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Committee votes to deny development variance

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

On Tuesday, Sept. 26, the Hiwassee Building and Planning Committee unanimously voted to deny the requested variance for the proposed housing development known as The Common at Lake Chatuge.

According to members of the committee, the developer's application for a variance did not meet the granting criteria enumerated in the city's Code of Ordinances.

The event came in the wake of the Sept. 7 public hearing that garnered feedback from residents regarding the request, with more people offering opposition than support for granting the variance.

Real estate developer

Kim Bucciero of Tiny South, LLC proposed fitting 54 units onto 4 acres of the 5-acre parcel at Main Street and Ross Lloyd Road, with the goal of making the development more economically justifiable.

Ultimately, she was asking that the allowable number of units be increased from 24 for a total variance of 30 units, a percentage of which would have been sold at below-market rates to help with the lack of affordable housing in the area.

Economic Development Director Denise McKay said that, despite the denial, the developer still intends to use the land for housing if possible.

"I have talked with the developer and am hopeful that we can create a feasible plan that would be a start at address-

ing the missing middle and affordable housing needs that will not require a variance," McKay said.

Committee Member Jay Chastain Jr., who also serves as a Hiwassee City Councilman, said, "In no way was this decision personal - I think we need some workforce housing within the county - but they just did not meet the criteria in our ordinance to be granted a variance."

"It was nothing personal," agreed fellow Committee Member Ken Pollard. "We were just following the ordinance."

The criteria for being granted a variance are spelled out in the city's Code of Ordinances pertaining to Land

See Variance Vote, Page 8A



Members of the Hiwassee Building and Planning Committee in the run-up to their variance vote inside the Civic Center last week. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

City Council talks feather flags, Paris Business Center

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Hiwassee City Council held its regular work session meeting on Monday, Sept. 25, at City Hall. Topics discussed included changes to the Sign Ordinance pertaining to "feather flags" and updates on the Paris Business Center.

In Councilwoman Amy Barrett's opinion, residents

don't want Hiwassee to look "tacky" with the number of signs that are currently out front of local businesses, but many also understand the need for advertisement.

The gray area is where problems start arising, with some business owners feeling personally targeted by enforcement while other establishments have been able to keep feather flags out for longer durations

due to their status as newer businesses.

Threadz Ink owner John Landress attended the meeting to say he was approached by Hiwassee Police Chief Jeremy Parker, who confirmed that he had indeed spoken with Landress and asked him to take down the business' sign at night and return it back outside every day.

See Work Session, Page 8A



Hiwassee City Councilwomen Amy Barrett, Patsy Owens and Anne Mitchell in last week's monthly council work session. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

DDA unveils exciting news for Paris Business Center



The Hiwassee Downtown Development Authority is looking forward to opening the Paris Business Center on Main Street in 2024.

News Special
Towns County Herald

The Hiwassee Downtown Development Authority has announced the Paris Business Center will be providing space for two important functions in 2024, one of which will provide a service that currently

does not exist in Towns County - adult education.

North Georgia Technical College will use the PBC as Towns County's adult education center. In addition to being an official GED educational and testing facility, NGTC will offer courses in

adult literacy and certifications in ServSafe®, pest control, and other services to be determined based upon needs.

"I am so excited that we were able to outline the agreement, especially because there is not an adult education facility in our community."

See Paris Business Center, Page 8A

Civil Air Patrol extends opportunities to young folks



CAP Cadet Chief MSgt. Caleb Sheffield, Movers & Shakers Leader William "Scotty" Scott, and CAP Lt. Kenneth Stanger at Friday's weekly meeting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Back after popular demand, the 152nd North Georgia Composite Squadron of the Civil Air Patrol returned to talk with the Mountain Movers and Shakers bright and early at the Sundance Grill on Friday, Sept. 29.

This time, the topic at hand was not the history of the organization, but a glimpse into cadet life - and the opportunities that come with it for young people.

CAP Lt. Kenneth Stanger introduced Cadet Chief MSgt. Caleb Sheffield, who at 16 has already shown an interest in expanding his role with the Civil

Air Patrol, which is "a Total Force partner and auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force."

Sheffield explained that he came from a military family, born in Okinawa, Japan, to parents in the United States Air Force.

