

Towns County Herald

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Taxing authorities prepare to set millage rates

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Local tax levying authorities received the updated gross property digest last week, after which the Towns County Board of Education, Towns County Government and City of Hiwassee all announced that they will be lowering their property tax rates in 2023.

Young Harris City Council and Mayor Andrea Gibby will be meeting Oct. 24 to discuss their millage rate, which each taxing authority sets annually based on budgetary needs for the coming year.

Towns County Government and the City of Hiwassee will be accepting their rollback

millage rates in meetings toward the end of the month.

The School Board will actually be lowering the district's rate beyond the rollback for the second year in a row, giving property owners another small tax break this year.

Rollback rates are calculated to offset inflationary real estate trends, preventing property owners from being subjected to tax increases without due notice. If a taxing authority intends to accept a rate above the full rollback, it must hold three public hearings and advertise a tax increase.

Fortunately, the recent announcements mean that most property owners will not see a higher tax bill unless they re-

ceived a dramatic increase in their property assessment for 2023.

The School Board discussed the decision to go even lower than its rollback in a called meeting on Thursday, Oct. 12, in which members voted to advertise their 2023 millage rate along with the district's Tax Digest and Five-Year History of Levy.

For years, Towns County has enjoyed the lowest school property tax rate in the state, and 2023 will be no different after the School Board decided to lower its millage rate to 5.995 mills, or 0.012 mills below the rollback rate of 6.007.

"There were only six
See Millage Rates, Page 6



The Towns County Board of Education met in the Board Office last Thursday morning to vote on advertising its 2023 school millage rate. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Invasive lake weed, removal options highlight meeting

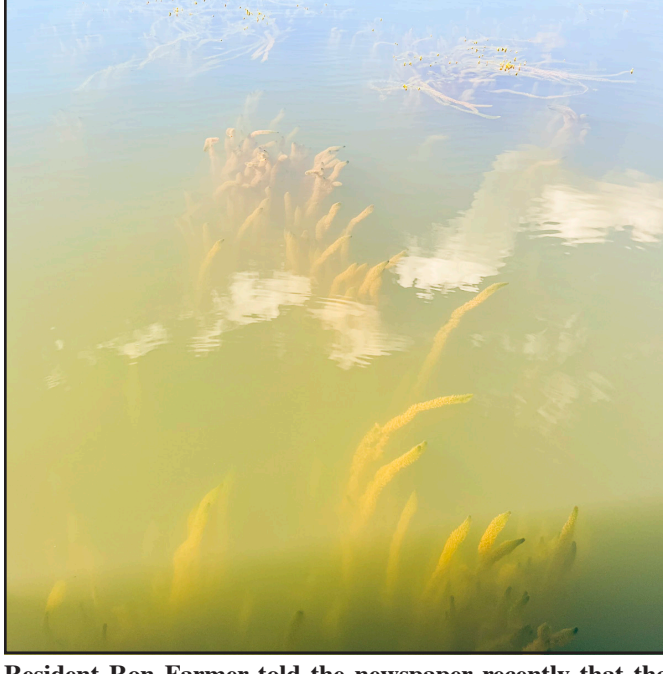
By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Mountain Movers and Shakers welcomed MountainTrue Western Regional Director Callie Moore to speak Oct. 13. A main topic of discussion was the invasive parrot's-feather weed and the steps that may be taken to control its spread in Lake Chatuge.

MountainTrue was formed in 2015 after three North Carolina environmental and conservation nonprofit groups combined. In 2019, the regional Hiwassee River Watershed Coalition, led by Moore since 2003, joined the organization.

In her role, Moore continues to maintain a special focus on area water quality, putting the invasive weed that has been growing in the lake for a couple of years squarely in her jurisdiction.

See Invasive Plant, Page 6



Resident Ron Farmer told the newspaper recently that the parrot's-feather weed is so bad on the south end of Lake Chatuge that "we can no longer go in the water, and the invasive species is clogging up our boat motors." Photo/Ron Farmer

Sons of the Pioneers to play benefit concert Sunday



This Sunday, Oct. 22, is your chance to see the legendary Sons of the Pioneers live in concert, all for the worthy cause of raising money for childhood literacy.

News Special
Towns County Herald

Fresh from the Grand Ole Opry, the Sons of the Pioneers western music group will be performing in Blairsville on Sunday, Oct. 22, at 2 p.m. inside the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center at 926 Panther Overlook.

