

Towns County Herald

Legal Organ of Towns County

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75 Cents

Publication Number 635540 Volume 93 Number 40

Wednesday, August 3, 2022

School leaders highlight return of students Aug. 4

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

School starts back this week on Aug. 4, and in recognition of the big communal occasion, several members of Towns County Schools leadership addressed a large crowd of Mountain Movers and Shakers on Friday, July 29.

Speaking in the civic organization's meeting were Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong, High School Principal Roy Perren and new High School Assistant Principal Bryan Thomason.

Perren announced that the 2022-23 school year would be his 19th and last with Towns County Schools. As for why he has decided to retire: "It's just time. My children have

grown up here. Four of them have graduated from Towns County High School, and it's been such a blessing."

Perren said Thomason is being groomed to step into his shoes at the end of this next school year.

"I am tickled to death to be here," said Thomason, who originally hails from Snellville in Gwinnett County and graduated from Western Carolina University. "I thought (moving to the mountains) would be a retirement thing. I didn't think we'd ever get here until then."

"As I went through the interview process with Dr. Berrong and Mr. Perren, it became evident that, A, this was a special place, and B, it's where I (and my family) wanted to be."

"My wife is an educator, she teaches online. This

is her ninth year teaching online. I've got two kids that are elementary-school age, and I can't tell you how excited I am for my kids to grow up here. It is truly a dream come true."

Thomason said he was a teacher and football coach for 10 years, then moved into administration in Hall County Schools, Gainesville, for three years.

"So, this will be my 14th year in education," Thomason said. "Thank you for the warm welcome."

Moving along, Berrong spoke to a packed house of people who, in light of the recent "woke" ideology making its way into school systems around the nation, had a plethora of questions.

"First of all, I just want
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(L-R) Towns County High School Principal Roy Perren, Shakers Emcee/Organizer William "Scotty" Scott, Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong and new High School Assistant Principal Bryan Thomason.
Photo by Mark Smith

Chaplain Moss recounts surviving war, finding faith

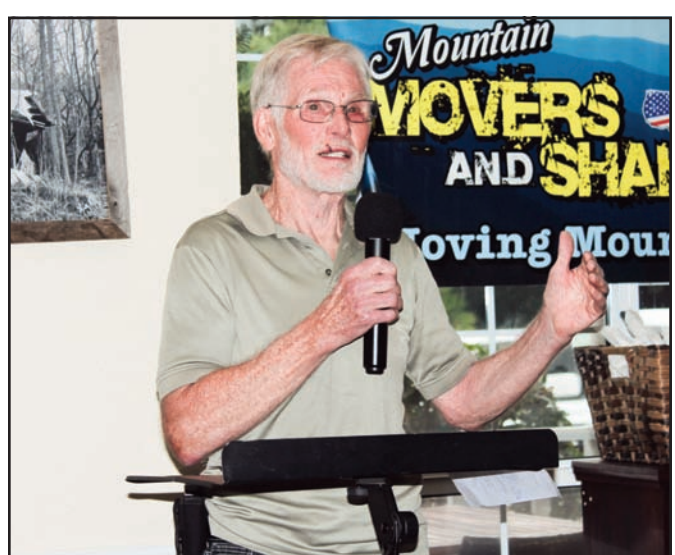
By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The discussion of life and all that comes with it can be a heavy subject, especially when it comes to facing the ugly truths of war, but it's worth holding onto endurance and faith. That was the topic of the July 22 Mountain Movers & Shakers meeting featuring VFW Post 7807 Chaplain Dwight Moss.

A member of the Movers & Shakers himself, Moss was no stranger to the setup at the Sundance Grill in Hiawassee, but with his own memories, he movingly transported this audience back in time to the jungles of Vietnam when he was just a 20-year-old foot soldier.

He began his talk with a somber recollection of "a patrol that was coming in."

"They were carrying the body of a Marine, and I was in a patrol going out," Moss said.



VFW Post 7807 Chaplain Dwight Moss moved his Mountain Movers & Shakers last month with stories from the Vietnam War.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

"I looked at that situation, and I said, 'You know, one day, that could be me.'"

Many times, Moss said, he and the rest of the troops were no more than targets.

While they preferred to engage with the enemy in battle, the Viet Cong usually fired down upon them in surprise guerilla raids.