There are more than 50 different cadet "wings" in CAP. See Civil Air Patrol, Page 8A

Concentrated patrols result in additional drug arrests

News Special
Towns County Herald

During one of the Towns County Sheriff's Office's continuing concentrated patrols in the early morning hours of Sunday, Sept. 24, Deputies, K-9 and Drug Investigators conducted a traffic stop initiated by Deputy Darringer Barrett and K-9 Xena at 474 South Main Street in Hiwassee.

A free air search was conducted by Xena, and she alerted on the vehicle.

Probable cause to search the vehicle was established, and a search of the vehicle was conducted, resulting in the confiscation of an amount of marijuana, as well as a crystal substance that field-tested positive for methamphetamine, and drug-related objects.

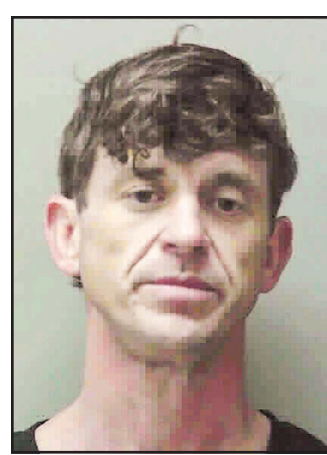
Kevin Matthew Reynolds, 38, of Hiwassee, was arrested and charged with felony possession of methamphetamine, possession of marijuana, and possession and use of drug-related objects.

Sheriff Ken Henderson stated he was "proud of our initiatives and focus on criminal activity and crime suppression in our community."

On Friday, Sept. 22,



Kevin Matthew Reynolds



Nathan Conrad Simms

TCSO Deputies, K-9 and Narcotics Investigators teamed up to conduct ongoing concentrated patrols. These patrols concentrated on a small geographic area of Towns County are very effective, the Sheriff's Office said.

A traffic stop was conducted that Friday at the intersection of Bell Creek Road and Main Street in the City of Hiwassee.

K-9 Xena conducted a free air search and alerted on the vehicle.

Probable cause was developed, and a search of the vehicle resulted in locating a

clear crystal-like substance consistent with methamphetamine that field-tested positive for methamphetamine laced with fentanyl!

Driver Nathan Conrad Simms, 43, of Jefferson, was immediately placed under arrest. Simms has been charged with felony possession of methamphetamine and possession and use of drug-related objects.

Sheriff Henderson commends these patrol techniques to continue his office's fight against drugs and other criminal activity. These concentrated efforts result in high visibility of patrol deputies.

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46th Indian Summer Festival debuts this weekend

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

SUCHES – Get ready for a weekend that promises family fun, great food, live music, and a variety of vendors all for a worthy cause Oct. 7-8 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., as the Valley Above the Clouds hosts an Indian Summer Festival like no other at the Woody Gap School.

The festival will sport a diverse assortment of 50-60 vendor booths ranging from jewelry to produce, crafts, and much more.

Alongside the booths, there will be plenty of food available to curb guests' hunger such as hamburgers, hot dogs, barbecue and, of course, the famous Indian Summer Festival pies.

To keep things entertaining and showcase local talent, there will be several artists performing live at the festival as well as some students, who are sure to impress the audience with their musical skills.

"I've been looking at some of the applications, and it's amazing how many things are going to be there," commented event organizer Larry Wood, who is one of the original coordinators of the 46-year-old tradition.

Wood noted that there will be ample free parking overseen by the Fire Department, as well as a shuttle for handicapped people provided by event security. Admission is \$5 per adult, \$2 for kids ages 7-12, and free for children 6 and under.

Although the only new attraction of the festival is the typical vendor and music variation, there's plenty of fun to be had all while knowing that the money people spend goes directly toward supporting the smallest public school in Georgia.

"Every dime that we make at this festival goes to that school," Wood said. "We do everything from help them go on field trips to help them buy different stuff for class. That's what it's all about."

"It's going to be a lot of fun for two days. It's a big family get-together for us, and we just want people to come out and enjoy the show for a great cause."

For more information, visit <https://www.suches.com/festivalinfo.htm>.



Always a treat at the Indian Summer Festival is the historical play put on by the young students at Woody Gap School. Photo by Lowell Nicholson/2019

Civil Air Patrol...from Page 1A

accounting not just for every state, but for American territories like Puerto Rico and territories where American troops may be stationed, like South Korea and England.

That said, Georgia is the largest wing, boasting the most cadet Colonels – the highest promotion a cadet can earn. Earning the rank of a Colonel ensures immediate promotion to Captain upon graduation into the Air Force.

