

# Towns County Herald

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## Hatchett picks up two votes in recount after settings gaffe

### Elections Board denies recount petition in sheriff's race

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

Due to the settings on ballot scanning equipment being set to a lower sensitivity in the Aug. 11 General Primary Runoff Elections, Republican Bo Hatchett has picked up two Towns County votes in the District 50 State Senate race recount.

The Towns County Board of Elections Office made this determination during Monday's state-mandated race recount when a Dominion Voting Systems technician noticed the machines were not set to electronically adjudicate hand-

filled provisional and absentee-by-mail ballots.

A Dominion tech assigned by the Secretary of State's Office attends each election to operate and maintain the settings on the machines, and it was unclear at press time what the default be or why the machines were in a lower sensitivity during the runoff.

Electronic adjudication allows a hand-filled ballot with stray marks to be kicked out for manual adjudication by specially designated elections volunteers, who must decide how the voter meant to cast his or her ballot based on the visible

markings.

In the case of Hatchett's two additional votes, adjudicators determined that the ballots in question were clearly marked in his favor, yet the sensitivity setting of the machine made the ballots register "no votes" in the state senate race.

All 4,131 local ballots were accounted for in the Aug. 31 recount, but the final recount result showed that, of the 3,652 Towns County votes cast in the state senate race – up by two with the different settings – Hall's total remained at 1,878 votes to Hatchett's updated 1,684 votes.

See *Recount*, Page 6A



L-R: Towns County Elections Supervisor Rachel Edwards with the Board of Elections – Chair Dr. Janet Oliva, David Plunkett, Loretta Youngblood, Vice Chair Scott Ledford and Betsy Young.  
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## School board to adopt budget in Sept. 8 meeting on campus

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

The Towns County Board of Education will adopt the 2020-21 school budget on Tuesday, Sept. 8, at 7 p.m. inside the Middle/High Media Center.

Fortunately for taxpayers, the budget is very similar to last year's very despite challenges with coronavirus, and Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong said the school system will be accepting the rollback rate in 2020.

As previously reported, due to the economic impacts of COVID-19, the state will be contributing significantly less money for local education this school year, creating a budget shortfall of \$491,000 in "Quality Basic Education" monies in Towns County.

To partly make up for this difference, the system is



Dr. Darren Berrong

reducing the 2020-21 school year by five calendar days, trimming instruction time for students from 176 to 174 days, and for staff from 190 to 185 days, effectively shaving about \$250,000 in employee pay off the local budget.

Furthermore, the state is contributing about \$229,000 in federal CARES Act reimbursement monies, which, when combined with the savings from a shortened school year, will go a long way toward making up for the budget shortfall caused by the state cuts to local funding.

Additionally, the schools are expecting teacher pay step/upgrades of \$220,000, leading to an overall shortfall of \$232,000 that will be paid for using reserve funds should it become necessary, though the board office plans to "monitor expenditures and come in under budget."

In a recent public budget meeting, School Finance Director Myra Underwood said fiscal year 2020 revenues were looking to come in more than budgeted, with sales tax collections being up over the

See *School Budget*, Page 6A

## Fairgrounds to hold October craft show in place of Fall Festival



Towns County Lions Club Member Shannon Nguyen and Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason in last Thursday's Georgia Mountain Fair Board of Directors meeting.  
Photo by Jarrett Whitener

By Jarrett Whitener  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Due to COVID-19, the Georgia Mountain Fair Board of Directors has postponed the Fall Festival until 2021.

Board members made their decision in an Aug. 27 meeting inside Anderson Music Hall. In place of the Fall Festival and its usual slate of live entertainment, the board will host the Georgia Mountain

Fair Craft Show the second and third weekends in October. This latest decision comes on the heels of the board's July 16 call to postpone the Georgia Mountain Fair.  
See *Fall Festival*, Page 6A

## Volunteers work together to feed, care for local cat colonies



Towns County Feline Feeders, L-R: Holly Tiger, Sue Scott, Rhonda Kopecky, Dan Howard, Sandy Hazen and Sheila McDevitt. Not pictured: Cat Anderson and Karen Carmichael.  
Photo/Submitted

By Jarrett Whitener  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

A small collective of caring Towns County residents have formed a group they call the Towns County Feline Feeders dedicated to feeding cat colonies around the area.

Sue Scott leads the initiative and has been tending to the needs of local

colonies for the last six years. "I feed six colonies," Scott said at one of the locations last week. "There are 10 cat colonies in Towns County, which is approximately 24-30 cats. Right now, these cats were here, and somebody noticed they were here, and since I live around here it was perfect for me to do."

"It is a problem in Towns

County. In the last six years, I have spayed and neutered more than I can count. I have gotten some adopted, and we have taken a lot out of here."

Volunteers such as Sandy Hazen also contribute to the feeding and care of the cats, going out twice a day each day of the week to make sure they have food and water.

