

Towns County Herald

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Publication Number 635540 Volume 94 Number 33

Wednesday, June 14, 2023

ESPLOST heads to ballot; Perren says 'goodbye'

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The Towns County Board of Education has officially approved a resolution to place a new 1% Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax referendum on the ballot for approval by voters this November.

As previously reported, the School Board approved the referendum last month, and after adoption of the resolution in the June 5 regular meeting, the referendum will be sent to the Board of Elections to be included on this year's municipal ballots to expand the election countywide.

If voters approve the referendum to return ESPLOST to Towns County, the local sales tax rate will increase in

April 2024 by one penny on the dollar to 8%, replacing the longstanding 7% sales tax on eligible goods and services.

The School System is asking voters to support ESPLOST to raise money for needed capital improvement projects at the schools.

Board Office staff have generated a list of ESPLOST projects, including upgraded facilities at the ball fields and relocation of the waterline beneath the parking lots, which also need repaving.

And the list includes a reworking of the Elementary School HVAC system and the installation of AC at the basketball gym, plus flooring in the three schools that is due for replacement along with the football field bleachers.

Additionally, Superin-

tendent Dr. Darren Berrong said the new grant-funded Agriculture Facility that is in the works would benefit from ESPLOST-enabled enhancements, like adding a dedicated cannery and commercial kitchen.

Should ESPLOST pass, the system is projecting about \$3 million in collections a year based on current Local Option Sales Tax revenues, so the referendum includes a \$15 million collections cap over the five-year collection term.

If the cap is met before the ESPLOST expires, the tax would stop being collected unless a continuation referendum is approved. But if sales tax collections decline over the next few years, it's possible ESPLOST would expire

See ESPLOST, Page 8A



Retiring TCHS Principal Roy Perren receiving a parting gift from School Board Member Stephanie McConnell last week, presented on behalf of a grateful Board of Education in Perren's last regular meeting as principal. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Council talks ordinances, franchise fee, land donation



Young Harris Mayor Andrea Gibby, City Attorney Marvin Harkins and City Finance Officer Ana Hess in their June regular meeting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Young Harris City Council and Mayor Andrea Gibby held their regular monthly meeting on June 6 inside City Hall. And while Councilmen John Kelley and Terry Ingram were absent, the council nonetheless had a quorum and addressed some important business.

The new Financial Administration Ordinance received its second reading and enactment that Tuesday.

Essentially, the state has updated its law specifying that

any "work" or project over \$100,000 be put out to bid, raising that limit even higher to \$250,000. The local ordinance approved June 6 raises the city's \$30,000 bidding threshold to \$100,000.

Turning discussions to updating the city's Zoning Ordinance, City Attorney Marvin Harkins said he waited until there was a need to incorporate multiple changes before putting it up for a first reading last month. This month, the revised ordinance received a second reading and enactment.

"(This is) a language cleanup to get the city ordi-

nance in compliance with the state zoning procedure law, to change some definitions and all that," Harkins said.

In particular, the definitions of zoning are being changed slightly to include situations relating to adoption and repeal.

A second part of the ordinance goes into detail about the new Planned Unit Development, or PUD, which serves as a classification system for zoning that allows for residential and commercial lots in the same area.

"So, the current existing See City Council Meeting, Page 8A

Roberts, Nicholson discuss local emergency services

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

In their regular meeting on June 9, the Mountain Movers & Shakers received an update on Towns County's emergency response teams, welcoming Emergency Management Agency and 911 Director Marty Roberts as well as Emergency Medical Services Director Ken Nicholson.

Roberts addressed the crowd first, revealing that the

911 Center, which received 7,700 calls last year, has been "totally updated."

According to Roberts, dispatchers have "the latest, greatest technology that can be bought for 911 calls." Not only that, but a special new feature can start saving lives in an unconventional way.

Towns County 911 can now take emergency texts, which are particularly useful in hostage situations or for domestic violence victims looking for

discreet aid. This comes after a new state mandate requiring that the service be made available.

