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Mountain Country Christmas opens at Fairgrounds Thursday

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The holiday season is once again knocking at the door, and the community has begun to grow outwardly festive in its efforts to spread cheer and joy.

And once again, the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds is hosting its renowned Mountain Country Christmas in Lights, beginning this week.

The lights are set to open Thanksgiving night, on Thursday, Nov. 26, at 6 p.m. and go through Saturday, Dec. 26.

Mountain Country Christmas runs every Thursday and Friday from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., and every Saturday from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Admission is

\$6, with children 12 and under allowed in free.

"The Fairgrounds will be transformed into a spectacular and magical holiday light show, with special Christmas music provided by local churches, art & craft vendors, holiday food, hot chocolate, and of course a visit and pictures with Santa!" according to georgiamountainfairgrounds.com.

Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason is excited for the lights this year, especially after the Mountain Country Christmas was chosen as a Top 20 event in the Southeast by Southeast Tourism Society 2020.

"New this year, we have a lighted rocking horse that stands about 10 feet tall (that

is on its way," Thomason said. "We've also got some new starburst lights to go around, and just a lot of extra lights."

"We have a Christmas Market this year that is new, and it will be from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. every Saturday. There will be arts and crafts for you to purchase for Christmas presents, and you can shop local."

Also new in 2020 is Cowtown, a live exhibit featuring an old-time creamery for guests to participate in preparing a cow for milking by hand.

"Kids get hands-on experiences with the process of making butter ice cream and soap using historic tools and machines in these processes," See *Christmas Lights, Page 8A*



Workers decorating Nov. 17 ahead of the Thanksgiving night debut of the Mountain Country Christmas walkthrough light extravaganza. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

Sheriff's Empty Stocking Parade to roll through town Saturday

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

It's that time of year again, when the Towns County Sheriff's Office sponsors the annual Empty Stocking Parade through Downtown Hiawassee on Saturday, Nov. 28.

The parade will start out from the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds parking lot at 6 p.m. and end at South State Bank Saturday, so spectators will want to make sure and line Main Street in time to see it go by.

Each year, the parade acts as an introduction to the Sheriff's Office fundraiser to help kids in need get a good Christmas.

Sheriff Chris Clinton, who will be leaving office at the end of the year, has been a part of the parade and fundraiser for the last 13 years,



Towns County Sheriff Chris Clinton has led his fair share of parades since first swearing into office on Dec. 14, 2007, and he'll lead his last Empty Stocking Parade Nov. 28, 2020. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

and he feels it is important for Towns Countians to support.

"The parade is the big start to the drive each year," Clinton said. "We will be collecting toys for kids then,

and of course, we are collecting toys and donations up until the holiday.

"It is for children in Towns County, kids that wouldn't

See *Parade, Page 5A*

Raffensperger certifies election awarding Biden state electors

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger certified Georgia's Nov. 3 General Election results Friday, and Gov. Brian Kemp made the certification official by signing off on the results the same day.

At stake were 16 presidential electors, who have now been pledged to candidate Joe Biden over rival Donald Trump, though the president has asked for a machine recount due to the difference in the race being a mere 0.26%.

"Because the margin is still less than 0.5%, the President can request a recount after certification of the results," the Secretary of State's Office said in a release



Brad Raffensperger

Thursday. "That recount will be conducted by rescanning all paper ballots." The certification came on the heels of a statewide hand See *Election, Page 8A*

Hiawassee takes control of city property tax collections

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Instead of getting just one property tax bill in the mail this year, Hiawassee property owners will be getting two. That's because the City of Hiawassee has taken over its own tax collections.

Historically, Hiawassee has relied on the Tax Commissioner's Office to collect city taxes each year, but for some time now, it has been a goal of Mayor Liz Ordiales to transfer those responsibilities to the city.

"Since we've got the personnel in place now with our Court Clerk Jennifer Garner, we've decided to take over billing and collections for our property taxes," Ordiales said. "We feel that the city will have better control over timing and collections than the way it's been done in the past."

Billing and collections for city property taxes are the only things that have changed, as the Tax Assessor's Office will still be assessing properties in the city, and the Tax Commissioner will continue to provide information pertinent to the city setting its millage rate annually.

"Young Harris has done it like this for many years, and we just think it's a better way for us to keep up with our revenues and our collections," Ordiales said. "I think we will



Liz Ordiales

do a better job of controlling our income by being able to do a follow-up process like we do with our utility bills."

The city prepared bills in-house and mailed them out last week via vendor MailWorks, though in 2021, Ordiales hopes to consolidate these efforts under Hiawassee's current utility biller, Black Mountain Software.

"Black Mountain has a property tax collection module which we would hopefully use to process our property taxes," Ordiales said. "They can send out reminders, they can accept bills - they can do all of that stuff that they do for us for water and sewer bills."

This process has been actively ongoing since June, when the city notified the Tax Assessor's Office of its intent, and though the city was a week behind the county getting property tax bills out this year,

Ordiales said the process has gone very smoothly.

"The residents that live in the city will get two bills," Ordiales said. "You'll get a county bill, and that county bill will consist of county taxes, fire taxes and school taxes. And on the city bill, they'll only have the city portion of their taxes."

Added Ordiales, "Our property taxes are very important to the city. While our biggest income is the local option sales tax, property tax is second, so we need to make sure we've got a good handle on how we go about collecting all that revenue."

Generally, the mayor said last week that everything is going well inside city limits. She cautioned people to continue following COVID-19 best practices, as SARS-CoV-2 is still circulating through the community.

"We've always maintained fairly low case counts and death counts, but it just keeps rising," Ordiales said. "So, we're still in a very preventive mode; we're being very vigilant. We are going to cancel our Christmas event, Light Up Hiawassee."

"We're still going to put up the decorations, but the actual event where Santa comes in on the firetruck and all of that, we're going to do that virtually. Once we get more information on the actual process for that, I'll let you know."

Volunteers bring holiday cheer with square decorations



Unfortunately, this year's Light Up Hiawassee will not feature an in-person gathering, but people can still enjoy the lights and tune in for a Dec. 5 online event. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

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Towns County residents and volunteers worked together on Saturday, Nov. 21, to get the Hiawassee Town Square decorated and ready for the Christmas season.

With around 20 volunteers showing up to decorate the square, Mayor Liz Ordiales was happy to see the community coming together.

"One of the most important things that I have always strived for is to bring us together as a community," Ordiales said. "This is a great event for that because it is Christmas, and everyone loves Christmas."

"We have kids and adults and even some teenagers out of Blairsville that came out to help us. To me, it is a huge great beautiful thing to have the community and this many people do this."

Ann Peterson helped decorate the square for the first time this year and saw it as a way to give back to the city.

"I am just part time, and this is the first time I am able to do it," Peterson said. "I lost my husband of 50 years and am trying to keep myself busy. I love Hiawassee, and I love what the City Council has done with Lloyd's Landing and the Mayor's Park, and I would like to give back as much as I can."

Nicole Lonano brought her family to help decorate because she wanted to show her children the value of working with neighbors.

"It is my community, and I feel it is important for my kids to be involved in the community," Lonano said. "I feel it is part of our duty to come make it beautiful for the holidays and have other people come through and enjoy it."

"This allows us to get to know the people in our city on a personal level, and that allows us to be more comfortable and feel that we can go to them for something we might need."

The decoration was meant to be for the big Light See *Holiday Cheer, Page 8A*

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SPORTS BASKETBALL

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How to Cook a Thanksgiving Turkey Kindergarten Letters

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Hamilton Gardens Christmas in the Greenhouse

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