The famed act has been billed as "the most influential western-music group of all time, founded in 1934 and still going strong!"

Sons of the Pioneers are known around the world for cowboy classics such as "Tumbling Tumbleweeds," "Cool Water" and "Don't Fence Me In," with their iconic harmonies, yodeling and driving rhythm.

There are currently five members of the group: Tommie Nallie, Ken Lattimore, John Fullerton, Paul Elliot and Chuck Ervin.

"You will be blown away by the sound," Fullerton said previously. "The sound will sound exactly the same if you've been a Pioneer fan all your life. The sound has not changed."

"We are still singing the same arrangements that we've done for all these years, and it will be the familiar cowboy classics that were popular in so many of the western movies," added Fullerton, noting that people will hear those signature three-part harmony vocals and instrumentation.

By every measure, the

concert promises to be a memorable event for everyone, held at a state-of-the-art venue.

People from all over the North Georgia Mountains and beyond are invited to come see the performers live in concert this weekend, with tickets selling for just \$36 apiece. And attendees should know that their support of the concert will directly benefit local children and families.

All proceeds from the concert will go to Ferst Readers of Union County Childhood Literacy Program, which furnishes a free book every month to any registered child in Union County ages birth to five years and helps to promote literacy through early childhood read-

See Sons of the Pioneers, Page 6

County to withdraw from Joint Development Authority

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw sent a letter this month to the cities of Hiwassee and Young Harris notifying them that he intends to withdraw Towns County Government from the Towns County Joint Development Authority.

The letter, dated Oct. 3, arrived at Hiwassee City Hall on Thursday, Oct. 12, addressed to Mayor Liz Ordiales and the Hiwassee City Council.

"I would like to take this opportunity to thank both Mayor Ordiales and the council members for their service to the citizens of Hiwassee," Bradshaw began the letter.

Continuing, "In the beginning of 2020, the county and both cities decided a need existed for a Joint Development Authority made up of

representatives from each entity. However, as you are aware, our county has experienced exponential growth due to the pandemic and other factors.

"At this time, the county feels like with the economic conditions and growth our area is experiencing, the need that was found in 2020 no longer exists. Therefore, let this letter serve as an official notice that the Towns County Government is withdrawing as a member of the Joint Development Authority and will no longer participate in its activities.

"This letter will also serve as the required 60-day notice of Towns County's intent not to renew the 'Intergovernmental Agreement for the Provision of Economic Development Services by and between the City of Hiwassee, the City of Young Harris, and Towns County.'

"Once again thank you



Cliff Bradshaw
County Commissioner

for your continued service. Your contributions are vital to the continued success of our communities."

Since the Joint Development Authority was formed,

See Development Authority, Page 6

Sheriff's Office arrests two residents on cocaine charges

News Special
Towns County Herald

Towns County Drug Investigators received a tip regarding drug activity on Saturday, Oct. 7, at 39 Happy Valley Road in Hiwassee.

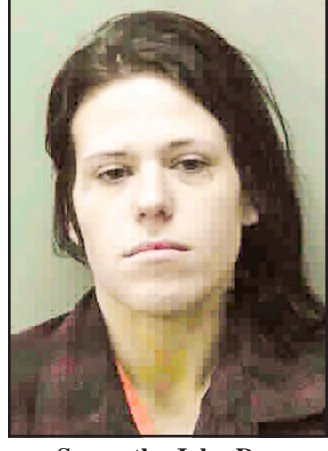
During the investigation, probable cause was developed to search the residence. As a result, cocaine that field-tested positive was confiscated.

Jason Cole Lampert, 41, and Samantha Jolee Dye, 28, both of Hiwassee, were arrested and charged with felony possession of cocaine.

Sheriff Ken Henderson said he appreciates the community's willingness to report criminal and drug activity, which assists the Towns Coun-



Jason Cole Lampert



Samantha Jolee Dye

ty Sheriff's Office with its drug initiatives.

Anonymous tips may be

submitted online by visiting <https://www.townscountysheriff.org/>.

Early voting started Monday; continues through Nov. 3

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Advanced in-person voting for the Hiwassee General Election and the countywide Special Election for the Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax Referendum began on Monday and will run weekdays between now and Friday, Nov. 3.