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Council talks jurisdictional dispute, liquor licensing

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

In the July 25 Hiawassee City Council work session, Mayor Liz Ordiales discussed the now-infamous June 24 traffic stop that ended in a roadside jurisdiction argument between Hiawassee Police Sgt. Tracy James and Towns County Sheriff Ken Henderson.

To recap, Sgt. James had pulled over a motorist about 1.3 miles west of city limits. According to the city, James was in "hot pursuit" of a vehicle he'd clock speeding inside city limits, which would give him the legal authority to pull the motorist over outside the city's jurisdiction.

The Sheriff's Office has cast doubts on this version of

events, stating recently that "it appears that Sgt. James may have initiated an illegal traffic stop because he was out of his jurisdiction, and it is unclear whether or not he was engaged in 'hot pursuit.'"

During the work session, Ordiales walked people through security footage from the Valero gas station that showed James pulling out to initiate the traffic stop that the city insists was legal.

In reviewing the timeline of the footage, she noted James' position at the Valero, the speeding motorist passing the gas station, the reported dispatch of the impending stop, and the final stop time.

"From the time he was seen on the video where he pulled out to the time we actually stopped (the driver)



Liz Ordiales
Hiawassee Mayor

and gave him the ticket, we're looking at 1 minute and 27 seconds," Ordiales said. "Now, did
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Hiawassee DDA outlines ongoing plans, future events

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority Program Manager Steven Harper stays busy these days raising awareness for various projects aimed at fostering positive local economic conditions and opportunities in town.

"Our main project going on right now is the renovation of the Paris Business Center," he said. "That is the two-building project where we will be making the one story building a restaurant in which we are in talks with a few high-potential candidates."

Along with that, when all is said and done, the second building is that two stories will serve as a dual-purpose and fully functioning business incubator.

"We have space available on the first floor that we are currently mulling over several different options for

what we are going to provide in that one," Harper said. "But upstairs are going to be classrooms, cubicles and conference rooms."

"The way this will work is, when an entrepreneur approaches us with their ideas for their company, we will review the business plan with them first and then help that person go through the plan and focus not on what is happening right now, but the long-term solutions, to see if they are the right fit to occupy a space there."

"And upon graduating our success program, if they are, then we will rent them the space."

The rented space will serve as a temporary location for each business that benefits from the incubator, with successful businesses eventually moving to other lodgings in the city to make room for additional startups looking to take advantage of the program.

"Sixty percent of new businesses fail within the first



Steven Harper
Hiawassee DDA

year," Harper said. "Why? Because they either cannot afford rent or they did not plan properly, and we want to take that calculus out so that by the time they get out of this program, they have already been a success long enough that their success can go on their own and establish their business in their own building."
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Shimmy Rock debuts for domestic violence awareness



Raq the Mountain Bellydance offers classes for area residents who are interested in learning the ancient and timeless art.

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

A very special and unique event came to town on Saturday, July 23, as the Raq the Mountain Bellydance team held

its first annual "Shimmy Rock" dancing showcase for the community, and all to raise money for a great cause.

Raq comes from the Egyptian Arabic phrase "raqs sharqi," which is the classical style of bellydancing, and the

group is headed up by Ophelia Williams and headquartered at Blairsville Dance Project.

Williams has trained in the exotic form of bellydancing for just over 20 years and instructs classes and other work-
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Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival sets a 'shining example

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE - The three-day Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival at Granddaddy Mimm's Distillery and the Downtown Blairsville Square was such a success over the weekend that organizers are already planning for a return in 2023.

Well over a thousand people attended July 29-31, enjoying more than 70 artists, merchants and food vendors, plus distillery tours, ax throw-

ing, a mechanical bull, a costume contest and more, as well as plenty of tasty beverages from businesses and Granddaddy Mimm's that certainly hit the spot.

Speaking of Granddaddy Mimm's, the distilling company is named after the legendary moonshiner Jack "Mimm" McClure, who for years operated a still out of Young Harris and was the grandfather of distillery owner and Country Music icon Tommy Towns.

The festival took place largely around the Historic Courthouse, with dozens of

small businesses from around the area benefiting from the music and moonshine draw by selling all manner of crafts and products.

On top of the free tastings at multiple booths with the Moonshine Passport Drink Tour, the live music kept festival patrons entertained throughout as they boosted both the bottom line of local merchants as well as the tax base.

