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Towns County celebrates Veterans Day at VFW

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

About 150 patriotic members of the Towns County community packed into the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7807 on Saturday, Nov. 11, to celebrate Veterans Day in recognition of the brave men and women who have served their country honorably.

Initially set to take place at the Towns County Veterans Park, the event was moved indoors due to the threat of rain. Attendance was exceptional, even with the ominous clouds overhead.

American Legion Post 23 Cmdr. Randal Forehand called the room to order at exactly 11 a.m., then local VFW Chaplain Dwight Moss gave a brief invocation. After bowing their heads in prayer, the North Georgia Honor Guard posted

the colors for the Pledge of Allegiance.

While the crowd remained standing, community member Becky Jake took the podium to sing the National Anthem.

The original plan was to have the Towns County High School Band accompany her lovely voice, but unfortunately the back-up venue was too small to enable that. However, the entire audience joined in to support her in song.

After everyone found their seats, Forehand introduced the keynote speaker for the morning: District 9 American Legion Cmdr. Gary Ely.

Born in Ohio, Ely moved to Michigan at 4 years old after the tragic death of his father. He began his military journey at age 17 when he joined the U.S. Army, and after several years of service

abroad was medevaced back to the U.S. with neuropathy and foot drop.

He continued to serve the country back on home soil, and to this day supports his fellow veterans.

Ely spoke on the origins of the American Legion and the importance of patriotism before stepping aside to allow Scott Drummond, the chairman of the Towns County Memorial Wall Committee, to present the newly engraved names on the wall.

The memorial honors Towns County veterans who have passed away. This year, seven names were added to the memorial. As Drummond announced each name, his daughter presented a rose to a representative from the deceased veteran's family.

Mark Groesbeck accepted the first rose for Robert. L

Crawford. Next, Sharman L. Cunningham took a rose to honor her husband Mac H. Cunningham. Margaret Grizio did the same for her late husband Myron E. Grizio before Rebekah Jakab Fernando accepted a rose in honor of her brother David E. Jakab.

Marsha Venters took a rose for her husband Dale R. Venters, and Nancy Similie took one for her mother Shirley P. Sonnenfeld. Brandy Creel accepted a rose to honor her brother Thomas Wright, and Sharon Scott received a rose for her husband Walt Scott.

In honor of the sacrifices many generations of fallen soldiers have made, a traditional laying of memorial wreaths followed with participation by American Legion Post 23 and Auxiliary, VFW Post 7807 and Auxiliary, American Legion



District 9 American Legion Cmdr. Gary Ely spoke on the importance of patriotism in the Nov. 11 Veterans Day Ceremony at the VFW Post. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

ESPLOST passes; Wilson wins election to City Council

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Towns County voters said "YES" to another Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax in the Nov. 7 Special Election, with 59% of voters supporting the 1-cent sales tax referendum.

And in the Hiwassee General Election that ran alongside the countywide referendum, city voters elected Jonathan Wilson to the lone City Council seat on the ballot, handing him 65% of the vote. Wilson earned 157 votes to defeat Elizabeth "Babette" Dunn, who received 83 votes.

For ESPLOST, 745 county residents voted "YES" to 519 "NO" votes, with 12 absentees and one provisional ballot remaining to be counted

at press time.

Overall voter turnout for the referendum was low, likely due to ESPLOST being the only item on the countywide ballot; just 1,264 people voted out of 10,551 active registered voters, calculating to a meager 12% of the electorate casting ballots to decide the tax.

Still, a win is a win, and Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong said he, the School Board and the entire School System were grateful to voters.

"I simply want to thank the voters for their support in passing the ESPLOST," Berrong said. "This decision paves the way for crucial investments in our community's education and infrastructure, ensuring a brighter future for generations to come.

"This community's dedication to the betterment of our schools and facilities is a testament to the strength and unity of our community."

Berrong went on to say that the passage of ESPLOST "guarantees that there will be no need to consider raising property taxes for at least five years."

The Towns County Board of Education decided in May to put the ESPLOST referendum before voters to raise money for needed capital improvements at the schools.

Now that ESPLOST has passed, the local sales tax rate will increase in April 2024 by one penny on the dollar to 8%, replacing the longstanding 7% sales tax on eligible goods and services.

