

9/11 Remembrance...from Page 1A



The North Georgia Honor Guard presented the colors at the 9/11 remembrance on the Hiawassee Town Square last week. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

to save many others.

"In this attack, there was 2,763 people killed (at the World Trade Center), including 343 firefighters, 8 paramedics and 60 police officers," Keyes said. "There was no way to prepare them for what they were about to encounter.

"When they arrived on the scene they never paused. They never said that they weren't going to do this. Instead, they took action, running straight inside the building. Those actions were completely selfless. Those men and women are true heroes. They showed the true meaning of valor."

Keyes urged the audience to never forget the event, and he performed a ceremonial bell ringing for the fallen.

Bill Rinaldo and the Appalachian Saint Andrew's Pipes & Drums performed patriotic music for the event, and the North Georgia Honor Guard played "Taps" on the brass horn.

Also during the remembrance, Ordiales

welcomed special guests for the debut of new City of Hiawassee Heroes Banners on the square to show pride in local veterans and those currently enlisted.

Banner on the square recipients include Scott Drummond, U.S. Coast Guard; Chuck Frisk, U.S. Marines; Bill Lyon, USM; Bart Rodgers, U.S. Army; Lydia Moss, U.S. Air Force; Brody Graper, Army National Guard; Tyler Guss, USAF; and Walker Guss, USAF.

Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw delivered closing remarks for the ceremony, reminding people to keep 9/11 in their hearts and memories while continuing to strive for a better future.

"We will remember every rescuer who died in honor, we will remember every family member that lives in grief, we will remember the fire and the ash, and we will remember the last phone calls, the funerals of children by President George W. Bush," Bradshaw said.

Continuing, "I want to ask you this morning, are you

having a good morning? Are you free? Do we live in a free country? Isn't it wonderful? It is for me, and I know it is for you. We come and go as we please.

"Let us not forget but let us always remember and teach our children and grandchildren the tragedies that have happened to the United States of America. I feel it is our obligation to teach our children and grandchildren to love, to fight for what is right, and to always remember that freedom is not free.

"We must fight for it, love it and care about it every day. I absolutely love this community; I love this country and I know you do as well."

Like many attendees, Martha Rollison was moved by the Patriot Day remembrance Friday, and she hopes it continues every year so that the community never forgets.

"I was living in Eagle River, Alaska, and getting ready to go to work in Fort Richardson, Alaska," Rollison said of Sept. 11, 2001. "I had the TV on and saw the second plane go into the tower, and by the time I got to Fort Rich, the traffic was lined up as far as you could see because security was clamped down.

"My husband (a career Army officer) had passed away the year before, and I couldn't help but wonder what he would feel about this because he spent tours in Vietnam.

"I came to the (remembrance) last year, and I thought it was so well done and moving. I'm glad they have decided to make it an annual thing, because people do forget. Of course, young people don't really know about it because they didn't experience it. It is great to remember."



Attendees crossing their hearts for the Pledge of Allegiance during Friday's Patriot Day observance. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

School Board...from Page 1A

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 has reduced 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 will be contributing about \$229,000 in federal CARES Act reimbursement funds, 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 budget 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."

Board members also voted Sept. 8 to accept an agreement with the Department of Public Health for the Towns County Health Department to provide flu shots to students wanting them on campus, with a date and time to be forthcoming.

School Nutrition Manager Becky Mullins attended the meeting to discuss the extended federal waiver allowing all kids of the county to receive free meals through the school system, with breakfast and lunch available to be arranged for pickup on campus.

As usual, leaders from each of the three schools in the district delivered updates for the board, starting with Elementary School Principal Shannon Moss, who is in his first year as principal following Dr. Sandy Page's retirement last year after 33 years in education.

Moss reported that staff and students had done a great job with masks, and that two classes that recently quarantined for COVID-19 had since returned to campus. Of the 390 kids enrolled at the elementary school, 99 are taking online-only classes.

Middle School Principal Dr. Connie Hobbs said both teachers and students were "thrilled to be back on campus," and that everyone has been following COVID-19 guidelines to keep people safe. Currently, there are 82 online learners of 222 total enrollment, and no positive COVID cases.



Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong offered a COVID-19 update in last week's school board meeting, saying there were only two known active infections in the district as of Sept. 9. Photo by Shawn Jarrard



Elementary School Principal Shannon Moss was happy to report that all was well at his school, including the recent return of two COVID-19 quarantined classes. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

High School Principal Roy Peren pulls double duty as a director on the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Board, and he wasn't available to deliver a report that evening due to a conflicting meeting. It should be noted that the school board held its regular meeting a day late because of Labor Day.

In his stead, Guidance Counselor Dionne Berrong spoke with the board, noting enrollment was up due in part to kids attending from North Carolina, with current enrollment at 318. The high school has only had one positive COVID case, and everyone seems to be following virus best practices.

"We're working on Homecoming for Sept. 25," Berrong said. "We have a committee putting together what that's going to look like for this year.

"We know for sure we won't have that bonfire or pep rally that we did in previous years, but they are working on possibly doing a parade scheduled for the 24th, and I'm not sure what that will look like, they're still in the process."

Subject assessments have been underway in all the schools, though Superintendent

Dr. Darren Berrong reported that State School Superintendent Richard Woods had said federal end-of-course testing would not count against students due to the challenges of returning to school amid COVID-19.

Berrong reported only two active COVID cases in the entire system as of Sept. 9, including a young student now pursuing online learning in the elementary school and a staff member.

"I was talking to someone today that, if there was a huge outbreak or there were issues in schools, I promise you would have seen on the news by now," Dr. Berrong said. "So that tells me that things are working really well in all systems throughout the state, and I'm hoping we have control over this.

"The numbers in the state of Georgia are continuing to decline, which is great news. The numbers in Towns County aren't necessarily declining, but in the state they are.

"So hopefully, people are doing what they need to do to stay safe and (allow our kids to) continue to go to school and play athletics and have as normal a school year as humanly possible."

COVID Cases...from Page 1A

testing requirements are based on community prevalence, so the nursing homes are testing negative staff at least weekly and residents as any new symptoms develop. All residents have had an initial baseline test.

Barnett reiterated that the nursing homes are following all testing guidelines, and that the family of each resident is alerted every time a new case crops up in one of the system's long-term care facilities.

All nursing home residents who have died with COVID-19 were elderly and/or had significant underlying health conditions, both of which are known to contribute to mortality risks with and without the viral disease.

Barnett said last week that recovering residents were doing well and that "most are still asymptomatic."

A majority of residents have remained well enough to stay in the nursing homes under observation per Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, Barnett said, with most experiencing mild or asymptomatic infections not requiring hospitalization.

The outbreak in Union County appears to have doubled over the last two weeks, with about 80 of the facility's 85

total positive tests being tied to the outbreak.

Roughly 2/3 of the nursing home population has tested positive for COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, though many of these residents have either fully recovered by now or experienced asymptomatic cases from the beginning.

Only one resident remained hospitalized at Union General Hospital at press time.

The Blairsville outbreak began around the beginning of August, when a new resident at the nursing home suddenly developed symptoms before quickly requiring hospitalization. Barnett said 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 Aug. 7. When 20 tests came back positive Aug. 12, the hospital tested all residents and staff in the building, with ongoing testing resulting in the discovery of the newer cases.

Forty-two total Union County Nursing Home employees have tested positive since the start of the pandemic,

many of them after the outbreak began. There are currently 13 asymptomatic employees who are not working due to their positive status and are quarantined at home.

Staff are screened each day at the beginning of their shift for temperature and symptoms prior to beginning work, and Barnett continues to emphasize the impossibility of knowing exactly how the virus entered the building.

The chief nursing officer commends the staff members at the nursing homes, saying that everyone remains vigilant in working to keep residents safe in such uncertain times, and that both facilities remain on lockdown to outside visitors, as they have since mid-March.

Viral outbreaks are fairly common in nursing homes, with influenza and stomach bugs regularly affecting large percentages of long-term care residents nationwide, including in the past in Union and Towns.

Through the end of August, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services had linked 53,196 deaths to COVID-19 in nursing home facilities, at the time making up at least 30% of all COVID-related deaths in the U.S.

Hiawassee...from Page 1A

other counties," Mitchell said. "And the city is going to bag the candy? Have you seen an overload of employees waiting for something to do lately? I think that's too much."

"Well, she just sent (the suggestion) to me, so I told her I would put it out there," Barrett responded. "If Blairsville and Hayesville were doing something similar on the same night, we could probably handle something like that and get the volunteers to bag the candy.