"One of my favorite things about Civil Air Patrol is the sheer amount of things you can do within it," said Sheffield, taking a moment to describe National Cadet Special Activities. NCSA meets allow CAP cadets to develop confidence and responsibility while affording opportunities to learn about the choices they may make ahead.

For example, a technologically inclined cadet might be more interested in learning about cyber security career opportunities while another may excel at search and rescue. Yet others look toward the sky at flight academies, and some go

down the path of civic leadership.

"In an increasingly difficult world to do so, we still try to maintain the core values of integrity, respect, service and duty. So, many of these things are instilled in cadets from a very young age. I personally had them instilled in me before I was even an official member of the squadron," Sheffield said, admitting that some of the hardest situations in training were the most integral when it came to teaching him important life lessons.

Despite their young age, cadets who earn high-ranking positions learn how to be responsible by keeping an eye on the lower-ranked members of their squadron and attending meetings and training sessions all while running on four hours of sleep.

"You're tired by the end, but it feels amazing when you complete that encampment," Sheffield summarized, relaying how he has witnessed the growth of squad mates, whether that confidence manifests as becoming a more outgoing person

or learning the basics of flight in a little over a week.

Inspiring figures like Army Rangers and Navy Seals can serve as instructors to the cadets who decide to attend NCSA programs and other learning opportunities.

Depending on the field they plan to specialize in, cadets may even have the chance to speak with important political figures like Vice Presidents and members of Congress. Others train directly under Special Operations.

For now, Sheffield is focusing on finishing high school before joining the Air Force. His eye is set on working specifically with fighter jets or helicopters, but, in his own words, "We'll see."

The Mountain Movers and Shakers meet every Friday at 8 a.m. at the Sundance Grill in Hiawassee. They invite local figures and community leaders to speak, and often, a Q&A session follows the presentations to stimulate thought and conversation. The public is invited and encouraged to attend.

Work Session...from Page 1A

Overall, there seemed to be some confusion about what the ordinance entailed, considering there was some debate on what counted as an official guideline pertaining to sign rules.

"(A new business) flags are no more important to them than our flag was to us. We tried to take a 40-year-old restaurant and make it something different," Landress said, adding that people still come in looking for cheeseburgers at the old Georgia Mountain Restaurant location.

"So, it's important for our signage to represent that ... But if y'all are going to make a policy, you have to have the cojones to stand behind it and enforce it equally."

The atmosphere became slightly heated before council members agreed to accept the changes to the ordinance in their next regular meeting, which occurred after press time on Oct. 3.

Proposed Sign Ordinance changes, which have been under discussion for months, were enumerated during a work session presentation:

Feather flag signs should only be visible if a store/location is open; if tattered in any way, a sign should be removed; there should be a limit of one sign per business and three real estate signs per business; for new business openings, allow for one month for the signs to remain up.

If these guidelines are not met, business owners will be liable for a warning for the first

offense. For every other day the flag stays out after business hours, offenders must face ordinance violation fines that begin at \$100.

In other business, Economic Development Director Denise McKay offered an update on the Paris Business Center, saying that multiple businesses had already shown interest in utilizing the facility that will host new businesses and act as a regional business incubator for economic development.

So far, there are 14 clients who have either launched a new business, expanded a pre-established business or, in the case of one person, realized that starting a business was not the best course of action for them.

Most of the spaces in the building will be small, but McKay added that there will be conference rooms along with the business spaces. One idea that the DDA had for the latter was to offer training sessions or retreats for employees; the conference rooms will be different sizes.

The USDA grant for \$93,000 includes equipment like Wi-Fi connection and other amenities, and although not confirmed, it is believed that rent for businesses utilizing the center will be about \$7,000.

Also in the meeting, Babette Dunn requested a moment to address concerns that her running for the City Council in November while contracting with the Downtown Development Authority presented a conflict of interest.

Specifically, Dunn has contracted with the DDA to oversee "the development and implementation of the business policies, procedures and processes required to execute the Paris Business Development Center and will receive compensation over \$500 for the services."

Dunn said she has volunteered an average of 10 hours or more weekly for the past six months as a DDA Board member, stating that there was no conflict between her volunteer work and her status as an independent contractor.

Board members cannot be compensated for their work, but her state as an independent contractor does allow compensation, she said.

Dunn explained that her own compensation comes from a private donor, and the contracted project that it covers will be over in December, meaning that any payments would end before she swears onto the City Council in January should she win in November.

