being Child Abuse Awareness Month, we wanted to make sure that we held an open house within the month of April so people could have (an) opportunity and know that CASA is available and there is a great need for volunteers,” said Outreach
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BOE Meeting...from Page 1



School Board Members Stephanie McConnell, Brandon Grimsley and Sara Rogers in their April regular meeting.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

go up to \$1,760. And while the state will cover most certified school staff, the rest must be funded locally.

"Originally, we were told last year that the non-certified would be over a four-year period," Underwood said. "They would increase \$250 every year, starting in January, for the next four years."

"Well, it was \$945 in '23. In '24 January, it went to \$1,195, so next January, we were anticipating \$1,445. They've come back and told us they're raising it to \$1,580 come January. They wanted to raise it to \$1,760 this July is what they had proposed in the budget, and that's killing all districts across the board."

Underwood reassured the board that, "Fortunately, we are a district that does have fund equity, but hits like this – you have to be careful."

Board members will hold a second Public Budget Meeting on Monday, May 6,

at 5:30 p.m. on campus "to receive public input on the proposed annual operating budget for FY 2025."

Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley attended the April School Board meeting to speak not in his usual role, but as the chair of the nonprofit Appalachian Christian Leadership Council.

Formed last year, the organization's goal is to establish "released time learning" in Northeast Georgia.

First, Langley appealed from an academic standpoint, saying, "You can't understand much of American literature, Shakespeare (or) the founding of the American Republic without having some understanding of the Judeo-Christian teachings arising from the Bible."

"Whether you are a faithful believer or a non-believer, having some understanding of the Bible is required for a well-rounded education," Langley said.

Students could still earn school credit for taking a Bible-based class, and Langley believes the class would offer a compromise to parents looking for their children to have "the public school experience" while also receiving Christian learning.

On the whole, the board was receptive to the idea, though Chair Caroleen Woods asked Langley to give them time to "digest" the information, and perhaps they will invite him to return to another meeting to discuss further details.

Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong broached the possibility that future SPLOST projects be handled by a single construction contractor for a period of five years to save time doing "months and months" of paperwork on small projects.

Board Member Stephanie McConnell raised concerns about the legalities of the idea, and Berrong agreed to consult a lawyer before further discussion.

Finally, Towns County may soon have a behavioral specialist on hand among school staff.

Though not quite a counselor, a behavioral specialist, for example, could help

students learn proper handling of their emotions and trauma processing. The position would also help clear up disturbances in the classroom and delays in administrative duties caused by disruptive students.

The Towns County Board of Education meets on the first Monday of every month at the Towns County Middle and High School Library, starting at 6 p.m.

DDA Business...from Page 1

of city limits.

Finally, a calendar of local events and activities will come up along with the map when the QR code is scanned to encourage visitors to check out things like concerts or the Night Market.

As for the Night Market,

planning is well underway for the 2024 season. Things will kick off on May 3 with a live performance by Troy Underwood. The event will return every first Friday in the months of June, July, August and September, from 5-9 p.m. each scheduled night.

Rhododendron Festival...from Page 1



On Saturday, the Hamilton Gardens unveiled this beautiful piece of handblown glass artwork titled "Rainbow Ginger Blossom" by David Goldhagen, donated by the Mountain Arts Association.
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

include "award-winning food trucks, gourmet dessert and coffee vendors, unique and organic homemade ice cream, as well as artistic and delectable charcuterie boards."

Additionally, the Wine and Mimosa Bar will open at noon on Saturdays and Sundays throughout the festival.

Musical performances will be available each Saturday and Sunday from 12-3 p.m. on the Courtyard Stage:

Chantal Lynn, April 13; Scott Low, April 14; Gavyn Thorsell, April 20; Wyatt Espalin, April 21; Canon Tyler, April 27; Zach Kilmer, April 28; Jack McKeon, May 4; Nicholas Edward Williams, May 5; Jamie Saylor, May 11; and Trailer Hippies, May 12.

Then there's the "Run for the Rhodos 5K" that starts at 8 a.m. on Saturday, May 4. Reg-

istering for the race is \$40 plus a \$3.10 sign-up fee.

"Run for the Rhodos is a unique, blossoming event presented by Hamilton Gardens of the entertainment rich Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds nestled in exceptionally scenic Hiawassee, Georgia," according to the website.

"This runner/walker friendly 5K experience offers racers a woodland trail course that immerses you in our ravishing Rhododendron Garden while in its full bloom splendor! The proceeds from your participation in our 2024 Rhodo Fest garden run will support Hamilton Gardens' ongoing mission to FUEL NATURE!"

All participants registered before April 18 will receive a Rhodo race T-shirt as well as finisher's greenery to plant. For more information,

visit <https://georgiamountainfairgrounds.com/localevents/id/556>.

New this spring are The Concerts at Eller Holler located inside the fairgrounds. Top-rated bands from all over the Southeast will play Thursday nights between April 25 and May 23, with live music from 7-9 p.m. Admission is \$10, with tickets available at the gate, by phone or online.

