

Towns County Herald

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Sheriff candidates offer competing visions in forum

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The second half of the Towns County GOP Candidate Forum featured a lively discussion by sheriff candidates – and at times, an unruly audience – on Monday, April 15.

Republican candidates Ken “Ode” Henderson and James “JR” Murray alternated answering voter-generated questions posed by moderator Jeff Pierot, who serves on the Towns County Board of Elections & Registration.

Henderson is seeking reelection as the incumbent sheriff, currently serving his first term. Prior to that, he worked for 35 years as the Young Harris College Police Chief. His 2024 campaign platform focuses primarily on “promises kept” during his first three years in office.

He said he has adhered to his promises of transparency by producing a monthly newsletter and regular social media posts; of greater visibility with black and white patrol cars; of imposing rules on deputies governing vehicle use, such as speed; of combating drugs; and more.

Murray’s 10 and a half years in law enforcement include both the Towns County Sheriff’s Office and the Hiwassee Police Department, the latter of which he left this year due to a City Charter requirement that people qualifying for public office first resign from their city positions.

Given that no Democrats qualified for county-level offices on the ballot this year, one of these two men will be the de facto next sheriff following the May 21 General Primary Election.

Diving into the subjects

that mattered most to voters, the first question centered on attracting new recruits and retaining experienced personnel in a competitive employment market “with the funds available to the office.”

Henderson said law enforcement hiring “is one of the most difficult things to do” in Georgia, noting that he approaches that challenge by offering various incentives, like pay increases through working with the commissioner, offering take-home cars and favorable hours, etc.

Murray said “better leadership” would help retain employees, and that his “good leadership” would inspire deputies who have left to return. He would also use training opportunities as a recruitment tool and focus on getting “younger people involved with

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Incumbent Sheriff Ken Henderson and JR Murray addressed potential voters during the GOP Sheriff’s Candidate Forum on April 15. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Early voting starts Monday for General Primary

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

In-person early voting for the General Primary Election begins Monday to give active registered voters the chance to select political party nominees to appear on ballots in November.

On the Republican side, there are just two county-level seats featuring primary opposition: Superior Court Clerk and Sheriff.

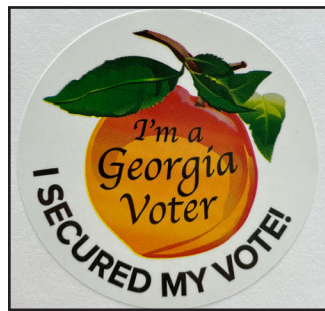
No Democrats qualified for local office, and candidates in all other county contests qualified unopposed, though there is some primary opposition in state-level positions.

Also appearing on ballots will be state party questions to help each party set political priorities moving forward, as well as nonpartisan candidates.

Election Day for the upcoming primary is Tuesday, May 21. There will be three weeks of early voting for this election running weekdays between Monday, April 29, and Friday, May 17.

Early voting will also include two weekend voting opportunities on Saturday, May 4, and Saturday, May 11.

All in-person early voting will take place from 9 a.m. to 5



p.m. inside the Towns County Civic Center, located in the same building as the Board of Elections & Registration Office at 67 Lakeview Circle in Hiwassee.

General Primary voters who decide to wait until Election Day to cast their ballots will need to head to their predetermined voting precincts between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. on May 21.

Towns County has two voting precincts: the Hiwassee Precinct at the Civic Center and the Young Harris Precinct in the Lodge Hall Building at 135 Murphy Street.

For people voting absentee-by-mail, ballots may be requested at the Elections Office now through Friday, May 10. Absentee ballot applications can be returned by mail, fax, as an email attachment, or in person at the Elections Office.

Voters returning absentee

ballots can use the official drop box inside the Elections Office during early voting hours; mail them back in plenty of time to be counted after polls close on Election Day; or drop them off in person at the Elections Office through 7 p.m. on Election Day.

Monday, April 22, was the registration deadline to vote in this election. Voter registration takes place inside the Elections Office.

Candidates qualified in March for the May 21 General Primary, and there is a runoff date of June 18, which may be necessary in the clerk of court’s race that has three Republican candidates, as a candidate must receive a majority vote to win.

Primary winners will move on to the big General Election that is slated for Tuesday, Nov. 5, though no local contest will feature opposition in November during this presidential election year.

Oct. 7 is the deadline to register for the General Election.

Residents may visit https://mvp.sos.ga.gov/s/ for voter registration status, mail-in application and ballot status, poll location, registration information on file with the county, sample ballots for upcoming elections, provisional ballot status and more.