Hundreds of guests attended Saturday night's big concert at the distillery featuring headliner Keith Anderson,
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Granddaddy Mimm's Distillery offered a terrific venue for live music over the three days of the Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival.
Photo by Jeremy Foster

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Hiawassee City Council...from Page 1A

we stop this vehicle outside the city limits? Yes, but it started in the city limits.”

Further narrating the footage, Ordiales called attention to a driver that had stopped to let James pull onto the roadway because “he sees the blue lights,” adding to the city’s case that the officer was involved in a “hot pursuit.”

“Again, we did absolutely everything textbook,” Ordiales said. “We also have a written statement from the gentleman who let Tracy out in the red car (at the Valero), saying that he had his lights on and that he was in pursuit of the speeding car.

“We’ve looked at every single law – and (City Attorney Thomas Mitchell) can attest to this – that states that if the violation occurs inside the city limits, we can go outside the city limits, outside the state, anywhere, in order to finalize that incident and close it down.”

Mitchell confirmed Ordiales’ statement in the meeting. The mayor said she would prefer to put this incident behind the city and police department, reiterating that the city’s “No. 1 priority” is the public’s safety. She also said recently that she would be “open to discussions” with the Sheriff’s Office.

When reached for comment, the Sheriff’s Office said that the legalities of this situation, as well as the city’s May 27 Memorial Day Weekend chase into the county that the

Sheriff’s Office discussed in a recent Facebook post, were being looked into by County Attorney Robb Kiker.

Sheriff Ken Henderson said he is willing to meet with the mayor and Hiawassee Police Chief Paul Smith to resolve these issues.

“I am looking forward to working together with the city to keep our citizens and community safe,” Henderson said.

Liquor Discussion

Also in the July 25 work session, Hiawassee Package owner Simon Illikattil expressed his concerns about an in-progress third license application to operate a liquor store inside city limits.

Essentially, Illikattil is asking the city to limit its liquor licensing process, either by number of stores or by distance between stores, as many other municipalities do.

He has already written the city a letter but wanted to address the council in person to say that, while he appreciates competition, based on his research, he does not believe the small local population can support more than the current two package stores.

Pointing to a 15-year sublease, a large required inventory, and the need to pay four employees, Illikattil asked, “How are we going to survive?” He went on to say that he’s looking at the prospect of having to

lay off at least two people and potentially even shut down the business.

“This is not a threat or anything, but I have to survive,” Illikattil said.

Ordiales confirmed that the city’s Alcohol Ordinance does not limit the number of licenses or distance between liquor stores. During discussions after the city’s liquor referendum passed last November, the council settled on a “free market” approach when crafting ordinance language.

“When we talked about this to start with, we decided to let the free-market system be the controls there,” Councilwoman Anne Mitchell said. “At that time, I assumed that the playing fields were level, and it turns out that they’re not. So, I don’t think it was a really good idea, but it is an ordinance.”

Councilwoman Patsy Owens said that she doesn’t think the city needs any more liquor stores, and Councilwoman Mitchell said, “I don’t think we wanted a third one.”

“I really thought people looking at the size of Hiawassee and seeing that there’s already two would say, ‘Good grief,’” Mitchell said.

Calling Illikattil’s concern valid, Ordiales said the city would put the issue on the agenda for discussion in the next council work session.

“It is too late to do anything for it now,” Ordiales said, with Councilman Jay Chastain

Shimmy Rock...from Page 1A

shops at Mountain Yoga, also in Blairsville. She organized “Shimmy Rock,” with Towns County High School serving as the venue during summer break.

“I like to bring a lot of cultural styles into my dance routines and shows, and we had a great time that night,” Williams said. “Everyone in the audience really enjoyed all of the performances and what we had to offer.

“We had so many people ask us and want to know when we were coming back and putting on another show, so we were very grateful for this opportunity, and I definitely plan on making this a yearly thing to look forward to.”

The main purpose of the event was to raise awareness about domestic violence.

“I started up a chapter of an organization called ‘Shimmy Mob,’ which is a worldwide dance event like a flash mob to help support that cause all over,” she said. “Here in the Blairsville Chapter, I have been working with REACH of Cherokee County for almost five years now.”

Established in nearby North Carolina in 1983, REACH is a local nonprofit agency that works to end domestic violence and sexual assault “through education, advocacy, self-empowerment and community awareness.”

“So, we help to raise donations for them by putting on shows, and every bit of money we raise goes to them,” she said.

