

City Council approves \$2.15 million loan for water treatment plant

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The city of Hiawassee has finalized a \$2.15 million loan through the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority to be used for upgrades at the Water Treatment Plant.

Members of the Hiawassee City Council unanimously approved a resolution to borrow the money – not to exceed the \$2.15 million loan amount – in a called meeting on May 22.

And because Hiawassee is designated a PlanFirst Community, GEFA is allowing a 0.5% interest rate reduction, so the interest rate on the 20-year loan will be 1.75% rather than the usual 2.25%.

This will save the city many thousands of dollars in interest over the life of the loan.

Additionally, GEFA awarded Hiawassee a principle forgiveness grant in the amount of \$430,000 for this loan, making it an even sweeter deal for the city.

The loan money will enable expansion and upgrades at the plant, which will go a long way toward helping Hiawassee handle current demand plus future development.

“We need to increase our intake at the plant due to growth – we’re close to our limits in the summer months,” said Mayor Liz Ordiales in the May council work session.

Also in the May 20 work session, Economic Development Director Denise McKay made the case for a Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority.

“A development authority is a quasi-form of government,” said McKay, explaining that a development authority would be an organization supported by the city but privately managed.

“We can do a lot of things through a DDA that a city cannot do,” said McKay. “They have a lot more leeway to do things that are good for the community that the city can’t do. Their purpose is to help redevelop and revitalize



Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales congratulating “If I Were Mayor” Essay Contest winner Jaden Taylor in the May 20 City Council Work Session. Photo by Mark Smith

downtown areas.

“An authority is also a financing mechanism that we can use. They have funding available to them that the city does not have. The authority can enter into long-term contracts that the city government cannot. They can also do financing of notes.”

Furthermore, McKay said the city isn’t responsible for anything the DDA does because the DDA is separate from the city, “but it’s a financing tool and an organization that we need to go forward with the city.”

All it would take to form a DDA in the city would be the adoption of a resolution by the council, which McKay said she would be requesting at the June council meeting.

There were only positive comments and no objections from those in attendance for the standing room-only meeting.

In other city news, the mayor announced Hiawassee’s impending status as a Broadband Ready Community.

“The Department of Community Affairs, in conjunction with the governor of the state of Georgia, has come up with guidelines to make a city broadband ready,” said Ordiales. “They’re waiting for the final approval of how much money they’re going to put into rural Georgia to get them broadband ready.”

Ordiales said she wants Hiawassee to be ready when the state finalizes its guidelines,

so she has made sure that all program prerequisites have been met, with the final step in the local process to be for the city to enact an ordinance to ensure the city is eligible for state infrastructure money.

City Attorney Thomas Mitchell is reviewing the ordinance, and Ordiales said she expects to have the first reading at the June council meeting.

Ronnie Whelchel of the Hiawassee Lions Club Service Project was recognized for finding another vehicle for the city.

Whelchel was instrumental in locating a police car for the Hiawassee Police Department, which the Lions Club recently purchased and donated to the city, and now, he has found a low-mileage 2014 Dodge Ram pickup that the city plans to buy for \$16,000.

The truck will be used by the water department, and the council is expected to approve the purchase in June.

For the present, the purchase of a \$68,000 tractor with a sidearm for mowing roadsides will be put on hold, and that mowing work will be bid out.

Police Chief Paul Smith reported that his department had acquired a new utility vehicle for use at various events within Hiawassee. Smith said the department purchased the vehicle with money they made from calendar sales.

Superintendent Berrong talks school modernization projects in meeting

By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong shared the spotlight with 10th-grader Syler Church in the Friday, May 17, meeting of the Mountain Movers and Shakers at Sundance Grill.

Church is a veteran of the Top of Georgia Student Speech Contest held locally, and he opened the meeting Friday morning with a speech on changing one’s mindset.

He spoke about two different types of mindsets, fixed and growth. Church said that people with a fixed mindset miss out on a lot of great opportunities because of their unwillingness to try new things.

People with a growth mindset, however, are willing to develop, learn and try new things.

For his part, Berrong started by thanking Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason for inviting him to be a part of the 69th Annual Fair Parade Committee.

“We have been doing a lot of work to try and make sure that the parade is the best that it’s ever been,” Berrong said, before moving on to speak about all the projects at the schools that were completed last summer and ones that are in progress this summer.

“We had many construction projects going on last year, and we’ve got a lot more going on this year,” said



Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong speaking to members of the Mountain Movers and Shakers earlier this month. Photo by Chad Stack

Berrong. “We could not have done this without the help of Mr. (Roy) Perren, who is the facilities director and federal programs director.

“He is the person that found out about this modernization project grant, so without him and his help, we wouldn’t be able to do what we’ve done at the school.”

Through the modernization project grant, the schools are getting 70% return on investment from the state of Georgia through the Department of Education.