"They can actually text us, and my dispatchers can text back to them, just like a 911 call," Roberts said. "It comes in with locations so we can see where that call's coming from. It's a pretty neat feature."

All 911 dispatchers were also recently trained to give CPR instructions over the See Emergency Services, Page 3A

GDOT addresses 515 project, population projections

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – Guest speakers from the Georgia Department of Transportation offered insights into the ins-and-outs of their official duties and previewed upcoming local projects during the Eggs & Issues Breakfast at the Union County Community Center on June 8.

The quarterly morning meet-up is hosted by the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce.

GDOT Commissioner Russell McMurry and District 1 Assistant Traffic Director Jason Dykes spoke to those gathered that Thursday, with McMurry providing details about what GDOT does on a statewide level and Dykes giving the scoop on future area projects.

McMurry has been with the department since 1990 when he first began his career as an engineering intern working in construction. By 2015, he was named commissioner of the organization following

unanimous acceptance from the State Transportation Board.

Throughout his presentation, McMurry quoted "A Tale of Two Cities" by Charles Dickens to show how GDOT is simultaneously experiencing "the best of times" and "the worst of times."

For example, "the best of times" has included the new Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which McMurry called "the most historic investment in infrastructure in our nation's history."

In total, the act adds up to \$1.2 trillion in federal infrastructure spending to provide benefits on a state level as well over the course of five years.

"What it really meant was about a 20% increase in federal funding to all states, including Georgia," McMurry said. "And then each of the five years, there's a 2% increase of federal funding that comes to each state."

"So that gets us up to 28%-30% – over the five years – more federal funding than we had to begin with."

On the other hand,



Russell R. McMurry
GDOT Commissioner

2022's average bids were 22% higher than what GDOT had budgeted for, proving "everything costs a little bit more, and we're no different in the transportation sector."

Thanks to the federal act's passage, increased funding has kept the budget "level," but there's always repairs to be made and development to catch up on, as "the dollar's just not

See 515 Project, Page 3A

British motorcycles rally for annual convention at GMF



It was all vintage motorcycles at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds last weekend as the Greater Atlanta British Motorcycle Association welcomed enthusiasts for their annual rally. Photo by Natalie Mintz

By Natalie Mintz
Towns County Herald

Over the weekend, organizers of the annual British in the Blue Ridge Rally gathered with participants inside the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds for two full days of vintage motorcycle fun in the

mountains June 9-10.

The Greater Atlanta British Motorcycle Association has been meeting in the area for 38 years, with the idea of celebrating the passion of motorcycle enthusiasts alongside keeping vintage bikes on the road and promoting safety,

according to Association President Steve Griffith.

Attendees were welcome to explore the area on their own, but Griffith said the association always organizes events for attendees to enjoy during the rally. One of these See British Motorcycles, Page 8A

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JUNE 16 & 17
UNION COUNTY SADDLE CLUB ARENA
GATES OPEN 6PM - SHOW 8PM - RAIN OR SHINE

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Georgia Mountain Fair Helps Lions Club Raise Funds

For the past 30 years, the Towns County Lions Club and the Georgia Mountain Fair have worked together to sell raffle tickets during concerts in the Anderson Music Hall to help pay for college scholarships to deserving TCHS graduating Seniors.

Every year, the Lions try to beat the total of the previous year's designated scholarship fund. Last year's amount of \$15,000, which was awarded to the 12 most qualified graduates in the Class of 2023, will be tough to surpass. But this year's crew of elite and energetic Lions raffle ticket sales staff are eager to break the record for next year's equally deserving Class of 2024 TCHS scholars.

The TC Lions are proud of this program and sincerely thank all the concert patrons who have faithfully bought tickets to help our cause of annually financing higher education for the graduating scholars and urge all upcoming show attendees to also help support this goal.