Finally, Dunn reassured the audience she would step down from the DDA should she be elected to the council position.

"The only interests I represent before the council would be those of the citizens of Hiawassee," Dunn said in closing.

Hiawassee work sessions are held on Mondays the week before regular city meetings, which take place the first Tuesday of every month. Both meetings are held at 6 p.m. inside City Hall, located at 50 River Street. The public is welcome to attend and encouraged to get involved.

Variance Vote...from Page 1A

Development and Planning in Hiawassee. A variance can only be granted if a developer meets one or more of the following criteria:

"There are unusual, exceptional or extraordinary circumstances or conditions applying to the property that do not apply generally to other property in the same vicinity or use district," such as geographical and topographical differences or the shape of the lot itself and surrounding properties.

"As a result of such unusual circumstances or conditions, there is an unnecessary hardship or practical difficulty in complying with the provisions of this Code," was another point.

Thirdly, "The authorization of such variance will not be materially detrimental to the public welfare or injurious to property in the vicinity or district in which property is located, and the variance will be in harmony with the general purposes and intent of the provisions of the Code."

Finally, "The variance approved is the minimum variance that will make possible the legal use of the land, building or structure."

It is generally agreed that affordable housing is needed in Towns County; even those opposing the variance have voiced their belief in a need for workforce housing. For many, however, the problem with The Common lies in its location.

According to those opposed to the variance, the nearby Dunkin Donuts has already generated a considerable amount of traffic in a town where residents have grown accustomed to complaining about traffic congestion.

In the Sept. 7 hearing, County Coroner Tamela Cooper pointed out the day that Hiawassee saw three wrecks on Main Street, and Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw said that his main concern was traffic, especially as it relates to emergency response times.

Bradshaw added that with the incoming Bojangles expected to draw more traffic,

it stands to reason that Hiawassee's roads will only be getting busier. A density-rich residential property wouldn't provide any solutions to the problem, even if the would-be 54 units were restricted to only one vehicle per residence.

"It was just too many houses for one little track of land," said Committee Member Matt Espalin, noting that the issue, for him, could be boiled down to safety. "There's not been any kind of impact tests as far as traffic and all that goes, so they just didn't do their due diligence, I feel."

"And then everything was a 'maybe.' Maybe a stoplight – and I'm thinking, you know, 'That's just a big if.' When you're trying to do something of this magnitude, you need to cover all your bases."

"I'm not out to get anyone. I don't even know those people ... We just didn't think it was a good fit."

The Hiawassee Building and Planning Committee will meet inside City Hall at 6 p.m. on Oct. 4 to approve both the minutes of the Sept. 26 meeting and the written denial of Tiny South, LLC's variance request.

Paris Business Center...from Page 1A

ity anywhere in Towns County," said Leslie McFarlin, Vice President Economic Development at NGTC.

The second major development is that Hightower Sweets, a bakery, and a mental health counselor who will branch out on her own, have committed to occupying the incubator spaces once the building opens in 2024.

Both businesses will be paying rent for a period not to exceed 24 months while they receive education and help from the PBC's network of partner organizations and professionals. The program is called SUCESSTM, and it allows entrepreneurs to test drive their business while identifying issues and refining processes before striking out on their own.

"Incorporating adult education and other services from

NGTC is a win-win for Hiawassee and Towns County," said Denise McKay, economic development director for Hiawassee, Towns County and Young Harris. "The Paris Business Center's mission is to offer needed services that will improve the lives of our residents, grow and retain businesses, and assist with workforce development within the region."

"Both announcements do just that. The incubator businesses may or may not operate in Hiawassee once they graduate – the point is for them to go where their customers are, whether it's in Hiawassee, Towns County or somewhere else in the region."

The PBC is currently under renovation. It and the building next door are two of the oldest buildings in Hiawassee. Once completed, the PBC will have four conference/training

rooms and an outdoor patio and roof deck for business meetings, events or collaborative workspace.

For more information, visit <https://www.downtown-hiawassee.com/paris-business-center/>.

"The Paris Business Center will be the first full-service business incubator in the Northeast Georgia region," according to the website. "The service area includes parts of north Georgia, west North Carolina, and east Tennessee."

"Designed to help both new and existing business owners either start, expand or retain their company, the PBC and its partners will offer assistance with putting together a solid business plan and obtaining financing and will put its clients in touch with attorneys, accountants, bankers, and marketing experts."