There will also be two days of weekend voting on Saturday, Oct. 21, and Saturday, Oct. 28, with all early voting to take place between

9 a.m. and 5 p.m. inside the Towns County Board of Elections Office located at 67 Lakeview Circle, Suite A, in Hiwassee.

Election Day is Tuesday, Nov. 7, with voting set for 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. On Election Day, people will need to report to their designated precinct either in Hiwassee or Young Harris for the countywide election, and municipal election voting will occur inside the Elections Office.

Only registered city

See Early Voting, Page 6



Eligible voters can cast their ballots in the local elections at the Towns County Board of Elections Office, located in the same building as the Civic Center off the Hiwassee Town Square.

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Lake Levels

Blue Ridge 1,673.32
Chatuge 1,919.84
Nottely 1,765.80

FOOTBALL

10/20 7:30 PM

@ Warren Co

CASA @ Movers & Shakers See page 5

Digests & Millage Rates See pages 5, 9, 12

Remember My Name Oct. 26 See page 14



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Tina Denton | 706-435-1104
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NMLS# 744611

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Hiwassee Main Office
NMLS# 744609

Millage Rates...from Page 1

counties in the entire state that were under 10 mills (combined last year)." Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong said. "(Adopting this millage rate), we would definitely be the only school system in the state with a millage rate in the 5's, and I don't think anybody's even going to be in the 6's, so we are going to be significantly lower than everyone else."

Despite a consistently lowered millage rate, the School District has increased its property tax collections due to substantial growth in the digest in recent years, to the tune of about \$1.2 million in additional tax revenues since 2019. But growth in the digest is a double-edged sword, as the higher the local property values, the more the School District – and by extension taxpayers – is expected to pay in "local fair share" money that is in turn withheld by the state.

And because of the way the state funding scheme works, the district is now in the position of losing more state money than it is collecting in additional tax revenues, Berrong said, all during a time of extreme economic uncertainty. One of the reasons the

schools have been able to continue lowering the millage rate, despite less money coming from the state, is all the pandemic-era federal funding that has shored up the district's coffers.

However, no additional COVID-linked federal dollars will be forthcoming, and the schools still perceive needs for students in the district, which is why the Board of Education is asking voters to support the Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax Referendum this November.

Without ESPLOST, the growing deficit in state funding and other budgetary setbacks will mean the district will not be able to complete multiple capital improvement projects at the schools, in which case the board signaled it may have to look at raising property taxes starting next year.

"We're hoping we're going to get this ESPLOST passed, which is going to help us out tremendously with the items that we can use the ESPLOST for," Board Chair Stephanie McConnell said. "We cannot use the ESPLOST to pay salaries; we are not going to be able to use it for things

that are everyday running expenses."

At the Elementary School alone, ESPLOST will pay for new flooring, playground restrooms, schoolwide restroom renovations, roof and HVAC renovations, and new technology, software and educational supplies.

"It's going to be tough over the next several years if we don't get an ESPLOST passed, but if we don't, then we go with other options and just see where we are from there," Berrong said.

The Board of Education will adopt its 2023 millage rate in a called meeting on Thursday, Oct. 26, at 7:30 a.m. in the Board Office at 67 Lakeview Circle in Hiwassee, on the lower floor of the building.

Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw will adopt the county millage and fire millage rates in a called meeting on Thursday, Oct. 26, at 9:30 a.m. in the Towns County Temporary Courthouse Facilities at 900 Main Street in Hiwassee.

Hiwassee City Council will adopt the city's millage rate in a meeting on Monday, Oct. 30, at 6 p.m. inside City Hall at 50 River Street.

Development Authority...from Page 1

the county and cities have contributed monetarily toward the salary of Economic Development Director Denise McKay for her services leading the organization, next steps for which remained unclear at press time.

And though the withdrawal letter has been mailed to Young Harris City Hall, per Bradshaw, Mayor Andrea Gibby said she had not received any communication on the matter from the Commissioner's Office as of the end of last week.

"His actions are highly unprofessional," Gibby said Friday, expressing her displeasure with the decision. "We are supposed to be partners, but he has decided to separate himself from a healthy community partnership."

Also Friday, Mayor Ordiales said that the news came suddenly, describing Bradshaw's decision as "totally unexpected." She added that the city would

have to "regroup" on the issue when she returned from a vacation later this month.

Likewise, Gibby said that discussions about what comes next for the Joint Development Authority would be taking place soon with the Young Harris City Council.