(L-R) standing: Danny & Martha Meeks, Truman Whitaker, Della Dearing, Karen Garrett, Janie McConnell; seated: Susan & Dale Willrich, Sybil Davis and the brand new autographed Yamaha FG 800 Acoustic Guitar; not pictured: Kathy Carlson & Nancy Whitaker

year's prize guitar, which will be signed by all the headline performers on the entertainment schedule, will be the last show of 2023, Dec. 2 at the Oak Ridge Boys Christmas Concert. Also, please watch for the guitar being displayed and raffle tickets being sold during other upcoming community events.

In other Club news, Pres. Ronnie Whelchel thanked Lion Allen Saylor for his recent excellent leadership of the Rhododendron Festival project and Lion Julie Payne encouraged all Lions to support the upcoming Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce 2023 Made In Georgia Festival June 24, 10 AM to 5 PM, and June 25, 11 AM to 4 PM at the Towns County Rec-

reation & Conference Center at Foster Park.

The Towns County Lions meet at 6 PM in Daniel's Steakhouse Restaurant on Hwy 76 on the second and fourth Tuesday nights of each month with certain exceptions.

Please follow us and the GA Mountain Fair on Facebook.

Emergency Services...from Page 1A

phone, ensuring that even more lives can be saved at a moment's notice.

And Roberts shared additional options for the community to get involved without having to volunteer to become a firefighter or join the 911 Dispatch Center staff.

"The county has a CodeRED Alert System that, if there's an emergency, even down to a community, we can just send a message to a community," Roberts said. "And we really, really need people to sign up for it."

"We've worked really hard; we've had sign-ups at the courthouse, sign-ups at our office, but we would really like to get the word out."

Whether a resident is in Georgia or halfway across the country, he or she will get an alert on their phone if a call goes out. Roberts said it's especially useful in cases of missing persons, as an entire community can begin looking for someone as soon as a report is made.

To sign up to receive the alerts, visit <http://www.townscountyga.org/emergency-alert-system.html>.

EMS Director Nicholson took over next, sharing that Towns' 19 full-time employees receive between 2,300 and 2,400 calls yearly. Out of those 19 full-time workers, 14

are paramedics and five are EMTs. There are 16 part-time employees, made up of six medics and 10 EMTs.

"We run two stations; we've got the one next to the school and then one down next to the Chamber of Commerce, which is our main station," he said. "We run one truck out of each station 24 hours a day."

"And then also we have a call truck, which, if both trucks are out, we call people in (to staff)," Nicholson explained further, saying that most of the time, at least three trucks are available during the day.

"We have five ambulances – three of them, which are our newest ones, are Frazers," he added. "We're talking top-of-the-line. Their box is separate from their front, so everything's run off a generator in the back."

The county has three new electric stretchers to boot, cutting down on the likelihood of back injuries for EMS workers hauling patients in and out of ambulances.

"We also have the LUCAS devices, which actually does the CPR for you; it doesn't do the breathing, but it does the pumping" Nicholson clarified with a smile. "Our ambulances are stocked with all the modern stuff that we need and use."

It's also worth noting

that Towns County ambulances have four-wheel drive, meaning that operators can reach victims just about anywhere.

To support local first responders, head on out to the Summer Heat Festival – otherwise known as Family Fun Day – at Foster Park on Saturday, June 17, from noon to about 4 p.m.

Serving as one big fundraising event, the festival is totally family friendly and will feature games, craft vendors, food and some famous visitors like Ironman and retired Atlanta Braves centerfielder Otis Nixon.

"We're looking at it as being a first responder for the first responders," according to information provided in the meeting. "And what the Summer Heat Festival of Towns County is doing, is we set up a safety net for all our first responders of Towns County."

"If they get hurt, sick, injured on the job or off the job, and they need help paying their bills, you're going to be there to help them pay their bills and get them back on their feet."

The Movers & Shakers meet every Friday at 8 a.m. inside the Sundance Grill in Hiawassee, to feature guest speaker Towns County Historian Jerry Taylor this week.

515 Project...from Page 1A

going as far."

"The good news is, we're still driving Georgia projects forward," McMurry declared.

Most notable and perhaps most closely followed is the upcoming roadwork to widen SR 515/SR 2/US 76 between Union and Towns counties.