"But I agree with Anne, with them not having it, we'd run out of candy within the first half an hour ... I love Crystal's suggestion, and if Blairsville and Hayesville were having it, I'd be all for it. Or if a bunch of churches (were doing something) ... but I just think, right now, it would be too much."

Ordiales said she would add more Halloween discussion to the agenda for the Sept. 28 work session, at which point "we'll have to make a decision, because it's still a month away after that, but it's good to have these conversations."

The council led off its action items with an approval of new Microsoft email accounts with Freedman Design Group for \$4,650 a year, which works out to \$18.50 a month per user, including police officers, office workers and council members.

"We've had all kinds of trouble again this week," Ordiales said. "We were email-less for at least two days, so we're hoping this will take care of all those problems."

Barrett said her emails from the development director had been going to her spam folder, and Councilwoman Nancy Noblet said she'd been receiving double emails each time the city sent one.

The new contract also includes up-to-date Microsoft Office programs for all account holders.

Next up, the council held a second reading and

subsequent adoption of the new technology fee for police citations.

"We decided that would be \$20 (per citation)," Ordiales said.

Proceeds from the technology fee will go into a separate account that the Hiawassee Police Department can use to purchase technology for the department and court, i.e. computers, cameras, radios, etc.

"If the fine is set by law, there are no fees added to (the citation)," Police Chief Smith said. "A \$15 seat belt ticket will remain \$15, same with a \$50 cellphone ticket.

"All traffic offenses are classified as misdemeanors, and state law doesn't always set those fines, so the fine can be up to \$1,000 like any misdemeanor. Others are capped by law. When they don't set a fine, it's left up to the local jurisdiction and the judge to determine the fine.

"Several years ago, I did a survey of fines from surrounding municipalities and presented the average fine to the City Council. The fines haven't changed since."

Council members also held a first reading of the city's amended alcohol ordinance that evening.

"There's still lots of work to be done to the alcohol ordinance," Ordiales said. "Amy and Denise and (Councilwoman Patsy Owens) have been working on that, they talked to Mr. Mitchell today about that some.

"The first (reading) will

get us at least going so that we can approve it possibly in October if we're ready and have it all done."

Included in the updated ordinance is 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.

With the ordinance, the city will be consolidating alcohol sales times to allow beer/wine package sales and restaurant sales until midnight throughout the week except on New Year's, when alcohol may be served until 2 a.m.

Currently, the ordinance ends sales at different times depending on the type of alcohol sale, 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 in the August work session was unnecessary because it is unlikely the city would be able to support more than one anyway.

Also on the agenda was approval of the city's CARES Act Resolution to allow Hiawassee to receive federal funding "for the COVID expenditures."

"We've already received some \$14,000, and we've already applied for the other allotted 30% for us, which is another (about) \$34,000 - we're getting some money, but we have to have this resolution in place."

Young Harris...from Page 1A

Added Clark, "We talked in the committee meeting that the numbers I had that day were basically to break even. There were no contingencies in there at all; we didn't have any extra money if a pump broke or we needed to go fix something.

"For that reason, I left the \$32,000 in expenses for the engineering of the waterline in there because that represents about 9% of our actual annual expenses right now, not including asset expenses, just plant operating expenses."

Council members agreed with Clark that the rates for sewer need to be increased by around 21% to 25%, and more

discussion on sewer rates will be had in the upcoming budget meeting, where members of the council will review all the numbers and make a plan of action.

The budget meeting will be held on Tuesday, Sept. 22, at 6:30 p.m.

Next, Councilman Dr. John Kelley brought up pavilion construction at Cupid Falls, reporting that work so far included "some grading, filling, taking out some trees and widening the trails around the site."

"Robert (Penland of Penland Builders) has agreed to do the project," Kelley said.

"He is going to do a little surveying, then he will get back to us with a plan. I told him that it did not have to be timber frame like we currently have unless it was economically wise to do so.

"I told him to keep in mind that we did not have excessive funds, but we wanted it done right and that is why we wanted him to do it. Timewise, I told him that I would like for us to have it done before winter weather sets in."

For the project, the council will be using remaining SPLOST funds to pay for a pavilion with a cost of no more than \$96,000.