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BOE says no tax increase despite bigger budget

By Mark Novak
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

School property taxes are not expected to increase this year, even though the school budget proposal for next year is up by approximately \$474,000.

Members of the Towns County Board of Education met on April 9 for the first of two budget hearings at the board office in Hiwassee.

"The general fund budget proposal that we have is \$13.776 million, which is up \$474,000 from last year," said Myra Underwood. "Retirement is going to increase from 16.81 percent to 20.9 percent. That increase is going to be \$300,000."

Other increases in the budget proposal include about \$40,000 for non-certified

employees, more than \$100,000 for teacher salary upgrades, and \$35,000 for a proposed second school resource officer.

"We put that in the budget in case that's something the board did decide to do," said Underwood concerning the resource officer. "That decision hasn't been made."

Added Underwood: "We are not anticipating a tax increase, these are just expense increases that we are anticipating for next year."

After the meeting, Underwood confirmed that the numbers are approximate due to the nature of trying to plan for the future, as well as changes in expenses such as medical insurance.

Furthermore, most of the budgetary increases are mandated by the state, according to Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr.



Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong

Dr. Berrong. "The state increases our portion of things and we have no option but to pay for these

things," said Dr. Berrong. "If it wasn't for that, our budget would not have gone up, this would have been the fourth year in a row."

Added Dr. Berrong: "These aren't things we're choosing to do. These are things we are mandated to do."

Dr. Berrong has not included any money in the budget for the flooding issues on the baseball and football fields.

"We have room in (the maintenance budget) for emergency type situations," said Dr. Berrong. "For example, for a given year, there's things that could happen that you have no way to budget for. So, when an HVAC unit blows up and you have to spend \$200,000, we have to have some cushion in there for that."

"Right now, I'm not looking at doing anything. I



Myra Underwood and Paula Whitehead of the Towns County Board of Education Office.

know we talked about turf, but that for me right now is completely off the table for next year. I think we have to do

everything humanly possible to at least fix it without having to go to that extreme." See Board of Ed., Page 6A

Rep. Doug Collins gives an update from Washington D.C.



U.S. Congressman Doug Collins

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Assistant Editor

It's safe to say that U.S. Rep. Doug Collins of Georgia's 9th Congressional District has been keeping busy in Washington D.C.

With all the news lately about the \$1.3 trillion omnibus spending bill, on top of House Speaker Paul Ryan's retirement announcement and the failed vote on a Balanced Budget Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, Congressman Collins has had a lot on his plate.

The congressman said he's still working to secure broader and more competitive broadband

internet service back home in his rural district, and that he and his colleagues remain constantly committed to safeguarding the economy in the nation's capital.

In other news, Collins saw some movement earlier this month on a bill he introduced last July – the Prison Reform and Redemption Act.

Rep. Collins introduced the bill after seeing a growing trend of successful criminal justice reforms take place in many states around the nation, including his home state of Georgia.

"What we're trying to do is make sure that folks who make mistakes and want to correct those mistakes have the tools and

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Director candidate forms to roll out soon; due back June 25

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Assistant Editor

YOUNG HARRIS – The Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Board of Directors has approved the new Director Candidate Form ahead of the 2018 director elections.

All nine directors gathered for their monthly meeting on Tuesday, April 10, to discuss the new form and other business.

Starting this year, candidates will be presented with a user-friendly form for candidacy, which could be available at BRMEMC.com as early as this week.

The new candidate form will come with an informational



BRMEMC General Manager Jeremy Nelms

sheet about the job, designed specifically to give candidates a better idea of what will be expected of them as EMC directors.

Furthermore, the form will require candidates to answer questions about their interest in the position, with one goal being to more accurately describe the potentially demanding director workload.

"One thing I've heard from the board, people really need to understand what the time commitment is," said EMC General Manager Jeremy Nelms in the meeting.

Members who submit a form for candidacy will be

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Dozens of Hiwassee parcels left off tax rolls, city says

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Assistant Editor

Hiwassee Mayor Liz Ordiales has learned that dozens of properties located within city limits have never been asked to pay city taxes.