The primary focus will be to widen and straighten the highway between the city limits of Blairsville and Young Harris, making it into a bypass around the latter's downtown area. The bypass will be the initial phase of construction, which is set to receive bids later this summer.

Running from Young Harris Street in Blairsville to Timberline Drive just north of Young Harris, the current road features only two and three lanes and has an unfortunate history of crashes, some involving fatalities. During construction, it will become an 8.5-mile stretch of four lanes.

Other than accidents, there's something to be said,

too, about population. North Georgia, like the rest of the state, faces inevitable growth, and unless the roads adapt to more commerce, there's going to be more hang-ups when it comes to traffic.

Population projections for Georgia estimate over 3 million more people will call the state home by 2050, with 75% of that growth expected in Metro Atlanta. But according to maps shared by McMurry, a profound movement north will continue to reflect current local development data.

"With growing population comes growing labor opportunities and jobs, which is great," McMurry said. "When you look at the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission, the counties nestled here in sort of Northeast Georgia, by 2050, you see 17% growth in jobs, which is adding almost 27,000 jobs out to 2050. So, 27 years to 2050, that's almost 1,000 jobs a year."

This is another aspect that the 515 Project should improve upon. Increased freight

movement – expected to double – calls for more travel routes to keep traffic relatively tame.

Due to soaring costs from the long-running inflationary environment, it was decided to begin the project in multiple phases.

"Phase 1 is going to let this August," Assistant Traffic Director Dykes said, noting that the bypass would run from Sampson Road to Timberline Drive around Young Harris proper. "The estimated cost on this one is \$13 million."

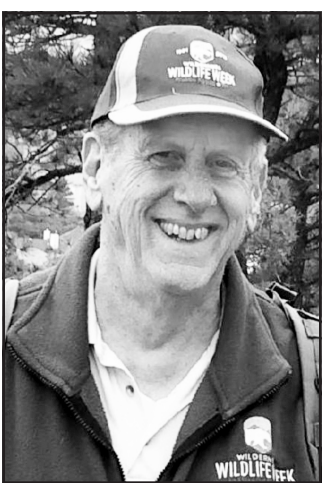
Dykes also made mention of a roundabout at Brass-town Creek Road where the Young Harris bypass will tie in. Unlike the one at Blairsville's Square, this roundabout will be a multi-lane road.

"The biggest thing that you need to know is where you're going before you enter the roundabout, because you're going to need to pick your lane," Dykes said.

For further questions on the Young Harris Bypass or any other GDOT projects, call 404-631-1990 for the main office in Atlanta or 770-532-5500 for the Gainesville office.

Don Wells Lecture Friday, June 16th: Who Built the Indian Mounds in the North American Continent?

There are thousands of earthen and rock mound sites throughout the Northern Continent with as many as 800 in Louisiana alone. The scientific community has declared that these are Native American in origin. But are they? The Mountain Stewards research over a nine-month period traveling 10,000 miles to visit many of these sites has shown that they are not Native American but rather Asian, European, and Mesoamerican. Native Americans did occupy many of the mound sites after the builder cultures left and used them for sacred sites. Many tribes claim ownership of the mound sites today. Don Wells and his wife Diane studied the mound culture in 2021-2022. Their research has shown that three cultural periods seem to stand out covering the cultures that migrated to North America



and changed the landscape of North America. The first period was from 3300 to 0 BCE and was mostly Asian and European. The second cultural period is from 0 to about 700 CE. During this period, those that migrated to the Northern Continent were mostly Eu-

ropean and Asians with the beginning of the Mesoamerican cultures. The last cultural period begins in 700 CE and goes to about 1600 CE. This period saw many Mesoamerican cultures with a few Asian and European cultures.

Don and Diane published their research report on the Mountain Stewards website, www.mountainstewards.org.

Don Wells will be returning to the Moss Memorial Library on June 16th at 11 am to give a new lecture in the Carolyn Krueger Meeting Room to reveal the latest information concerning Indian Mounds. Don has always drawn a large crowd here in Hayesville due to the Cherokee Culture that existed here. His lecture is free to the public and sponsored by the Clay County Master Gardeners.