See Election Results, Page 4A



L-R: School Superintendent Darren Berrong, City Council Candidate Babette Dunn and Elections Board Chair Roy Perren eagerly look over results as Elections Supervisor Diandra Southern posts them on Nov. 7 Election Day. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

City Council members vote to open mayoral investigation



Jay Chastain Jr., Nancy Noblet and Amy Barrett were the only Hiwassee City Council members to vote in favor of a mayoral investigation last week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

In their regular meeting at City Hall on Tuesday, Nov. 7, three Hiwassee City Council

members voted to initiate an investigation into Mayor Liz Ordiales for actions she described as having been "a procedural error."

Council Members Jay

Chastain Jr., Nancy Noblet and Amy Barrett opted to utilize their investigatory powers as defined in the city charter, though Councilwomen Anne Mitchell and Patsy Owens ab-

stained from voting for the investigation.

All council members voted to hire retired North Georgia attorney Dana Miles to lead the investigation as Special Assistant City Attorney.

Miles has decades of local government experience and was one of several lawyer candidates recommended for the position by City Attorney Thomas Mitchell.

Everyone on the council is familiar with Miles through his representation of the Towns County Water Authority in recent negotiations with the city wherein he conducted himself "professionally."

The investigation stems from allegations that Ordiales violated the city charter by signing at least two contracts without City Council approval.

One of the contracts was for the paving of Ordia-

les' home road, and the other a construction amendment committing the city to an additional \$1.2 million in backing for the Paris Business Center project being managed by the Hiwassee Downtown Development Authority.

For the mayor to have signed the contracts – and for them to be considered legally binding – the city charter required her to make the contracts available to the city attorney for review and then to the City Council for voting approval. Attorney Mitchell determined neither requirement was met.

Ordiales, who is in favor of an investigation, defended herself that evening by saying that any mistakes she may have made regarding the signing of contracts were unintentional.

"Like I said on Monday of last week, I did a procedural error, and I should have come

to you," Ordiales said. "I explained to you why that procedural error happened, because I was relying on the DDA to manage and run this building."

"So yes, it was a procedural error. I'm owning up to it – I'm not denying it. That is one contract that was changed."

When Ordiales said that the council knew about the contract change, Councilwoman Barrett interjected to disagree, and Ordiales said, "Let's go with the investigation. That's the way to go."

As previously reported,

pertaining to the Bradshaw Lane paving, Ordiales said the road, which provides access for 10 residences in addition to her own, "has been on the list to be approved for seven years," and that the city road crew simply paves "the worst roads" as they make the list.

See Investigation Opened, Page 5A

Controlling nuisance aquatic weeds in Lake Chatuge headwaters

By Callie D. Moore
Guest Contributor
MountainTribune

For the last two summers, noxious weeds have been an unwelcome presence on the south side of Lake Chatuge in and around the Macedonia area of Towns County.

The primary culprit, parrot-feather (*Myriophyllum aquaticum*), is native to tropical parts of South America, Australia and New Zealand.

Despite its highly invasive tendencies in natural waters, it is still actively promoted and sold for use in ponds and aquariums and has been accidentally introduced to wa-

terways all over the U.S. from these sources.

Like many invasive aquatic species, parrot-feather can be transferred to new lakes on boats and other watercraft.

Flourishing in warm water conditions, it grows rapidly in late spring and summer, creating huge mats of rooted vegetation that can cause recreational and navigational issues.

Chatuge Dam and Reservoir are owned and managed by the Tennessee Valley Authority. Earlier this year, TVA completed a thorough survey of aquatic plants in Lake Chatuge. As we know, they again found an infestation of

invasive parrot-feather in the headwaters of Lake Chatuge.

The agency is currently conducting an in-house environmental review to evaluate the use of grass carp and/or chemical control for managing the weeds. The study likely won't be completed until summer 2024.

If grass carp are found to be a useful control measure, the strategy will then need to be approved by Georgia Department of Natural Resources. If DNR approves the stocking, TVA will implement the stocking program and monitor the outcome.

However, due to a Tennessee Valley-wide scope of

operations, TVA only provides chemical control of aquatic plants in "developed public-access areas like boat ramps, swim beaches, and courtesy piers on its reservoirs on an as-needed basis when recreational use and/or access become seriously hindered."

Since the infestation in Lake Chatuge doesn't currently meet these parameters, if chemical control is the only recommended option, it will be up to homeowners, residential communities, and/or the county to control the infestation.