The discovery was made about a month ago by a sharp-eyed representative with the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission, who spotted the discrepancy while helping the city to map its water/sewer lines and other water infrastructure.

Ordiales then compared a parcel map from qPublic with a tax coded map of the city, and she was able to identify 51 parcels that, for reasons unknown, were coded for county taxes but not city taxes.

She even found that one of the excluded properties



Hiwassee Mayor Liz Ordiales

located within the city taxing district belonged to her and her sister.

"I don't want to make a big deal out of this, but in an effort to be transparent, which is what I want to be, we need to get this right," said Mayor

Ordiales. "Why should I pay taxes for my house and not on the other one?"

Added Ordiales: "There's no reason why, within the same city limits, one parcel or one property should pay taxes and others should not."

The total fair market value of the properties is about \$5.3 million. This works out to roughly \$2.2 million in assessed value for property tax purposes, which could yield up to \$4,800 more in annual tax revenues for the city.

Some of the numbers have yet to be finalized, however, as a few properties on the outskirts of the city limits run into the county, and the correct tax coding of these properties will need to be agreed upon before a final determination is made.

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Gowder brothers, Heaton plead not guilty to federal charges

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Assistant Editor



Former hospital CEO Mike Gowder, Dr. David Gowder and Dr. James Heaton pleaded not guilty to federal charges in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Georgia, Gainesville Division, on Monday, April 9.

All three defendants appeared before the court

to hear the criminal charges against them, and following their pleas of not guilty, they were each released on \$10,000 unsecured bond, per court documents.

Now, attorneys for the defendants will work to file motions on their behalf ahead of a May 16 pretrial conference, during which time next steps will be discussed with a U.S. magistrate judge.

The pretrial conference will take place telephonically, and only the attorneys who will actually handle the case at trial are required to participate on May 16, not the defendants, per court documents.

Various elements of the cases against the defendants will be discussed in the pretrial conference, including circumstances surrounding:

statements made by the defendants to law enforcement; any searches or seizures that resulted in evidence that the government intends to use against the defendants; testimony; and other elements, per court documents.

Evidentiary hearings will also be scheduled in the pretrial conference, per court documents.

A federal grand jury handed up a 212-count indictment listing the Gowder brothers and Dr. Heaton as part of defendants on Wednesday, April 4, and the document was unsealed on Friday, April 6.

The three men have been indicted as part of Operation SCOPE, "for illegally prescribing and obtaining thousands of doses of

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Maj. Gen. Britt speaks with Mountain Movers and Shakers



Photo by Mark Novak

Retired Maj. Gen. Maria Britt of the Army National Guard, with Michael Borkman of the Mountain Movers and Shakers, and student speaker Samantha Church.

By Mark Novak
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Retired Army National Guard Maj. Gen. Maria Britt of Blairsville visited with the Mountain Movers and Shakers

in Hiwassee on Friday, April 13, and she spoke on her job as Director of Strategic Planning for Mountain Education Charter High School.

"Let me start first by dispelling two perceptions,"

said Britt, who has been with MECHS for almost a year. "I am just going to put the elephant in the room."

"First of all, we are not

See Britt, Page 6A

Daffodil Project honors children killed in the Holocaust

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Sunday, April 15, served as a day of remembrance in Towns County, as dozens of

residents gathered under the Paris Pavilion at the Hamilton Gardens to honor the 1.5 million children murdered during the Holocaust.

Those in attendance

participated in a dedication ceremony for the Hamilton Gardens' entry into the Daffodil Project, a worldwide memorial that also honors children who

See Daffodil, Page 6A



Photo by Jarrett Whitener

Martin Pomeranz, Mike Weinroth, David Tinsley and Grace Howard. The Hamilton Gardens of Lake Chatuge welcomed guests to their dedication of the Children's Memorial Daffodil Garden on Sunday, April 15.

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