Candidates answer voters in Clerk of Court Forum



Superior Court Clerk candidates Eric Barrett, Sandy Morgan and Chris Clinton made their electoral cases at the GOP forum last week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Over 100 members of the public attended the Towns County GOP Candidate Forum on Monday, April 15, inside the Anne Oliver Mitchell Auditorium at Towns County Schools, with hundreds more streaming the broadcast either live or afterward via recording.

Participating that evening were candidates for the offices of Superior Court Clerk and Sheriff, the only two contested county races in 2024.

Local moderators posed questions submitted in advance by potential primary voters, and candidates took turns answering on stage via timed responses.

First up were Clerk of Court candidates Eric Barrett, Sandy Morgan and Chris Clinton. As there were no Democrats to qualify for local office this year, the outcome of this contest will be decided in the May 21 General Primary Elec-

tion – or in June if a runoff is needed.

Following the Pledge of Allegiance, Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley stepped up to the podium to moderate the first half of the forum, and each candidate did his or her best to persuade voters of why they should be elected the next Clerk of Court.

And it’s an important job. According to gaclerks.org, “Clerks are the official record keepers of the county – they receive and maintain criminal and civil court filings and serve as custodian of county land and property records.”

Barrett is a Towns County High School graduate who has worked for years as a property and casualty insurance agent at the family-run local business Barrett & Associates Insurance. He entered local GOP politics as a young man and called running for office “a dream of mine.”

Morgan is married to a local and has lived in Towns

County for 40 years. Her local law enforcement background has helped her to understand “some areas of the Clerk’s Office already,” and she feels her experience will assist her in safeguarding the records of the county.

Clinton is the former sheriff of Towns County, having served four full terms in office. He is running largely on his record as sheriff and the extensive training he received in law enforcement, and he said his office would be guided by feedback from the public.

There was a consensus among candidates that Clerk Cecil Dye – now in his 40th year in office – and his dedicated staff have done a great job, and that, ultimately, they would have to wait until elected to examine the office in detail to know exactly what improvements they would make.

The candidates agreed on many of the issues raised by voters. Regarding the rising

See Clerk of Court Forum, Page 7A

Enchanted Valley moratorium, Fire Auxiliary make meeting

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

In his regular meeting on Tuesday, April 16, Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw signed a resolution to extend a development moratorium at the Enchanted Valley RV Resort.

The moratorium freezes application and permit issuance processes for construction there, effectively putting a halt to anyone else moving in, at least for the next 120 days following the initial 180-day period.

“We want to make sure that the sewage that they have there can handle all the sewage that’s being put into it,” said Bradshaw, adding that the Health Department is conducting a study in the area.

The reason for the attention – and therefore the moratorium – is the establishment’s close proximity to the Hiwassee River; the primary concern is water contamination.

If the system were to become overloaded with sewage and fail, there’s a possibility of it getting into the river and, eventually, Lake Chatuge.

“This is something we take very serious, and we’re going to stay on top of this,” Bradshaw said. With the moratorium in place, the study is ongoing.

Bradshaw signed another resolution to officially bring into existence the Towns County Fire and Rescue Auxiliary, complete with its very own checking account.

According to the resolution, the group was formed because “there are many Towns County residents that wish to support the Towns County Fire and Rescue Department.”

That said, it was Fire Chief Harold Copeland’s idea to create the auxiliary. Supporting functions will include fundraising via community activities, though “administration support” was also mentioned.

“I don’t mean to speak for the fire chief, but I know that he came to me a while back and wanted to start this auxiliary just to get more public input,” Bradshaw said.

Copeland, who was present at the meeting, confirmed that a small board would be in charge of the new organization.



Cliff Bradshaw
Sole Commissioner

“There are different projects during the year that they can come out and help us (with),” Copeland said. “I thank (Commissioner Bradshaw) very much.”

Following receipt of a grant from the Georgia Department of Transportation, a new bus will soon be available for public transit. The project contains 80% federal capital funds of \$86,152; 10% state funds of \$10,769; and a 10% local match of \$10,769.

See County Meeting, Page 4A

Sheriff’s Office arrests woman for outstanding warrant, drugs

News Special

On April 15, Towns County Sheriff’s Office Uniform Patrol Deputies were conducting concentrated patrols in suspected drug areas – one aspect of their patrol functions – and observed a female walking on US 76 near Georgia 288.

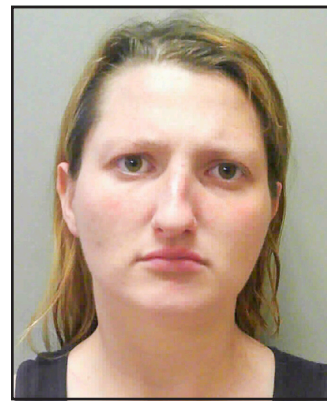
The female was known by deputies and possibly had an outstanding warrant for her arrest.