The growing season is almost over this year, but

See Parrot Feather, Page 8A



Parrot feather infestation in the south end of Lake Chatuge near the US 76 bridge. Photo/Submitted

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Election Results...from Page 1A

Once ESPLOST goes into effect, the local sales tax rate will remain 8% for at least two and a half years, and the Towns County Commissioner's Office will have to decide whether to seek renewal of the currently running county SPLOST in 2026.

The ESPLOST features a \$15 million collections cap and can run for a maximum of five years, meaning that the ESPLOST will expire either in five years' time or once the cap has been collected.

As noted above by Berong, property owners can breathe a sigh of relief, as ESPLOST revenues will shore up the School System's budget for years to come, making School Board members much less likely to perceive the need to raise the property tax rate to complete capital improvement projects on campus.

And the School Board is breathing a sigh of relief, too, as the annual budget has been growing steadily tighter from pandemic-era cost hikes mixed with the gross property digest inflating from an influx of move-ins driving up local real estate values.

The latter has increased the "local fair share" the School System must contribute to educate Towns County schoolchildren. In other words, the state has been sending less money because of the higher digest, leaving the schools – and by extension taxpayers – to fill in the gap.

Planned ESPLOST projects include new ball field facilities; waterline relocation beneath the parking lots; parking lot repaving; reworked HVAC, roof renovations and technology at the Elementary School; basketball gym AC; floor replacements at all schools; and more.

ESPLOST also enables enhancements of the new grant-funded Agriculture Facility that is expected to start construction next year.

This will be the School System's fourth ESPLOST since voters first approved the additional school penny at the local level in 2001.

Voters renewed ESPLOST in 2006, and the schools took a break from the 1-cent sales tax in 2011 to let the county run a SPLOST referendum of its own while still maintaining a 7% local sales tax rate.



**Jonathan Wilson
Hiwassee Councilman-Elect**

Before the county SPLOST could expire, however, the School Board perceived the need to ask voters once more for ESPLOST support, and the third ESPLOST passed in May 2016, resulting in a nine-month overlap of SPLOST and ESPLOST collections producing an 8% local sales tax.

But the School Board let the last ESPLOST expire in October 2020, a full year early, to make room for another county SPLOST while again maintaining a 7% sales tax at the time.

The Board of Elections said last week it did not get the necessary legal clarification in time to go ahead with a dual-count of the election via hand audit, an idea that was floated earlier this year as a possibility to assuage voter concerns about the state-mandated use of ballot tabulation devices.

Hiwassee Election

Voter turnout for the city election was higher than the turnout for the referendum, with 32% of the 756 active Hiwassee voters casting ballots.

And now that Wilson has won election to the Hiwassee City Council, he will swear into a four-year term at the start of the new year.

Wilson is an EMT with Towns County EMS, where

he has worked for years serving the public. His family has deep ties to the area, and he graduated from Towns County Schools.

For close to 20 years, Wilson has volunteered as a local firefighter at Towns County Fire & Rescue, with a focus on educating local children on fire safety.

On election night, Wilson, his wife Vanessa and their 6-year-old son Kaleb had just gotten home from a youth basketball practice – Jonathan is a coach – when a friend sent the family news of his victory.

"Everybody was jumping for joy," Wilson said before expressing appreciation for his wife. "We worked hard; my wife helped me with my mailouts and making sure that everybody who called my cell-phone and left messages was answered in a timely manner. She was basically my campaign manager."

Added Wilson, "I'm glad that all the people that I went out and talked to got to voice their opinion and choose who they wanted. I'm excited to get in there and listen to what the citizens want me to do as a City Council member."

Incumbent Council Members Jay Chastain Jr. and Nancy Noblet qualified unopposed in August, and each will start an additional four-year term in January.

Investigation Opened...from Page 1A

The city uses Local Maintenance & Improvement Grants from the Georgia Department of Transportation as well as Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax proceeds to pave roads.

“And as far as the LMIG grants, first of all, no one did it on the grant because it was too difficult,” Ordiales said of how paving was paid for before she became mayor. “I have done seven LMIG grants – every year since I’ve been here. We’ve fixed Smith Street, Tater Ridge, Belaire (without prior council approval).

“None of those have ever been a problem until we got to Bradshaw Lane, which is, gee, where I happen to live, which was the next street in line to be fixed. Now, let’s do the investigation; that’s part of the investigation, and all of that will come out.”