British Motorcycles...from Page 1A



British motorcycles make up a popular subculture in the automotive space, manifesting locally ever year in the annual Hiwassee-based rally. Photo by Natalie Mintz

is a poker run involving local businesses that is a “self-guided route” and typically “popular with couples.”

For the poker run, three businesses are chosen to hold poker chips for participants. These can be turned in for the chance to win an award. Part of the motivating factor in this is to encourage attendees to support local businesses and “bring commerce to the area,” Griffith said.

David Brock has been coming to the convention every year since it started. He said it has always been “full of good people” and that he has “made many friends over the years.”

Likewise, many other attendees have been coming to the event for years, brought in by their shared interest in motorcycles, of course, but also because of the sense of community.

Tom and Jennifer Ball pointed out how often “you see a lot of the same people,” and that the rally “is more like a family event” than what people expect.

Jennifer comes because of her husband’s interest in bikes, and she likes visiting all the restaurants and antique shops in the area. When asked about why he got into riding

motorcycles, Tom said that they helped him “escape the monotony of everyday.”

Couple Kim and Benny Payne are regular attendees who brought their friends TJ and Crystal Mullikin with them this year, prompting TJ to express his enjoyment of spending time with “like-minded people doing what they love.”

Rallygoer Steve Barnett said that he “loves the area,” noting that this is the only other place he would want to live. This sentiment is why Griffith stated that there is “no other place” for the annual rally to be held.

As to why attendees choose to ride British and vintage bikes, many of them pointed to the unique look and simplicity. Payne also said he likes how the bikes are “easily customizable.”

For his part, Jason Abbott said that people often “come up and talk to you” when they see a vintage bike. One of the main differences, added Barnett, is that English bikes are “smaller and faster.”

Brothers Mahrash and Hariash Murugadass have grown up coming to the convention. They stand out as some of the youngest at-

tendees, and nearly everyone around points out how they have known the pair since they were little.

Now 20, Hariash has become a welder, inspired by his time building bikes from scratch. The pair agree that the bikes are a way of “expressing their personality.”

It’s rare that younger people are interested in these kinds of conventions. Griffith said that most attendees are around 60 and 70 years old.

“It’s hard to get young people,” he said, commenting that part of the problem is that “they want a brand-new motorcycle.”

In light of this issue, attendance at the convention has been shrinking in recent years. Gene Perry, who has come every year since the beginning, noticed that the 2023 offering only had a quarter of the usual number of people.

Still, the rally has the strong support of a loyal base of riders, many of whom took part in mountain rides and had an overall great time here in the North Georgia Mountains Friday and Saturday.

For information on other upcoming local events, visit www.georgiamountainairgrounds.com.

ESPLOST...from Page 1A



The Towns County School Board in action during their June regular meeting, which featured a big ESPLOST referendum vote. Not pictured: Board Member Caroleen Woods, who was on vacation. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

before reaching the projected \$15 million in collections.

The decision to seek another ESPLOST is purely a financial one, taking into account many factors, according to the board.

For instance, revenues from the state will be decreasing in the foreseeable future due to greater “local fair share” costs spurred by pandemic-era increases to the property tax digest as people have continued to relocate to the county in recent years.

And expenditures have been going up for a while now as the country continues its lengthy battle with inflation, on top of the schools being newly on the hook for big increases in locally borne health care costs for non-certified staff like custodians, bus drivers, etc.

Further, the system is having to contend with homestead exemption refunds and, going forward, fewer property tax proceeds than anticipated due to the recent correction of

a longstanding homestead exemption collection error.

Essentially, the system will be having to do more with less, especially if it hopes to keep from raising property taxes to fill the gap, hence school officials perceiving the need to attempt another ESPLOST.

Also in the June 5 meeting, the School Board and educators in attendance said goodbye to Roy Perren, who is retiring this month after serving Towns County Schools for 19 years.