“Because, in their minds, it’s cheaper to renovate buildings than to tear them down and build new ones,” said Berrong. “To get the modernization grant, the building has to be at least 40 years old, and that’s a testament in itself to (former Superintendent and Sole

Commissioner Bill) Kendall, who designed and developed the building.”

“So many people that come to visit our school from the state ... none of them believe that our school building is 40 years old. Our school is in terrific shape, and it’s about to be in even better shape.”

Berrong said the projects from last year cost roughly \$3.8 million, with grant money reimbursing the district \$2.7 million for the new roof on the high/middle school and new HVAC systems.

“This summer’s projects are estimated to cost us about \$3.6 million, and we’re expecting about \$2.5 million back in reimbursement from the state,” he said. “The total after we are completed with these two projects from the past two summers, we’re looking at about \$7.5 million in cost, and it is looking at only costing us \$2 million out of the school system’s local funds.”

Added Berrong, “What we are doing this year is replacing all the lighting inside the building with LED lights, which will be more energy efficient; replacing the fire alarm system; and all the classroom flooring.”

He also talked about the renovations in the Bill P. Kendall Gymnasium, to include new seating, with the old seats being installed in Frank McClure Memorial Stadium; the new track; and the \$1 million artificial turf field.

Hiawassee completes new four-way stop at Bell Street and Frank Street

By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The four-way stop project at the busy intersection of Bell and Frank streets has been completed.

A request for a four-way stop there next to the Hiawassee Ingles was included in the 2010 Comprehensive Plan, but it was never accomplished because, at the time, there wasn’t a whole lot of traffic.

“I felt, with the new carwash coming in and the fact that coming out of Ingles you have limited visibility along with the enhanced traffic now, it was probably a good thing to do for public safety,” said Mayor Liz Ordiales.

During the April City Council work session, Police Chief Paul Smith spoke about the increased number of traffic accidents that have occurred at that intersection, as up until recently, there were only stop signs on Frank Street and coming out of the Ingles parking lot.

Many shoppers leaving the grocery store and gas station find it easier to exit from Frank Street, as it is difficult to make a left onto the busy Main Street from Ingles.

The new intersection makes it safer for shoppers to get back onto Main Street, as now, they can use the four-way to cross Bell Street to Frank



A Kia Soul taking advantage of the new and improved four-way stop at Bell Street and Frank Street in Hiawassee. Photo by Chad Stack

Street, allowing them access the spotlight on North River Street.

“From start to finish, I think it probably took about two weeks,” said Ordiales. “It was a quicker project to complete, but I think it will be good for public safety.”

Ordiales and Chief Smith had to do a pre-warning stating a change in traffic patterns and an additional “Stop Ahead” sign before installing the new stop signs on Bell Street.

Also, rumble strips have been added before the new Bell Street stop signs to warn drivers that there is a stop sign ahead.

Keith Donaldson, who

owns Pro-Stripe in Blairsville, was hired for the job, and Ordiales said the whole project including the signs and rumble strips cost about \$2,500.

“All of that was funded by the General Fund,” Ordiales said. “We have a fund that is dedicated for road maintenance.”

The city of Hiawassee has no road work scheduled for the near future other than to fix potholes in the city.

“We are trying very much to fix the roads where we can,” said Ordiales. “We are constrained with the budget, but if there is a pothole or something we can fix, we have fixed many of them already in the city.”

Olympics...from Page 1A

one event, so we are happy to see that the weather turned out great.

“The kids really enjoy getting to see each other again, and they form a lot of friendships at these events, and they get to know each other over the years. This is also the time that parents get to come and participate in something with the teachers and feel like they are part of this team also.”

Event participants had crowds of students cheering them on throughout each activity, with the high school band playing and others holding signs rooting for individuals.

“The kids get so excited seeing the support they have at this event,” said Setzer. “It’s just a wonderful time to get together with everybody and show what these kids can do.”



Athletes competing at the 2019 Union-Towns Special Olympics on May 20. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Mathis...from Page 1A

Agency director.

“We were best friends and we worked together all those years,” said Mathis of his dad. “Working with him really made it a great experience, along with all the guys that I’ve met and had the pleasure to work with over the years.”

Joining Mathis for his plaque presentation were Deputy EMA Director Brandon Walls, Fire Chief Harold Copeland and 911 Director Marty Roberts.

“I’m definitely leaving (the EMA) better than I found it,” said Mathis. “It’s in hands that are better equipped with the ability to handle modern technology. These people are more oriented with the technology of today than I am, so I just think I am leaving it in

a good position.”

Mathis’ last day on the job was May 26, and Roberts, who is over 911 Mapping and 911 Dispatch, will serve as interim EMA director until Bradshaw appoints Mathis’ replacement, which he plans on doing in the next county meeting.

Also during the meeting, the commissioner announced he would be recognizing veterans at the monthly meetings moving forward to honor them for their service and let them know that Towns County appreciates them.