The warrant was confirmed, and during the arrest, an amount of methamphet-

amine, which field-tested positive, was found along with sub-oxone strips, tizanidine 4 mg, and drug-related objects.

Christa Sheridan Shook, 22, of Blue Ridge, was arrested and charged with felony possession of methamphetamine, felony possession of a controlled substance, possession of drug-related objects, and dangerous drugs.

Sheriff Ken Henderson commends his patrol deputies “and their commitment to our continued drug initiatives.”



Christa Sheridan Shook

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Blue Ridge 1,682.89
Chatuge 1,923.10
Nottely 1,772.30

SOCCKER

STATE SWEET 16
@ Wheeler Co.
4/24 5PM

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United Community

Parrot-feather project receives state legislative boost



This summer, residents can look forward to treatment of the invasive parrot-feather to eventually eradicate the weed in Lake Chatuge.

News Special

Save Lake Chatuge is pleased to announce that the Georgia General Assembly has allocated \$400,000 to the Department of Natural Resources for the treatment and control of parrot-feather in the Georgia portion of Lake Chatuge.

While the funds must be contracted by June 30, 2024, DNR will have until June 30, 2025, to spend them.

MountainTrue will safeguard the private donations and other funds that have been received over the past three months in an interest-bearing account to be used for actions that are beyond the scope of the State of Georgia/DNR allocation.

These actions could include future treatments of invasive weeds in Georgia after the state funds are exhausted or to treat invasive weeds on

the North Carolina side of the line in Lake Chatuge.

The private donations may also be utilized for signage and other preventative measures such as boat-washing stations at public boat ramps.

“The unwavering support of our community has been instrumental throughout this endeavor,” according to <https://www.savelaakechatuge.org/>. “Your steadfast commitment to this cause ensures the comprehensive treatment of invasive weeds in Lake Chatuge.”

“Through the combined efforts of our private donations and the allocated DNR funds, we can now implement a multi-year strategy and preventative measures without the necessity of further fundraising in the foreseeable future.”

Save Lake Chatuge remains dedicated to advocating

for future government budget allocations, emphasizing a long-term approach focused on education and prevention initiatives.

“We are immensely grateful for the remarkable progress achieved in such a small amount of time,” the website reads. “Your unwavering belief in this project and ongoing support have been pivotal to its success. Thank you for standing with us in our mission to preserve and protect Lake Chatuge.”

“Finally, thank you to Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, Mayor Liz Ordiales, Senator Bo Hatchett, Representative Stan Gunter, and the rest of the state General Assembly for being responsive to the concerns of the citizens of Towns County and providing support for the Lake Chatuge Parrot Feather Project.”

County Meeting...from Page 1A



Commissioner Bradshaw and Historical Society President Tyler Osborn showing off the new painting by Marty Hayden that highlights local history. The painting will hang in the renovated courthouse.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

On a similar note, GDOT’s Local Maintenance and Improvement Grant will ensure \$419,930.35 will go toward resurfacing and repairing local roads. According to County Finance Director Andrea Anderson, this particular LMIG does not require the standard 30% local match.

Historical Society President Tyler Osborn attended to share the story of a piece of artwork that will soon hang in the freshly remodeled courthouse. Completed by local painter Marty Hayden, the piece was inspired by multiple historical photos combined to create the scene.

The focus is the Townsend Mill located in Young Harris, though the Stephens-Townsend House is visible in the background. A Spirit-charged baptism among real locals identified by Tommy Flanagan takes up the right side of the painting, while Gus Townsend stands watch to the left on the porch of his mill.

Even the frame tells part of the story, made up of a live wood edge and old mill belts. On the back of the canvas is a guide to identifying most of the painted figures thanks to Flanagan. The work is on loan to the county and is the third painting Hayden has donated to the so-

ciety.

Speaking of the courthouse remodeling, there may not be set dates for the move-in process quite yet, but Bradshaw said the day is rapidly approaching. The front courtyard is in the process of being paved, and the parking lot has yet to be striped, nor have the bumper pads been put in.

Training for the updated facility must also take place before the building is put back into use so that emergency response teams will be aware of everything there is to know about aspects like the sprinkler system and electrical cutoffs.

Bradshaw said that when the big day arrives, the grand opening will be announced in the newspaper and on the radio to make sure residents can all have a chance to come out and see the made-over “Seat of the County.”

Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason shared information on the upcoming laser light show planned for this summer, rain or shine. Admission is \$10 per adult admission, but children 12 and under can attend for free.