In other development news, McKay offered a positive outlook Friday via Facebook, making a big announcement for the Paris Business Center that is in the works in Hiwassee.

"We, the City of Hiwassee and the Hiwassee Downtown Development Authority have been working on a project for several years to restore two of the oldest buildings in downtown Hiwassee," McKay said.

Continuing, "One of the buildings will be a full-service business development center with incubator spaces, called the Paris Business Center (named after the family we purchased the buildings from way below

the fair market value).

"This afternoon I received a phone call from the Rural Development Office with the State of Georgia. They are submitting the Paris Business Development project to the White House for recognition as a rural development success project.

"We will find out next week if the White House has selected our project to be recognized. Even if the White House does not select it, the State wants to do a video on the business center and promote it as a rural development success.

"This is a huge accomplishment and honor for all that have been and continue to be involved with this. It's hard to imagine that a project from Hiwassee, Georgia, is being nominated for national recognition. I am so proud of everyone that has helped to make this happen.

"When I need it most, God lets me know that He is in control and that all will be OK."

Invasive Plant...from Page 1

Parrot's-feather propagates quickly, Moore explained that only a tiny piece of the plant is required for the weed to take root elsewhere, making it particularly likely to spread when it gets chopped up by passing boat motors.

One way it invades ecosystems is because of its common use as a decorative plant; the poor decision to dump aquariums into local lakes has caused outbreaks in other places.

But the more likely scenario for the local problem is careless boaters. The Georgia Power Company has been combating a parrot's-feather infestation in nearby Lake Burton in Rabun County since 2020, and Moore's hypothesis is that the weed "hitched a ride" on a visitor's watercraft.

After failing to rinse the organism off the boat, it's possible that anyone who recently picked up stray pieces of parrot's-feather from Lake Burton could have inadvertently dropped it off in Lake Chatuge, where it has been spreading with alarming speed.

While it's comforting to know that the plant likely wasn't introduced to the lake purposefully, there's still the looming question of how the weed can be managed and then removed from the ecosystem entirely, as it threatens public use of the lake over time.

Regarding herbicidal treatments, Moore revealed that the Tennessee Valley Authority "only treats with herbicide invasive plants that are around public boat ramps and in navigation channels."

"Now, their definition of navigation channels and ours

may be a little bit different," Moore said, "so they don't consider anything above (Hiwassee) Mayor's Park to be a navigational channel."

Simply put, the main concern with using herbicides is the unintentional impact it might have on native plants. That said, private landowners impacted by parrot's-feather on their stretch of water are allowed to hire licensed herbicide applicators with an aquatic rating to treat their land.

One Mover and Shaker asked if it was possible to use phosphorus treatment on the weeds, as it has been seen to act as a "limiting nutrient" in managing algal blooms. The problem with that, Moore said, is how parrot's-feather grows.

Despite its appearance, parrot's-feather does not float on the surface of the water but is instead anchored into the soil of the lakebed by a root system. In this way, it "chokes out" the natural environment of the afflicted body of water.

A more effective way to handle parrot's-feather infestations is to release carp. Despite carp themselves being considered an invasive species from Eurasia, sterilized fish can be used to manage outbreaks of some non-native plants.

Moore said there's no danger of carp feeding on native fish as they prefer plants, and while "they don't love" parrot's-feather, they will eat it if released into an area rife with the stuff.

That said, while carp might also consume native plants, Moore said the fish generally won't travel far in search of different species, as the parrot's-feather would be a



Callie Moore MountainTrue

more plentiful and reliable food source.

A solid treatment decision won't be in place until late next summer, Moore estimated. Between a lake inventory and in-house environmental review by TVA, and the Georgia Environmental Protection Division's clearance of the data, it's going to take time to reach any action.

Until then, boaters should be mindful about what they might be introducing into the lake.

The Mountain Movers and Shakers meet every Friday at 8 a.m. inside the Sundance Grill in Hiwassee. They invite local figures and community leaders to speak, often with a Q&A session to follow. The public is invited and encouraged to attend.

Early Voting...from Page 1

residents may vote in the municipal election, while the ESPLOST referendum is open to all registered county residents. The registration deadline to cast ballots in the elections was Oct. 10.

Requested absentee ballots started hitting the mail on Monday, Oct. 16, and the deadline to request an absentee ballot from the Elections Office is Oct. 27.