His most recent post was his return to the position he started in here, as principal of Towns County High. Over his 13 years as TCHS principal, he oversaw the graduation of 862 students, many of whom have gone on to lead successful careers to make their hometown proud.

And he has served as Facilities Director and Federal Programs Director over his time with the School System,

too.

“I’ve loved working here, I’ve been blessed to have been here,” Perren told the board in his very last “High School Report” of his career. He made sure to thank everyone he has worked with in the schools over the years, as well as the students, parents and the community.

The School Board thanked Perren, too, sending him off with a gift of various grilling items to enjoy during the summer vacation that will kick off his retirement.

Following an executive session that evening, Superintendent Berrong received a favorable evaluation by School Board members, who voted to extend his contract as leader of Towns County Schools for another three years.

Next month, the School Board will meet on Thursday, July 6, to accommodate the Fourth of July holiday. Meetings begin at 6 p.m. inside the High School Media Center.

City Council Meeting...from Page 1A

regulation requires a minimum of 7 acres to develop a PUD; this (update) would get rid of that minimum acreage requirement,” Harkins explained of the change.

Regarding the next topic of discussion, Bureau Veritas, Mayor Gibby said, “We actually had a conversation about this for a couple of months.”

After reviewing details like rates and fee schedules, the council decided to once again table a contract with Bureau Veritas, the same company that handles much of Hiwassee’s city construction.

Bureau Veritas would be handling building permits, electrical and plumbing inspections, manufactured housing inspections, sprinkler systems and more.

For now, the council wants more time to consider the deal before going forward, especially considering the fees and legalities attached to the agreement.

Concerning the problem-plagued Timberline booster pump, after the addition of a bladder tank proved fruitless, it was back to the drawing board. The problem is in getting enough pressure to drive the water uphill to the top of the mountain, and hopefully, the next plan will result in a fix.

In short, the latest proposal includes building an additional station with a smaller pump that will help move the water to the main pump. The bladder tank will work as an

“in-between” connecting the upper and lower pumps.

Councilman Steve Clark requested that a water and sewer committee meeting be held before the next council meeting in July to discuss the cost of the project.

One quote stated \$1 million, with \$700,000 of that going solely toward replacing the pipeline, though the hope is that after consulting with engineers, a new proposal will save the city half a million dollars.

The city’s decision to impose a franchise fee instead of raising property taxes hasn’t sat well with all residents, several of whom attended this month’s meeting, though a range of views were expressed that evening.

Young Harris College President Dr. Drew Van Horn attended the meeting, too, to urge the city to revisit its choice, questioning the need for expenses like the Main Street Director position when funds could potentially be better spent in other ways.

In response, Gibby explained that the Main Street Director is a needed position to help stimulate the economy and growth in the community. Because the position is so recently filled, newly appointed Rosemary Royston has not had a chance to do more in the city, but, Gibby said, Young Harris will be seeing more of her very soon.

Matt Logan, a new resident of the city and coach at

the college, took the middle road, saying, “I think it’s a little bit of a false dichotomy to say, ‘You know, you either have to do this or you have to do this.’”

Inversely, Young Harris Florist Sherry Ledford “played devil’s advocate,” insisting that she understood both sides of the argument. Still, as a business owner, she believed that it was only fair for the college to pay a franchise fee since they do not pay property taxes.

In the future, anyone looking to speak at the meeting may call 706-379-3171 and request to be added to the agenda.

Also in the meeting, the council graciously accepted the donation of 4.45 acres of land to the city for park expansion. The donation came by way of longtime resident Shirley Miller, the wife of the late Gov. Zell Miller and mother of Councilman Matt Miller, who abstained from voting.

The city expressed its gratitude to Mrs. Miller for the donation and noted that Young Harris was grateful to have her as a city resident.

Young Harris City Council meets on the first Tuesday of every month at 6:30 p.m. at City Hall located at 50 Irene Berry Drive, barring delays or reschedules for holidays. These meetings are open to the public, and the community is encouraged to attend.

Council members voted to move the next regular meeting to July 11 to accommodate the Fourth of July holiday.