The event ran from 5-10

p.m. and featured arts and craft vendors as well as live musical dances of different genres and original choreography routines by talented performers from various areas including Dahlonega, Clarkesville, Atlanta and others.

“That night being our first event here, we were happy to raise just over \$300, and year-to-date we have raised over \$1,000 for REACH,” Williams said. “We could not be more happy for the community supporting us, so thank you everyone so much.”

For more information on classes or to learn how to become involved with future fundraising, call the studio at 706-994-1463, visit www.raqthemountaintop bellydance.com, email raqthemountaintop bellydance@gmail.com, or find the dancers on Facebook and Instagram.

Back to School...from Page 1A

to thank this group,” Berrong said. “This group has been so supportive of our school system for that past eight years since I’ve been doing this as superintendent. So, we really appreciate that support. We couldn’t do what we do without the support of the community.

“We’re a very small school system, and we don’t want our kids not to have what a big 5A school system has just because they have more money than us and they’re bigger than us. We want our kids to have those same experiences, just the same types of facilities that they have. And I feel like we’ve successfully done that over the past several years.”

Berrong credited past superintendents and school boards for keeping the 45-year-old school facilities in such good shape. He also informed folks that the system was recently able to purchase a 10-acre parcel of land behind and adjoining the school property for future expansion.

The superintendent then talked about recent Georgia legislation aimed at preventing the teaching of certain divisive concepts to kids, for example, surrounding racial superiority and inferiority.

“It says that any teacher that is teaching students that they are less than anybody else, that can be reported to the school system,” Berrong said. “The principal has to investigate that. Then, if the parents are still not happy with that, it goes to the (local) board of education, then it goes to the State Board of Education.

“We know the values in Towns County. That is one of the great things about living in

such a small community. We can do things the way we need to do them. So, that was never a concern for us.

“But now, there’s actually legislation that will prevent that from happening in the State of Georgia.”

One attendee questioned Berrong about the use of televised material in the school system that contains ads promoting sexual and race-based cultural issues.

Berrong said he is not aware of any such material circulating within the Towns County School System, and that the only way he can imagine that happening would be through a website like YouTube.

“We’ve not had an issue with that,” Berrong said before moving onto school safety.

He described the new CrisisGo system that all teachers now have to alert authorities to threats and emergencies. And rather than simply locking doors and hiding, children are now taught to throw things at any armed assailant entering a classroom so said assailant can’t aim as easily.

Of course, there is quite a bit more to school safety protocols than can be addressed in this short article.

One attendee asked about a book a parent found in the children’s section of the Mountain Regional Library in Young Harris that promotes a range of sexual activity with graphics, pictures and explanations, titled “It’s Perfectly Normal.”

The questioner alleged that requests written by several local mothers for the book to be removed from the children’s section were refused by

the Mountain Regional Library System.

She wanted to know if the school system would allow such books in the school library, to which Berrong replied he is familiar with that book but can’t comment because it’s not a school issue.

“It would shock you, it would shock you,” Berrong said, “but that would not happen in our school.”

A question on how the school system approaches teaching the trades was raised. Berrong covered the health occupations program, Future Business Leaders of America program, and the agriculture program, otherwise known as Career, Technical and Agricultural Education.

Berrong fielded a few other questions about school funding, school nutrition, and civics type curriculum, then Perren addressed the Movers and Shakers briefly.

“The impact that you and this organization have had on the kids here in Towns County over the years – going in and being mentors, going in and helping our ag programs, and just being involved in the school and being supportive of the school – (has been great for Towns County students),” Perren said.

“Bad things can happen here just like they can anywhere else. But you’ve got to go looking for it at Towns County High School,” he continued. “We don’t have any gangs or any wannabe gangs at Towns County.

“Going back to the issue of safety, I think we all know that anything could happen anywhere at any time in this country. It’s just an unfortunate truth. But one thing that we really try to do with these kids, in addition to the mentor program and the mental health support, is have real relationships.”

Because if a student knows that someone cares about them, Perren said, they’re less likely to take a wrong path.

“Kids don’t care what you know until they know that you care,” he said.

In conclusion, Perren said that educating the kids of the school system “has been the blessing on my life, a calling to work here in Towns County.”

The Mountain Movers and Shakers meet every Friday at 8 a.m. inside Sundance Grill in Hiawassee.

Jr. adding that the third potential license was “already in the process.”

Furthermore, Attorney Mitchell said that license applications meeting the city’s ordinance requirements must be accepted.