The Holler Village opens at 5 p.m. with a food court, adult beverage bar, crafters and more, with amphitheater or lawn seating, so bring a blanket or a chair.

Performing at Eller Holler will be the Nathan Morgan Band on April 25, Run Katie Run on May 2, Jukebox Country on May 9, the Charley Etheridge Band on May 16, and Dead Bread on May 23.

CASA Open House...from Page 1

Coordinator Fran Parks.

Bennett agreed, adding, "A lot of people don't know who we are and what we do."

Debbie Ewing was one of those people. Previously involved in Isaiah 117 House, Ewing is no stranger to foster care programs. She decided to check out CASA after a friend recommended the nonprofit to her.

"The open house has given it more of a personal (aspect)," said Ewing about the opportunity to meet veteran

CASAs.

It's one thing to hear about the kinds of things the organization is involved in, but it's another entirely to talk to advocates and hear stories about individual children whose lives have been impacted.

"Before, it was just something you read about. You need to hear the personal end of it to make you (invested)," added Ewing. "I mean, I already was interested, but after our conversation, I'm in it."

"You really want to

change a child's story," agreed long-time CASA and Executive Director Della Lago. "We host these and know people have questions, and if you have a heart and are being drawn towards this, this is an opportunity to come and meet us – ask us all the questions."

While the location is yet to be determined, CASA's next open house will be on May 6, also at noon. In the meantime, a free "I Am For The Child" training conference will be held on April 26 from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. at the Union County Community Center.

Speakers for the event will include Bonnie Lockwood, Owner and Director of Cornerstones Counseling, and Jamie Compton, Appalachian Task Force Agent. Lunch will be provided, and all attendees will receive a certificate for five hours of extended educational training.

Head over to www.enotahcasa.org or call 706-969-8837 to register before April 22 if interested.

Memory Lane...from Page 1A

into the car show as well, and between both days, guests can expect performances from Layne Denton, Gavyn

Thorsell, Old Souls and True Youngblood. And while the cars will be the main event, arts and

crafts vendors will be set up on-site for those interested in taking home a souvenir, and for any peckish gearheads, food trucks will be available for some quick cuisine. That's not even taking

into consideration the silent auction, 50/50 chance and raffle. Entering the raffle offers an opportunity to win a Primo ceramic grill worth \$2,200.

"All the money we're raising from this car show and that fundraiser goes toward the seats for the Music Hall," added Thomason, referencing the long-time goal of completely updating seating inside Anderson Music Hall.

So far, there are 52 entries for the car show, but ac-

ording to estimates at the planning meeting, there may be as many as 20 more pre-registered vehicles adding to the approximately 250 cars expected to be on display.

Anyone planning on taking part in the car show needs to be present by 10 a.m. on Saturday, April 27, as that's when judging starts.

Spectator admission is \$10 per person, but children under 12 can get in for free. That said, anyone interested in

registering for the show must pay a \$30 registry fee, and the same goes for anyone wanting to participate in the swap meet.

Vehicle booth registration is \$100 and includes a 15-by-20 space available for two people. Arts and crafts vendor registration is \$125, food vendor registration is \$150, and commercial vendor registration is \$200.

For more information, visit <https://georgiamountainfairgrounds.com/>.

Towns County Lions Club hosted Georgia Lions Leader Dog



Club President Danny Meeks, Lion David Chase, Leader Dog Rusty, Seemore the mascot Lion, Lion Bryan Gordon, and Club Secretary Martha Meeks



The Towns County Lions hosted Georgia Lions Leader Dog Chair David Chase from the Toccoa Lions Club and his Leader Dog Rusty to the April 9 dinner meeting at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds Anderson Music Hall. Together they delivered an excellent presentation on this valuable sight impaired assistance program sponsored by the Lions Clubs International Foundation.

Lion David Chase quali-

fies as an expert speaker on this subject since retinitis pigmentosa eliminated his vision and he sought help from the Lions. Retinitis Pigmentosa is a chronic hereditary eye disease characterized by gradual degeneration of the retina. Rusty is his third Leader Dog and is a Chocolate Labrador.

Over 4,900 Lions Clubs in the United States and internationally donate to the Leader Dogs For The Blind Program which was founded in 1939 and is headquartered at its birthplace in Rochester Hills, Michigan, near Detroit.

In other Lions news, volunteers are prepared for the 3rd annual Rhododendron Festival from April 12 to May 12, 10 AM to 5 PM, Mondays

through Saturdays and Sundays 11-4, with the first concert at Eller Holler, Thursday night, April 25, 6-9 PM. Please check the website for more details and information.

Georgia Mountain Fair is also hosting its popular annual Spring Yard Sale event this coming Friday and Saturday April 19 and 20, 9 AM to 3 PM. Don't forget Dustin Lynch will visit the Anderson Music Hall Saturday April 20 at 7 PM.

Coverage of Towns County Lions activities can also be found on our Facebook page.

April, 2024 has something for everyone at the Georgia Mountain Fair! See y'all there at the Fair!