“We’re getting a lot of calls about it and people want to come,” said Thomason, who plans to make the event an an-

nual occurrence if it proves popular.

Lake Chatuge’s plight in the wake of the invasive parrot-feather’s chokehold has, thanks to the communicative efforts of State Sen. Bo Hatchett and Rep. Stan Gunter, reached the ears of Gov. Brian Kemp, who has signed off on some \$400,000 to go toward the Save Lake Chatuge fund.

“We hope we can use some of it for washing stations at the boat ramps,” said Bradshaw, adding that when he finds out more information, he will share it.

“They actually told me this is unprecedented – it’s never happened in the state before for a county or a lake to get that much money at one time.”

Finally, new welcome signs will decorate either end of the county in the coming weeks. Construction will wrap up on them soon, and they will indeed read “Welcome to Towns County,” as fought for by Bradshaw.

While courthouse construction remains ongoing, the Towns County Commission meetings take place inside the Temporary Courthouse Offices at 900 N. Main Street in Hiawassee every third Tuesday of the month starting at 5:30 p.m.

Rep. Clyde’s Bill to Redesignate Houthis as FTO Passes House with Bipartisan Support

On April 17, Congressman Andrew Clyde’s (GA-09) legislation, H.R. 6046, the Standing Against Houthi Aggression Act, passed the House of Representatives with bipartisan support by a vote of 285-135. The bill redesignates the Iran-backed Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and reinstates sanctions on the group.

“President Biden’s cowardly capitulation to Iran and its proxies has encouraged Iranian terrorist aggression – dangerously putting Americans and our allies in harm’s way,” said Clyde. “The Biden Administration’s severely misguided de-

cision to remove the Houthis’ FTO designation, which President Trump put in place, undoubtedly emboldened the Iranian proxy group and exacerbated hostilities in the region. I’m incredibly pleased by today’s bipartisan passage of my legislation to redesignate the Houthis as an FTO, as this sends a powerful message to both our Commander-in-Chief and Iran that the House is committed to taking action against acts of terror.”

Before the vote, Rep. Clyde spoke in support of the Standing Against Houthi Aggression Act on the House floor: “The Houthis’ inten-

tions are abundantly clear but by passing my bill, we make our intentions perfectly clear – that the United States does not bargain with or capitulate to terrorist regimes.”

Background: In 2021, President Biden recklessly reversed a Trump Administration policy by removing the Houthis from the Foreign Terrorist Organization and Specially Designated Global Terrorist lists.

Since Hamas’ barbaric October 7th, 2023, terrorist attack on Israel, U.S. troops in the Middle East have been attacked more than 160 times by Iran-backed proxies, including the Houthis.

Correction:

The article titled “DDA provides progress report on Business Center” from the April 17 edition of the newspaper featured two reporting mistakes.

Regarding the Hiawassee Business Map initiative by the Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority, the project is not a part of the #Hikeawasssee campaign.

“It is an independent project designed to make it easy and fast for all visitors and newcomers to Hiawassee to look first in Hiawassee for places to eat, drink, shop, play, stay and find services,” DDA Board Member Babette Dunn said. “We hope to display the code and/or map in as many locations as possible to encourage maximum visibility of our local businesses.”

Also, the map will not list businesses outside the city limits at this time, as “the project is intended to promote city businesses and to increase awareness of all there is to do in the city of Hiawassee.”

Blairsville Cruisers host a wonderful time on the Historic Courthouse Square Saturday, April 20th



The award winning "Non-Profit of the Year" Blairsville Cruiser Car Club held the first downtown cruise-in on the Historic Blairsville Square Saturday, April 20th.

38 vehicles participated in the event under overcast skies and warm temperatures. Winners of the "Club Choice" trophies were Keith McElroy of Blairsville with his 1962 Chevrolet SS convertible and Ronald Weller of Blairsville with his 1955 Chevrolet Bel Air.

The raffle car ticket sales were brisk and onlookers were impressed with the display of cars and trucks at the cruise-in.

The Blairsville Cruisers support many charitable programs with donation ticket sales from the raffle car each year. This year's car is a beautiful 2006 Mustang Premium Coupe. This one owner Mustang has only 34,000 miles on it since new, a clean CARFAX report and a Georgia title. A new set of tires, black leather interior and blue tooth sound system are featured on this Mustang. Tickets are a \$10 donation each. The drawing will be held at our end of season "Salute to Veterans" Car Show on November 2nd. Tickets are available at all club events and from any club member. Soon tickets will be available at United Community Bank in Blairsville, Tanner Towing office, and other pending locations.