Also discussed in the work session was the Hiawassee Night Market returning this Friday, Aug. 5, from 5-9 p.m., featuring live music from the Grace Worley Band, ax throwing, artisans and craftsmen from around the region, and plenty of food and beverage options.

Finally, the council entered into an executive session “to discuss potential litigation,” adjourning immediately upon exiting the session. Additional details on other topics from the July 25 work session will be available in the coverage of the Aug. 2 regular meeting.

Chaplain Moss...from Page 1A

In such a merciless landscape, death waited with eager jaws around every corner. Because of that, Moss came out of three near-death experiences during his time in Vietnam, all at a point in his life when he had yet to find faith.

"To me, drowning is probably a pretty easy death," he said, referencing one such experience he had after losing his footing and sinking into the deep, murky waters of a river overseas. "It sounds terrible, but you don't strangle. Once you have no air mixed with the water, you just begin to fade away."

"When death approaches, we have no control. It's going to happen to all of us, but our job is to celebrate life each and every day the best we can. We can't choose what happens to us, but we can choose our response to what is taking place in our lives."

In Vietnam, this utter

lack of control surfaced nearly every day. Shortly after conducting a mission to recover the bodies of 15 Marines killed in action, Moss contracted malaria and was forced to go weeks without treatment. When he was finally seen, he had a fever of 106.2 degrees.

"When they packed me on ice, I did not move; I guess I was near the end on that," he said of his second near-death experience. "They put me in front of an air conditioner, and I did not move. I'd seen men come into that air-conditioned tent and then get up. I thought, 'They're not very sick.'"

What happened next will stick with Moss for the rest of his life, as suddenly, he found himself outside of his body, "looking at myself."

"And I know that's an unusual experience, but I could give you every detail in that tent of what was going on," he said. "There's a comforting as-

pect to that, also."

Moss admits that he began to "doubt God, judge God, and deny God" while deployed. In his own words, he didn't believe in the power of prayer. His thought process looks familiar, even if the reactions of every person experiencing spiritual crises may be different:

"I thought, 'Man, if I were God, I'd get rid of this junk, this death and dying,'" he said, though, looking back, Moss attributes these thoughts to immaturity and a misunderstanding about "the way God works."

He realizes now that, with the gift of free will, man has been given the choice to do good or bad. The goal, Moss believes, is to do as much good as possible, because, as he learned overseas, there's enough damage done in the name of war.

As for Moss' third near-

death experience, it came when he least expected it. He was sent to scout out a suspiciously empty hut, and he attempted to paint a picture of his careful advance to the audience that Friday.

"My rifle was positioned for action. My eyes are roving, roving, looking in doors, windows and the area around (them), because you don't know (where the enemy is)," Moss described. "You are very much alive in these moments because you're attuned to the possibility of death."

Initially, Moss thought he had been shot, because while he didn't hear the landmine go off, he saw blood beginning to bloom from an open wound in his chest. While he was returned to safety, Moss told himself to remain calm.

"Being calm can save your life," he observed. "Being calm can at least keep you in charge to some degree."

After being caught in the explosion, Moss revealed that he didn't chew gum for years because it resembled the feeling of blood, shrapnel and torn tissue that gathered at the back of his throat from a torn esophagus. His ankle was nearly detached, and he "had chunks tore out" of his legs, arms and

abdomen.

"They began to work on me, and all of a sudden it became black – the blackest black," he said. "Close your eyes right now and you can see a semblance of light, but it was black. My eyes were wide open. I could still hear, but I couldn't see, and I said, 'This is it.' And there were no prayers for me. This is it."

But Moss survived the blast and returned home from the war. He thanks God he was able to live through the experience, and he has no doubt helped countless people during his continued life, especially after becoming a chaplain.

After telling these and other stories, Moss admitted that his experiences were nothing compared to the fight that the founders of the country faced in their pursuit of freedom.

"(Our Founding Fathers) knew they needed God. They were fighting an uphill battle. They weren't a nation like we are today; they were struggling, struggling. They didn't have the equipment, they didn't have their soldiers trained, but they had tasted freedom. My question for you today is, are we going to let that slip away?"

After answering several questions from a rapt audience, Moss was overwhelmed with visitors and support after his talk. But throughout it all, he was more concerned with the broader state of the country, moving past both political parties and individual opinions.