See *Cat Colonies*, Page 6A

## Council discusses alcohol ordinance, Halloween in work session

By Jarrett Whitener  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Hiwassee Mayor Liz Ordiales opened the livestreamed Aug. 24 City Council work session by asking people to continue to "wear the masks, wash your hands and walk away to keep 6 feet" due to COVID-19.

"We are continuing to be closed at City Hall," Ordiales said. "Everyone is working. We have a full staff there every day. If you need to come in for any reason, call 706-896-2202 and we will gladly address your concerns or give you whatever you need with no issues."

During the meeting, the council reviewed questions on the updated alcohol ordinance, which includes new language about package stores should city voters ever decide to allow them in town. A petition to put package stores to a local vote failed earlier this year.

One of the ordinance changes is the city is planning to make it to consolidate alcohol sales times to allow beer and wine package sales, as well

as sales in restaurants, until midnight throughout the week except on New Year's, when alcohol may be served until 2 a.m.

Currently, the ordinance allows some sales to 11:30 p.m. and others to 12 p.m., so the change would be for consistency's sake.

And though it's still under revision, the updated ordinance currently features a limit of one package store per 30,000 people, which Council Member Anne Mitchell said was unnecessary because it is unlikely the city would be able to support more than one store anyway.

"I don't see why the free market system can't control the number of package stores," Mitchell said. "If we say we are putting a limit on it, we are getting involved in places I don't feel like we want to go. If three of them open, two and a half of them are going to fail."

The first reading of the ordinance was held after press time during the regular city meeting livestreamed at the "City of Hiwassee" Facebook



Liz Ordiales

page on Tuesday, Sept. 1, with the second reading to be held in the October council meeting.

Next up, Mayor Ordiales discussed the city's plans for their upcoming Halloween event.

"Let's be conservative and say we had 500 kids, and each kid brings a parent, and now you have 1,000 people," Ordiales said. "If each kid brings two parents, then you have 1500 people all running around. Old Rock Jail is not doing the Haunted House. Blairsville is not doing their Halloween event."  
See *City Council*, Page 6A

## Six dead in COVID outbreak at Blairsville nursing home facility

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor



**UNION COUNTY NURSING HOME**

BLAIRSVILLE – At least six residents have died in the COVID-19 outbreak at the Union County Nursing Home, with two residents hospitalized with the disease as of Friday, Aug. 28.

All the residents who have died with COVID-19 were elderly and had significant

underlying health conditions, both of which are known to contribute to mortality risks with and without the viral disease.

The outbreak appeared to grow last week after the number of residents testing positive went from 20 cases on a single hall to over 30 cases on two halls. Thankfully, the virus seems to be contained to one of the two sides in the building.

"I think we finally have everybody with a baseline and kind of know what we're dealing with, so I think that's the beginning of trying to heal the organization, get everybody segregated appropriately," Union General Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said last week.

A majority of residents have remained well enough

to stay in the nursing home under observation per Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, with most experiencing mild or asymptomatic infections, Barnett said.

The local outbreak began about a month ago when a new resident at the nursing home suddenly developed symptoms before quickly requiring hospitalization, Barnett said, noting that this same individual had tested negative twice before being admitted as a resident.

A second resident started exhibiting COVID symptoms soon after, prompting the nursing home to test everyone on that hall for the virus on Friday, Aug. 7. When 20 tests came back positive Aug. 12, the hospital made the call to

test all residents and staff in the building.

Thirty-nine total nursing home employees have tested positive since the start of the pandemic, many of them after the outbreak began, though Barnett has emphasized the impossibility of knowing exactly how the virus entered the building.

Viral outbreaks are not unheard of in nursing homes, with influenza and stomach bugs regularly affecting large percentages of long-term care residents nationwide, including in the past at Union County Nursing Home.

However, this is the first COVID-19 outbreak in the local facility, and as such, the nursing home has increased its surveillance of residents for

COVID symptoms, with Barnett saying the facility remains on lockdown to outside visitors, as it has since mid-March.

"From the beginning of the pandemic (to now)," Barnett said, "we are just constantly learning and making sure that we are staying prepared, because we don't know what the future holds as far as the so-called second wave or any of that."

"It's definitely a benefit to our nursing homes to have the resources that we are able to lend to them from the hospital setting, with what we've learned in dealing with it at the hospital. That's been huge for us."

"I really can't say, in all honesty, that there's anything we could have done differently. Of course, we all wish that we wouldn't have had an outbreak,

but I don't know that there's anything more that we could have done differently to have prevented it."

Added Barnett, "They have just worked so hard trying to keep it out. And they did a great job for over six months keeping it out, but I think the prevalence in the community is what caused our issue in the end."

The number of cases at Chatuge Regional Nursing Home has fluctuated in the state data recently, going from five to two total positive residents and one employee, with full recoveries all around.

Barnett said the families of all nursing home residents are alerted each time new cases crop up in one of the system's long-term care facilities.

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