The Blairsville Cruisers is a 501(c)3 Nonprofit



Club Choice trophy went to this 1962 Chevy SS convertible owned by Keith McElroy



Club Choice trophy went to this 1955 Chevy Bel Air owned by Ronald Weller

corp. that has supported local communities by helping children in need and local veterans who need a helping hand. Since 2007 we have sponsored "Shop with a Cruiser", "Shop with a Cop", Union County Sheriffs' "Give-a-Gift",

Towns County Sheriffs' "Shop with the Sheriff" and Clay County Sheriff's "Shop with a Hero" as well as several other programs that assure that no child goes without at Christmastime. Your donation for raffle tickets along with our other fund raising events and our wonderful sponsors help raise an average of \$50,000 annually. All of these funds go back to the communities where our members reside to help children and veterans. The club also grants 3 scholarships to students of technical and trade schools and colleges in the area.

Visit our web site, BlairsvilleCruisers.com, for more information on all that the club does for the local communities.

The monthly members meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, April 23rd at the Union County Farmers Market pavilion with a pot luck dinner at 6 PM followed by the meeting. Guests who want to know more about the club are welcome to attend.

April is National Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month



Freedom from sexual assault is a basic human right. Yet tens of millions of Americans — our family and friends, colleagues, neighbors, and classmates — carry the trauma of sexual assault with them.

National Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month is an important time to speak out, stand with courageous survivors, and finally change the culture that has allowed sexual violence to exist for far too long."

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM). This is a time for advocates, survivors, their loved ones, and the community to come together to talk openly about sexual violence to support survivors, increase knowledge and awareness, and identify strategies and resources to prevent sexual violence. Let's all join efforts to end sexual violence in our communities.

S.A.F.E. (Support in Abusive Family Emergencies) is both Union and Towns county's Sexual Assault & Domestic Violence Shelte; 24/7 Crisis Hotline 706-379-3000.

Clerk of Court Forum...from Page 1A

prominence of cybertheft, all would promote the use of the state's opt-in Filing Activity Notification System that alerts property owners when certain filing activity occurs regarding their property.

Barrett would go "into the community" to educate people about FANS; on top of FANS, Morgan would appoint an Authorized Recipient Security Officer to oversee information security; and Clinton would appeal to resources like the Georgia Clerks Authority to institute best practices.

In terms of making information more accessible "while still keeping costs low," Morgan would rely on a highly trained, knowledgeable staff, make sure there were computers available for real estate and other searches by the public, and "get out into the community" if needed.

Clinton advocated for a "robust online presence" to inform people about what is available: "The most important thing I can do is be responsive and available to the people to hear what you have to say."

Accessibility is "one of the pillars I'm running on," Barrett said, noting he would utilize online platforms. Further, he would pursue after-hours outreach programs to notify members of the public about resources like FANS and eFiling.

Asked about helping people correct information that had been filed incorrectly, all candidates agreed that actively correcting records was not the job of the Clerk of Court.

"My best advice in a situation like that is to get an attorney if you have to file any paperwork, because it's very hard for lay people to do that," Clinton said, adding, "We can't give legal advice, but we're going to be there for you to help facilitate the process."

Barrett said he would do his best to catch mistakes prior to filing to help people avoid an incorrect filing, though "it's not up to the clerk to actually

correct information; it's up to the people who bring it in."

"That's the individual's responsibility, not the clerk's, but I still would be there for them every step of the way if they needed me," Morgan said.

As for changes they would make, despite limitations of not being active in the office as candidates, Barrett would pursue "computerization" as well as the lengthy process of digitizing old deeds and plats to provide backups of all county records to preserve local history.

Morgan listed "modernization as far as technology" as one of her goals, though she said that most clerk services are "already digital and free to each of you already." Likewise, she would work with the county to see about producing digitized backups of local records.

Clinton said one change that is certainly coming is a completely new staff, as he noted that Dye's staff members are retiring at the end of the year when he does: "It's going to be an entirely new office. That, to me, I see as one of the big hurdles that's coming up."

The former sheriff touted his record of recruiting, training and retaining "the right people for the job," which he would carry forward into the clerk's office.

Artificial intelligence came up, with one voter asking how the candidates foresaw the burgeoning technology being used by the next clerk and, importantly, how he or she would protect court records from hackers utilizing AI.

Morgan reiterated that she would install a special information security officer with proper training to prevent hacking while following through with other safety features like requiring attorney signatures on paperwork being filed.

In terms of preventing hacking, Clinton expressed confidence in the IT professionals working for the county. "I imagine that AI will

begin to take a role in some of this record keeping," Clinton said. "One thing that AI is very good at is splitting apart information and putting it where it goes really fast ... so I can see that actually playing a positive role in the future."