"For me, I am American first. That's who I am. I was born here, and I want my grandchildren and my children to have the opportunities that I have had," he said.

Greater than even that, however, was Moss' faith, and he wanted to make sure to voice his appreciation to the Father for the protection granted to him during the war and the enlightenment he received afterward.

For those who may still be seeking that enlightenment for themselves, he offered some parting advice.

"When you are that empty and then you begin to fill with the life that God gives you, you begin to realize that you are more than a temporary being. You have a body that's fading away, but you've got a life that's going to go on," he said.

The Mountain Movers & Shakers welcome new speakers every Friday at 8 a.m. inside Sundance Grill.

Music & Moonshine...from Page 1A



Despite a few afternoon rain showers, Downtown Blairsville was busy over the weekend for the Music & Moonshine Festival. Photo by Shawn Jarrard



The Music & Moonshine Festival inspired a robust attendance at the Old Union County Courthouse, with many vendors and small businesses well supported via excellent sales figures July 29-31. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

the renowned County Music artist who by all accounts put on a truly electrifying show.

Anderson has produced three Billboard Top-10 songs and co-written hits for Garth Brooks, George Jones and Big & Rich, the latter resulting in the 2007 No. 1 country hit, "Lost in this Moment."

And Tommy Townsend and friends performed that evening, too, giving folks much to write home about. Also performing during the festival were Rick Davenport & The Boys, Mountain Breeze Band, Heart of Pine, Bone Daddy's Band and Kim & Curtis Jones.

"Originally, we were just wanting to put on a small concert here for everyone," Townsend said before taking the stage Saturday night. "But when we met with Darren Harper of the Downtown Development Authority and with the Cham-

ber of Commerce, we all collaborated a little bit, and the city wanted to make it into a huge annual festival, so of course we were on board with it.

"It has been amazing so far. I have met so many people from all over the U.S. and even Germany, and we did not expect the huge success that we have had, so I want to thank our community and travelers for coming out to show your support."

Townsend's longtime friend and colleague Buddy Jennings, son of the legendary Waylon Jennings and now a retired road crew engineer, came down from Nashville to show his support for the festival.

"This was a great turnout with plenty more room to grow for next year," Jennings said. "I have seen my fair share of festivals, but they seem to already have the system down,

and next year's will absolutely be bigger.

"A lot of things may have changed in music over the years, such as digital downloads and streaming and such, but the one thing that will never change or top it will be seeing great music live and in person, so I am definitely coming back next year."

Many area businesses and organizations sponsored the event, including the Chamber of Commerce, Visit Downtown Blairsville, Granddaddy Mimm's, Iron Mountain Fence, Brown Haven Homes, Folger Gas, Lucky's Restaurant, Teppanyaki Time, RRG Roofing and more.

For more information and to stay on top of whatever Townsend is up to next, visit www.tommytownsend-music.com and www.granddaddy-mimms.com.

Hiawassee DDA...from Page 1A

Regarding the city's recently acquired Shook House, Harper noted that "the DDA's mission is to better the economic development of this city to the best of our ability, so with this house, we are going to convert this to commercial use for something that may be missing in this community."

"This way, the entire community is benefitting from bringing new businesses and ideas to be available," Harper said. "We have spoken with about five prospective tenants so far interested in the property and are meeting with an inspector soon to talk about the process of converting this residential building into a commercial establishment."

The Hiawassee First Friday Night Market vendor

series on the Town Square has been a major success since 2020, but unfortunately, the July outing had to be canceled due to high possibility of rain on that evening.

"For the three years that we have been running it, we have never had to put together a rain contingency plan; it has always been near-perfect weather," Harper said. "The next one is planned for Friday, Aug. 5."

"Of course, people will be able to enjoy everything that they have loved so far about it and more, including the live music, (food, crafts) and great weather with friends and family. And with 27 great vendors, this is shaping up to be the biggest one yet. And definitely bring your dogs."

Added Harper, "We also want everyone to come out to the Summer Heat Music Festival that will be happening on Saturday, Aug. 6, at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds. The amazing cause for this is to benefit and raise funds for the Towns County Sheriff's Office to update their technology with dashboard cams."

"People can expect live music of course from several amazing musicians, great food, bounce houses, raffles, face painting, pony rides," Harper said. "Kids can get tours of the police cars and will be deputized by the TCSO for the day."

"And there is so much more to enjoy, so we want everyone to come out, and we will see you there."