In the Hiwassee election, one City Council seat will appear on the ballot in a contest between Jonathan Wilson and Elizabeth "Babette" Dunn. City voters will also see the ESPLOST referendum on their ballot.

As for the 1-cent Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax referendum, the Towns County Board of Education decided to put another ESPLOST before voters to raise money for needed capital improvement projects at the schools, like floor replacements, HVAC

and more.

If voters approve the referendum next month, the local sales tax rate would increase in April 2024 by one penny on the dollar to 8%, replacing the longstanding 7% sales tax on eligible goods and services.

The last ESPLOST passed in May 2016, and the schools pledged then to let it expire early in hopes of alternating SPLOST collections with the county every three years, on an ongoing basis, to keep the tax rate at 7% in the long run, and ESPLOST collections ceased in October 2020.

A county SPLOST passed on the June 2020 ballot to fund the major courthouse renovation and expansion project that is under construction now. At the time, the office of Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw estimated the project would require a full collection term of six years to build.

The county's SPLOST is set to expire in October

2026, but school officials have determined they'll need more money before then considering upcoming budgetary challenges like state-mandated health care increases for employees and decreased state funding allotments caused by the gross property digest going up from COVID-19 pandemic-era move-ins.

School board members have lowered the property tax rate for years in Towns County – and will do so again this year – so to avoid the need to raise the rate, at least any time soon, the current slate of elected school officials is hoping that voters will support the ESPLOST in November.

Should the ESPLOST referendum pass electoral muster, the local sales tax rate would remain 8% for at least two and a half years starting next April, and the Commissioner's Office would have to decide in 2026 whether to seek renewal of the county SPLOST.

Sons of the Pioneers...from Page 1

ing.

"Ferst Readers wants every child to have the best start in life – and nothing helps a baby's brain develop more than exposure to rich language and loving interactions," according to www.ferstreaders.org.

This means providing reading materials to low-income families to "ensure children have developmentally appropriate books in their homes and provide parents with re-

sources supporting them as their child's first teacher."

Registering a child with the program can be easily done by visiting ferstreaders.org.

With children 12 and under getting into the concert free, the legendary singing group will undoubtedly deliver a family-friendly afternoon of classic western songs written by such greats as Bob Nolan, Roy Rogers, and others.

Reserved and General

Admission tickets are available at SonsofthePioneers.eventbrite.com.

General Admission tickets are also available at Carter Williams Insurance, Union County Historical Society, Chamber of Commerce, L & M Furniture, Pat's Hallmark, and Young Harris Pharmacy. Please pay with cash or check only at these locations, and call John Cochran at 706-897-0486 with any questions.

Season End Cruise-In on the Courthouse Square Saturday



The Blairsville Cruisers Car Club ends its 2023 cruise-ins this Saturday. The final Courthouse Square Cruise will be held from 3-6 PM with about 50 vehicles expected for the event. There will be two Club Choice trophies awarded as well as door prizes for registered vehicles along with a 50/50 drawing. Tickets for the fund raiser raffle car, a 1995 Camaro Z-28 convertible, are available at the cruise -in. The Camaro will be on display Saturday and Sunday at the Sorghum Festival in Meek's Park with tickets available at the festival.

The annual car raffle is the primary fund raisers for the club's Christmas for children in need programs. The "Shop with a Cruiser" will take 100 children Christmas shopping this year on December 2nd. Many of these children would not have much of a Christmas were it not for the Blairsville Cruisers. The Club is 501(c)3 non-profit corp. that helps children and veterans all year with several different charitable programs. Details of the Car Club are available on its website BlairsvilleCruisers.com and on face book: Blair-



Win this 1995 Camaro Z-28 and help local children in need this Christmas season. Get your donation raffle tickets soon. Drawing is November 4, 2023 at the Salute to Veterans Car Show in Blairsville's Union County Farmers Market.

Blairsville Cruisers Car Club Public Group. Come visit the Historic Courthouse square in Downtown Blairsville Saturday and see some great vehicles.

A big "thank you" to our

sponsors, supporters, donors and the wonderful local people who attend our events for making it possible to reach our goal of helping local children in need.

Blairsville Cruisers
Cruise In On The Square

3rd Saturday of the month from 3-6 p.m.
On the Historic Downtown Square in Blairsville, GA

Join us all season long as we host events to raise money for the children of our community.

For more information visit: www.BlairsvilleCruisers.com