Barrett said that additional layers of security pertaining to AI were available through the need for state legislation and subsequent execution and approval by the Clerks Authority before such programs could ever be implemented.

"AI is something big that's coming in the future," Barrett said. "There's so many unknowns out there until we actually get into that office and work, but it's something that we're all going to have to deal with."

Among other topics discussed, one voter question suggested that Towns County may be behind other counties in implementing online filing of records and documents, though Barrett clarified that Towns County currently offered two of the three types of eFiling.

"Towns County is eFile for your plats and your deeds, so every plat and deed that has to come in, it is eFiled," Barrett said. "The current clerk also keeps a paper backup, so he does it both ways, (which I would do also)."

The other form of eFiling available here is for civil court records, Barrett said, which, alongside plats and deeds, are accessible online.

"You have to create an account — it is free — but you can't file and eFile a piece of property unless you're an attorney," Barrett said. "So, it is available in Towns County ... criminal (eFiling) is coming up, so we're going to have another eFile in the future year."

The second half of the forum regarding candidates for sheriff is covered separately in this week's newspaper. To view the entire forum, visit the "Towns County Georgia GOP" Facebook page.

Sheriff's Forum...from Page 1A

the schools."

On the topic of illegal immigration, the candidates offered starkly different responses to a question about plans they would offer "to protect us."

"At this time, there's really not a lawful order that we can put into effect ... if they brought a busload of illegal immigrants out here, well, what would you do with them?" Murray said. "Unfortunately, we're going to have to take care of them."

"We're going to have to try to find them a place to be, we're going to give them the compassion that they deserve, and we're just going to have to go from there."

"Unfortunately, our Food Bank probably wouldn't be able to suffice with that, so we would have to go out and

work, hopefully, with these local restaurants and places locally here to have them worked and put up."

"We have nothing for that up here in Towns County. We're, honestly, probably not prepared for it."

Henderson appealed to the U.S. Constitution, saying that "illegal immigrants in this country can be arrested and put in jail, and that's exactly what'll happen here when I find out that it's illegal immigrants in our county."

"Three weeks ago, we had an illegal immigrant in Towns County selling drugs to our kids, or trying to, and he sold to somebody," Henderson said. "We arrested him, we put him in jail; I've got a good working relationship with ICE. I called ICE, he went to jail."

"Last time I checked, we're not a Sanctuary City here, and we're not going to allow them to come to Towns County and take Towns County over. The bottom line is, they're going to squat? Really? We're going to have squatters in Towns County? Yeah, we sure are - in the jail."

In terms of keeping roadways safe with traffic enforcement, Henderson said TCSO deputies are constantly patrolling, and that the Sheriff's Office worked well alongside the Georgia State Patrol that maintains a presence here also.

"Our county's growing, it's growing fast - we all see that; the population is booming here," Henderson said, adding, "So, public safety has to grow with it, and we're working with our commissioner very closely, and he's working with us."

Murray said that while "it's one thing to have your deputies out there patrolling the roads," he perceived a greater need to stop motorists who are driving recklessly, speeding, etc.

"You need to be doing traffic stops to educate, enforce and inform people of what's going on," Murray said. "You can have all the deputies you want out driving around - it doesn't mean people are going to drive like you want them to drive."

Murray would maintain good-working relations with GSP to alleviate some of the pressure on local deputies and, further, would consider starting up a dedicated traffic unit.

Asked about "what advanced training, certification or continuing education" each candidate had received to "ensure that you would make a good sheriff of Towns County," Murray said that he recently took a "leadership essentials" course in March.

"I've also been to First ALERT active shooter training, have standardized field-sobriety training," Murray said. "Some of the other ones that I've had is investigations, had interviews and interrogations. So, I've had some training."

"I'm working on trying to add more to the leadership training just in case I do get elected. I would like to already have a heads up and be in that path. I just feel like I haven't had the opportunities, which I blame myself for that for not taking those opportunities."

"But I just feel like that some of the training would pass onto the employees at the Towns County Sheriff's Office."

Henderson responded that he has been in training for 38 years, and while he doesn't "know it all," he said that if he had to recount all the classes he has participated in over the years, "we'd be here this time tomorrow." And he attends trainings to this day.

"So, I think I've got plenty of training in that area to keep up with what we're doing," Henderson said before pivoting to a comment Murray had just made regarding TCSO traffic tickets.

Right before time ran out on his response to the question about traffic safety, Murray remarked that, "I believe their Chief Deputy, Gene Moss, stated that the Towns County Sheriff's Office only wrote 200 and something citations in one year, last year."

Henderson understood that as an implication that the Sheriff's Office had been negligent in its duties, to which he took exception.