Councilwoman Noblet said that Presley Road was actually scheduled for paving before Bradshaw Lane, but Ordiales noted that Presley paving had been postponed due to upcoming construction of a “glamping site” there, so the city wanted to avoid tearing up new paving.

Noblet noted that Presley Road, on which she lives, had been on the paving list for five years, and that the glamping site construction had just cropped up in the last six months.

“I’m not arguing about it because it’s mine,” Noblet said, though Mayor Ordiales contended that Noblet was indeed upset about the paving order because Presley Road was Noblet’s street, which the councilwoman denied as her reason.

Councilwoman Barrett said the “ethical” action would have been for the mayor to recuse herself from the decision to pave Bradshaw Lane and seek council approval, and Ordiales reiterated that the investigation would reveal what happened.

The council also considered a motion for a forensic audit to do a deep dive into all areas of the city’s contracts and finances, but based on the “sheer expense” of such a process, council members tabled a decision on the matter pending the investigatory steps of Attorney Miles.

“Why do you think we need a forensic audit?” asked Councilwoman Mitchell, to which Barrett responded, “Because there were contracts signed that weren’t approved by the city.”

Also in the meeting, the council tabled multiple documents related to completing restoration and formalizing the subsequent management of the city-owned Paris Buildings for the Paris Business Center.

Council members were poised Nov. 7 to approve the nearly \$1 million loan needed to complete the center, largely to satisfy the requirements of federal grant monies that have been partially expended on the project and to avoid having to re-pay more than \$800,000 related to the project.

However, as the arrangement requires joint approval by the Hiawassee DDA, which had been unable to go through



Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales offered a variety of updates in the regular city meeting at City Hall Nov. 7.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

all the necessary documents prior to the Nov. 7 city meeting, the council tabled its own approval until the DDA could meet again to authorize agreements on its end.

The DDA met to finalize its part of the arrangement on Thursday, Nov. 9, and the city scheduled a meeting to give final approval for the documents on Monday, Nov. 13, after press time.

Among the documents expected to be accepted were the Intergovernmental Contract with the DDA containing the terms of the loan itself; an amended contract with Storm Construction, the company that is restoring the Paris Buildings; and the Management Agreement with the DDA.

Regarding Trailful Outdoor Co. and the city’s promised fix for the Paris Buildings drainage issues that have been exacerbated by construction there, the City Council decided, based on Attorney Mitchell’s guidance, that more investigation into the problem was needed.

The city remains committed to fixing any drainage issues at the Paris Buildings, which were previously acknowledged as having caused some extent of flooding at Trailful’s building next door.

But based on discussions in the Nov. 7 meeting, city officials want the city contractor and the engineer working for Trailful to take a closer look at the problem to “figure out exactly what needs to be done,” as the proposed fix may not be appropriate after all, Attorney Mitchell said.

Highlighted was the fact that the front sidewalk area of the Trailful building appears to be below grade, which officials believe may be accounting for more of the problem than the city property’s drainage issue is responsible for causing.

“If the city didn’t create the problem, it’s not our responsibility to fix it,” Attorney Mitchell said. “But I think that there’s some part of it that has been prompted by the project, is my understanding.”

Furthermore, since the council tabled the contract amendment with Storm Construction pending DDA approval, any solution determined to be appropriate must continue to wait.

Trailful Owner Eric Champlin was watching the livestreamed proceedings on Facebook, and he dropped a couple comments that were taken up by council members during the meeting.

Champlin asked why the city failed to discuss its apparent hesitation on immediately addressing a drainage fix when the business had made clear in an Oct. 30 public hearing that it needed something more than a verbal commitment “this week.”

“We don’t have a contract with Storm Construction right now to do anything,” Attorney Mitchell said. “As soon as we approve a contract with Storm, we can put them in touch with (Trailful’s) construction folks or their engineer or whoever and begin to work towards a resolution.

“But until we’ve got a contract with Storm, there’s nothing they can do.”

Responding, Champlin wrote, “Both Mayor Liz and City Council stated that regardless of the approval of the overall budget and funding of the city’s project, that the water issues impacting Trailful would be resolved and a written letter would be provided to us this week so that we could move forward with our building purchase. Why is solving the water issue now tied into the overall project funding?”

In other business, the council approved its 2024 meeting calendar, renewed the 2024 Air Med Care Contract for the same price at \$5,390, and held a second reading and subsequent enactment of the long-awaited Sign Ordinance to address the use of feather flags at local businesses.