“A while back, myself, (the preacher and veteran Jim McKeral) and a couple of our veterans were talking, and we came up with an idea that I’m very, very excited about,”

said Bradshaw. “We came up with an idea that any person in Towns County that maybe graduates high school and they go into the military, and they come out and come back home, we want to recognize them.

“Anybody that moves into Towns County, it doesn’t matter their age, if they move in and they are a retired veteran, we want to recognize them.

“We are losing 22 people a day on average from suicide of our veterans (nationwide). It’s not just the people getting out of the military, it’s all ages. And there are a lot of helpines you can call, but it’s a phone, and you’re talking to somebody over a phone or over the internet.”

Services while awaiting further news.

At approximately 6:20 p.m., members of the Towns County Dive Team located Plummer’s body in about 23 feet of water and about 150 to 200 feet from shore, the same general area identified earlier by eyewitnesses.

Local M.E. Kyle Cody was on-scene and performed a preliminary examination that revealed no contributing factors to Plummer’s accidental drowning.

The above press release was provided by the Clay County, North Carolina, Sheriff’s Office.

Plummer...from Page 1A

at Hayesville High School this year and was with several of his classmates at the time of the incident.

According to eyewitness statements, he was attempting to swim from the shoreline to a pontoon boat a short distance away when he began to struggle at about the halfway point.

Several friends say they saw he was in distress and immediately went to his aid, but efforts to reach him in time were unsuccessful.

The 911 call from a student at the scene generated a full response of every emergency resource available in the county.

Additional help

responded from Towns County in Georgia and Henderson County in North Carolina, as well as NC State Wildlife and TVA.

Hayesville Schools Superintendent along with teachers and staff, as well as the county manager and school board members, were all on-scene assisting emergency personnel with the mass of students and families that turned out in one of the largest support efforts seen.

The Hinton Center was a huge asset by providing a place for friends and loved ones to congregate and meet with grief counselors from the school and Appalachian Community

Young Harris College to host Alumni Weekend June 7-9



Young Harris College invites alumni and their families to return to campus Friday, June 7 – Sunday, June 9 for Alumni Weekend.

“This is the perfect opportunity for YHC graduates to return to the Enchanted Valley and reconnect with former classmates,” said Director of Alumni Engagement Dana Devereaux Ensley, ’97. “From our annual Alumni Awards Ceremony to tailgating on the lawn, there will be multiple opportunities to reminisce and celebrate with each other.”

During the Half-Century Club Dinner and annual Alumni Awards Ceremony on Friday, June 7, YHC will recognize members of the class of 1969, as they are celebrating their 50th reunion this year. Additionally, the College will honor five Alumni Award recipients.

On Saturday, June 8, YHC will host “Biscuits and Local Honey,” where attendees can visit with YHC President Dr. Drew L. Van Horn, retired faculty and staff, as well as fellow alumni. Featured speakers include Dr. Paul Arnold, professor of biology and chair of the biology department, Dr. Clay Dotson, former history professor, academic dean and interim president, and Dr. Kaycee Cash, ’15, a YHC alumna who recently graduated from

the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine.

The Alumni Weekend Luncheon will feature live music by the Border Hop Five. There will also be a Tailgate Tent Takeover, campus tours, a service of remembrance, milestone reunion events and an outing to Bell Mountain, among many other activities on Saturday. On Sunday, June 9, Sharp Memorial United Methodist Church will offer two church services that are open to alumni, and brunch will be available in the Grace Rollins Dining Hall on the YHC campus. For a complete schedule of events, visit yhc.edu/alumniweekend, and from the menu on the right side, click “Accommodations Registration.”

“We look forward to seeing our alumni back on campus every year,” said Ensley. “They live and work all over the world, and this weekend is a chance for them to come back to a special place and celebrate with friends—both old and new.”

AARP Smart Driver™ Class June 13th at North Georgia Tech

AARP Smart Driver™ – the new and enhanced driving refresher course from AARP Driver Safety will be offered at the North Georgia Technical College Conference Center in Blairsville. The college is located at 121 Meeks Avenue (off Highway 515). The class will be from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Thursday, June 13. The class will be taught by certified volunteer instructor John Daniel.

Since 1979, AARP Driver Safety has helped over 15 million older drivers stay safe, educated and confident behind the wheel. AARP Smart Driver Course participants will learn: valuable defensive driving skills; proven safety strategies; how to stay current with the latest driving technologies; the current rules of the road, specif-

ic to your community, and how to manage and accommodate common age-related changes in vision, hearing and reaction time.

Participants are encouraged to check with their insurance agent to see if they are eligible for an insurance discount. There are no tests required to pass the course.

The course is open to drivers of all ages and costs \$15 for AARP members and \$20 for non-members. There is no charge for those who have the AARP Medicare Supplemental Insurance. Lunch will be on your own.

Participants need to pre-register as class size is limited. Call John Daniel at 706-400-9957.