"A comment there a minute ago tried to make it sound like the Sheriff's Department don't go out and do their job," Henderson said. "We do our job. These guys are on call 24/7, and they're out there answering calls and trying to work traffic."

"They do arrest DUIs and they do charge them with other charges. But the city gets to sit inside the city, and they've got a small area, and they're writing a lot of tickets because their mayor's telling them if they want to keep their job, then they're going to have to write tickets."

At that point, both applause and boos rippled through the audience as guests registered either agreement or discontent with the sheriff's statement, and a brief period of heckling prompted Moderator Pierot to joke, "This ain't the Jerry Springer Show, folks."

The show, as they say, must go on, and it did, with the subject turning to what the candidates felt made a good sheriff and the expectations they had of themselves holding such a consequential position.

Henderson said that when he first got elected, he expected to make a good sheriff by holding himself accountable to the promises he had made on the campaign trail in 2020.

"And I have worked hard every single day ... and I have fulfilled those promises, folks," Henderson said, adding that he "will continue to do it if you elect me."

First and foremost, Murray said he believed a good sheriff "is one that can handle the leadership that needs to be done."

"I have a feeling that what makes a good sheriff is one that has honor, integrity and respect, and if I was elected sheriff, I would live by those three things - honor, integrity and respect," Murray said.

He added, "And that's what I expect from the community to see from their sheriff, is somebody that has those morals and does not act like a fool on the side of the road and make national news."

Murray was referencing a June 2022 public shouting match between Henderson and a former Hiwassee police officer, which stemmed from a jurisdictional dispute over Hiwassee officers pursuing fleeing vehicles outside of city limits.

The candidates were asked to explain their criteria for active vehicle pursuits, and Henderson said TCSO had a "zero-chase policy."

"Which means that we will only chase a fleeing, serious felony, which would be a rapist, a murderer, a bank robber, and we'll follow you forever," Henderson said. "But we will not chase you for a seat-belt violation and chase you all the way to the North Carolina line and wreck, and endangering all the citizens of Towns County."

"We will not do that. My officers will not chase. It is a proven fact - on traffic violations is what these chases are about - that when you turn those lights off and you turn around, that person will slow down and hit the backroad."

"We're not going to risk the people of this county's lives. We all see what kind of traffic is on these roadways, and we're not going to chase them. It will not happen unless it is a serious felony charge."

Added Henderson, "Get that tag number, let them go, they'll pull off, people will be safe. Go get your warrant, go get them and put them in jail. That's how it works, folks."

Murray said he would be better positioned to make pursuit policy recommendations if he gets into office but noted that "there's going to have to be some leeway."

"We can take a look at different options and ways to do it," Murray said. "I believe Towns County in January or February was just in a chase for a seat-belt violation themselves that went into North Carolina."

"I have never chased anybody for a seat-belt violation, and that's not the ones that we need to be chasing - you're absolutely right. There's no reason to put that risk versus reward against a seat-belt violation."

Added Murray, "The safety of the community is obviously of the utmost importance, so if you get into a situation where you were even chasing one of those 'making chases' you were just talking about, you're still putting the public's safety at risk."

"So, we have to look at that ... sometimes things are a split-second decision, and we need to figure out what we need to do in that split second."

Regarding the important topic of training, Murray said that, if elected, he would see what was available in the budget, noting that training is "a hard aspect of being in a small agency where you don't have that many people to cover shifts, and it is very expensive."

"There's a lot of training out there that ... is free, just they have to pay some lodging or some travel expenses, and of course, their hourly rate," Murray said. "But the training is available, and we just have to find the resources so that we can have officers that are highly trained."