Considering the invasive parrot-feather weed that has been spreading in the south of Lake Chatuge, council members also approved a \$1,200 contract with Pace Analytical to conduct baseline testing for herbicides and pesticides in the lake, as the city treats lake water for drinking.

During their Oct. 30 called meeting, council members accepted the city’s roll-back property tax rate in a 4-1 vote. Voting “no” was Councilwoman Anne Mitchell, who believes the city needs to collect more property tax revenues. Tax bills should be mailed soon to city property owners.

Veterans Day Program...from Page 1A



Resident Becky Jake performing a beautiful rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner” as veterans throughout the room hand-salute the flag on Veterans Day. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Riders, Sons of the American Legion, Marine Corps League Unicoi Detachment 783, and Club 66 and Associates.

Becky Jake then found her way back to the podium to

sing a patriotic hymn, and after the sound of three rifle volleys firing outside, Madison Hinkey played Taps to signal the retiring of the colors.

Scott Drummond, who

also serves as American Legion chaplain, led a final prayer before members of the VFW Post served a courtesy lunch to anyone staying after the ceremony.

Parrot Feather ...from Page 1A

MountainTrue is working in consultation with TVA to develop specific recommendations for homeowners and residential communities to control the parrot-feather next year. We will host public information sessions early in the season and will have referrals for licensed applicators working in our area.

Attempting to control parrot-feather by manual or mechanical methods is likely to spread the plants further and should only be conducted in small, contained water bodies, not in a large reservoir like Lake Chatuge. Even driving through parrot-feather in a boat can break off small pieces, which can drift and take root in another location.

For homeowners and residential communities who don't want to wait for the completed environmental review and possible grass carp stocking program – which may not even be implemented until late summer 2024 or later – TVA advises that commercial pesticide applicators with an Aquatics rating on their license can be hired to apply aquatic herbicides to control infestations around private docks and in small coves.

When aquatic herbicides are applied according to their label by a licensed professional, they pose no threat to people, pets, fish, birds, or any other wildlife, short or long-term.

In the case that there is a one-day swimming restriction or any other restriction, a licensed herbicide applicator will always communicate this to anyone with access to the water, as well as posting any relevant signs.

The applicator will also know about the restrictions associated with distance to a public drinking water intake. While a complete listing of Georgia-licensed commercial applicators can be found here, keep in mind that there are several categories of applicators; not all of them have the Aquatics certification.

Neighboring Lake Burton in Rabun County has also had an infestation of parrot-feather for several years. In a statement issued by Georgia Power in August 2020, these three companies were listed as “known firms successfully used by other members”; however, homeowners hiring one



Parrot feather (*Myriophyllum aquaticum*) is an invasive aquatic weed.

Photo/Submitted

of these or another licensed commercial applicator are advised to always check references:

Southeast Consulting – <https://www.scsforestry.com/>; Solitude Lake Management – <https://www.solitudelakemanagement.com/>; and AquaDoc – <https://www.aquadocinc.com/>.

Homeowners should refrain from undertaking chemical control on their own using AQUACIDE pellets or similar products that were primarily developed for recreational ponds. Product information warns of this environmental hazard: “Treatment of dense weed areas can result in oxygen depletion due to decomposition of dead weeds. This oxygen loss can cause fish suffocation,” leading to fish kills.

Finally, it's important to remember that there are native and beneficial aquatic plants in Lake Chatuge, which fish and other aquatic life rely on for food and cover from predators. Homeowners should work with professionals to be certain that they have a non-native invasive plant before undertaking any management activities.

If you have questions, contact MountainTrue Western Region Program Coordinator Tony Ward at tony@mountaintrue.org or 828-837-5414, Ext. 3.

Tips for controlling the spread of invasive plants:

Keep it Clean – Remove all plant material from boats, trailers, bilges, live wells, and any other equipment. This will prevent troublesome aquatic species from being introduced into other lakes.

Native Water Gardening Only – Please plant only native species around shorelines. While non-native species like ornamental lilies and water hyacinth are beautiful, they will quickly spread if introduced into the river.

Drain and Dry – When visiting reservoirs with known invasive plants, make sure all equipment is dry and free from fragments. Even completely dry fragments have the potential to grow once submersed again.

No Dumping! – Please refrain from dumping unwanted aquarium or water garden plants into nearby streams and rivers. Dispose of any unwanted plants in the garbage.