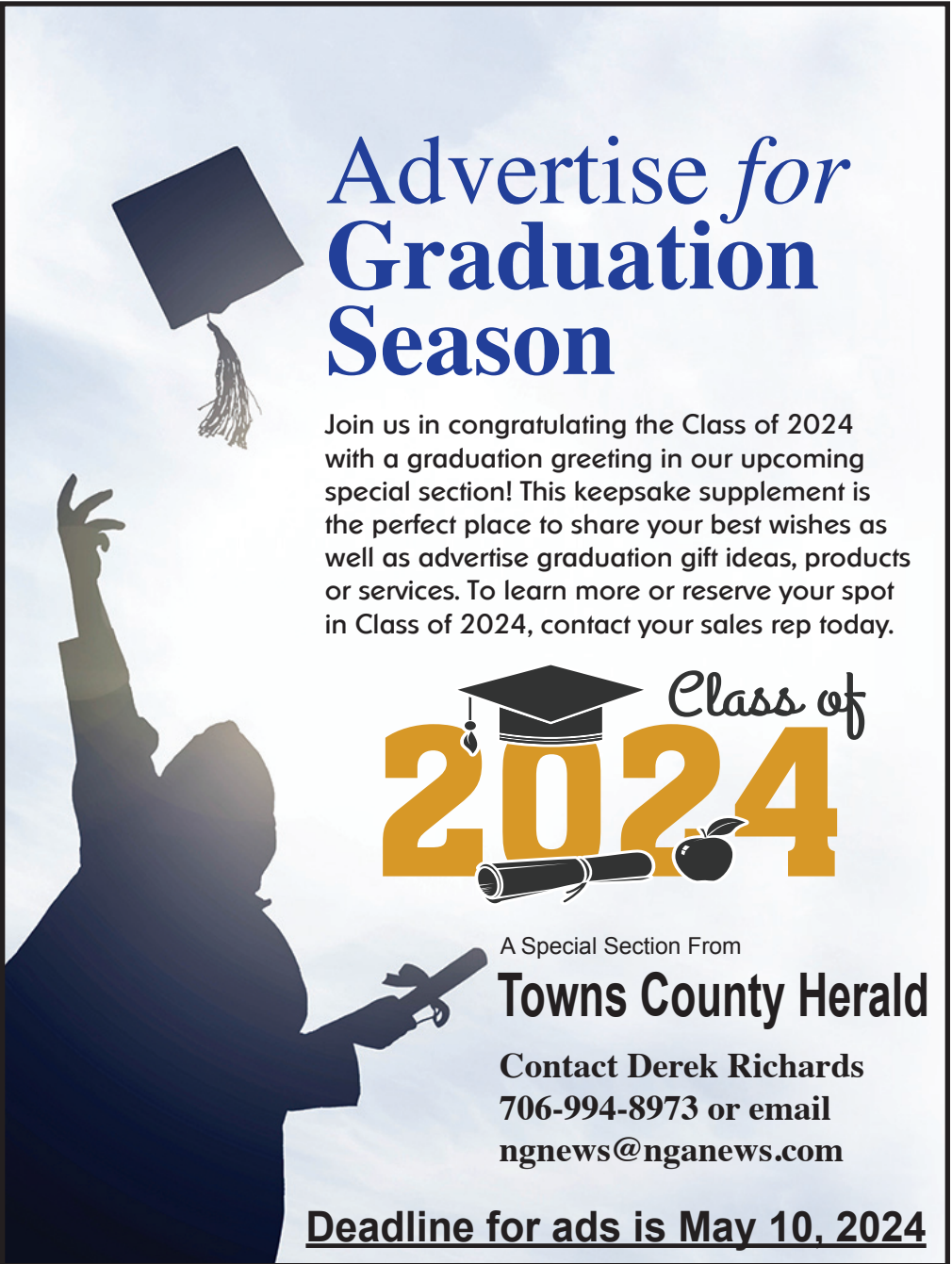
Henderson agreed that "you have to have a budget" for training, adding that when he first took office, he had said, "Training, training, training - you can never get enough training in law enforcement."

"With the ever-changing times that's going on across our country and the different things that are happening, we've got to have the proper training to stay up to speed," Henderson said. "Mandatory, the state of Georgia tells us we've got to have 20 (hours of training a year)."

"When I took office, I said we're going to have 40. We have had 40 every year that I've been in office, and I wish I could give them more training ... as a matter of fact, I'm looking now at going to Forsyth and talking to folks there about bringing folks up to where they could do training at the department for us."

This was the second half of the event, preceded by the Superior Court Clerk Forum that is covered in a separate article in this week's newspaper.

Other topics came up in the forum, including relationship-building with other agencies, technology upgrades and more. To view the entire forum, visit the "Towns County Georgia GOP" Facebook page.



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Your Patriot Reflection

Seek God While You Can (2 Chronicles 7:14)



called by my name, shall humble themselves and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sins, and will heal their land."

The second key theme of Joshua's Warriors is found in Second Chronicles Chapter 7, Verse 14, and powerfully proclaims a promise from God to those who will honor Him. "If my people, who are profess who He is, and label themselves as believers. They needed to humble themselves and submit their lives before Him, and pray fervently for healing in their land. They needed to seek His vision and direction, repent of their sins and live righteous lives. Our Founding Forefathers understood this scripture and submitted themselves and the course of history for our nation before God. We know the outcome of that submission.

God is offering us an "IF" today in our nation. If we will submit completely to His will, then He will hear from heaven and will forgive our sins and heal our land. Readers, we need to acknowledge God, humble ourselves, and pray fervently.

A Patriot Reflection is presented weekly by www.joshuaswarriors.org.