

Arson and burglary suspect arrested

During the early morning hours of Thanksgiving Day, November 23, a structure fire was reported at a residence located on Glassy Mountain Road in Bald Mountain Park. The residence was not occupied at the time of the reported fire. Upon further investigation, it was determined that the residence was burglarized prior to the start of the fire.

near the scene of the fire and burglary, recovering evidence related to the crime. Sheriff's Investigators arrested Austin James Shook, age 19 of Hiawassee, Georgia, charging him with two counts of burglary in the first degree, one count of possession of burglary tools, and one count of arson in the first degree.

This investigation is active and ongoing at this time. As the investigation proceeds additional charges are likely.



Austin James Shook

Burglary suspects arrested

During the course of investigating recently reported thefts and burglaries in the areas of Woodlake Circle in Young Harris and Bugscuffle Road in Hiawassee, Towns County Sheriff's Investigators have arrested two suspects.

Jonathon Caleb Hart, age 24 of Young Harris, has been charged with one count of second degree burglary, one count first degree burglary, one count theft by taking, and one count theft by receiving stolen property. Caleb Hart is being held currently in the Towns County Detention Center without bond. As well, Kristy McGaha, age 37 of Young Harris, Georgia, was arrested and charged with one count of burglary. She has been released on bond from the Towns County Detention Center.

Warrants have been issued on a third suspect, Zachary Patterson, age 22 of Blairsville, Georgia. Anyone with information as to the whereabouts of Zachary Patterson is asked to contact the Towns County Sheriff's Office at 706-896-4444.



Jonathon Caleb Hart



Kristy McGaha

Gold Wing Riders donate to Empty Stocking Fund



This past week the local chapter, Chapter J of GWRRA, made a stop by the Towns County Sheriff's Office and presented Sheriff Clinton with a donation to support Towns County's less fortunate children through the Towns County Sheriff's Empty Stocking Fund. Sheriff Clinton thanked the group for their generosity in supporting this worthy cause. If you know of a child or family in need of help this Christmas, or if you would like to help with the effort to provide for these children through donations, please contact your Sheriff's Office at 706-896-4444. T/Dec6,11/SH

Department of Juvenile Justice donates to Sheriff's Empty Stocking Fund



During their recent conference at Brasstown Valley Resort, leaders from Georgia's Department of Juvenile Justice, as part of a project, assembled and donated bicycles for the Sheriff's Empty Stocking Fund. Sheriff Clinton thanked the group for their generosity in supporting Towns County's less fortunate children. If you know of a child or family in need of help this Christmas, or if you would like to help with the effort to provide for these children through donations, please contact your Sheriff's Office at 706-896-4444.

Noblet...from Page 1A

all these years without the EMC franchise fees, and why it needed them now.

Mayor-Elect Ordiales, who spent several months running the city as mayor pro tem following the retirement of longtime Hiawassee Mayor Barbara Mathis in April, said that the city has taken a big hit in revenues after the six-year SPLOST collection expired at the end of June.

On average, the city collected about \$154,000 per year over the last six years of the SPLOST, its portion of SPLOST funds collected by the county.

The franchise fee, if collected, will go a long way toward filling that recent void.

Excluding the city's own electric accounts, based on sales data from September 2016 to September 2017, the city would generate more than \$120,000 in new revenues annually from franchise fees collected on gross electric sales within city limits, according to the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC.

In addition, the city would collect about \$10,000 more in franchise fees from other EMC services within city limits, such as fiber internet and cable services.

City officials made clear in the Nov. 27 public hearing that the new funds would be used for improvements around the city, such as the installation of more streetlights and other public infrastructure enhancements.

Debate ranged widely among members of the public during the hearing, as the standing-room-only crowd made the case both for and against the franchise fees.

One resident argued that years of low property taxes – among the lowest in the state – have left the city in a financial bind, and others chimed in that revenue is needed if people expect the city to grow and attract businesses to the area.

On the flip side, still others felt that the fee, though marginal for the average household, would still prove to be a substantial burden for people living on fixed incomes, particularly the elderly and disabled.



Former Hiawassee City Councilmember Joan Crothers, right, sitting next to Noel Turner of the Towns County Homeowners Association in the Nov. 27 work session/public hearing. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

Another resident worried that the fees paid by businesses would be passed on to consumers, making local goods and services more expensive, and yet another person felt that the fees would make Hiawassee less competitive than the surrounding communities for bringing in businesses and industry.

The ubiquity of franchise fees came up in the hearing, as they are well established in a majority of municipalities around the state, and several people pointed out that Windstream has been paying thousands of dollars a year in franchise fees to the city.

A proponent of the fees shared their concern that property values would start to drop if the city became stagnant from lack of revenues, but Union General Hospital CEO Lewis Kelley said that the franchise fees could hurt the local hospital by adding roughly \$9,600 a year to the electric bills of Chatuge Regional Hospital and Nursing Home.

As previously reported, the franchise fees are to be collected from all EMC account holders inside Hiawassee City Limits, and will appear as line items on bills to the tune of 4 percent of gross electric sales and 5 percent of gross cable and fiber sales.

Based on state law and the Hiawassee City Charter, the

city has a right to collect the fees as rent for the EMC running its infrastructure through city property – whether the city will actually begin to collect the fees is now up to the council.

The Hiawassee City Council is set to vote on the second reading of a repeal ordinance to do away with the franchise fees in its Dec. 5 regular meeting.

Only two of three councilmembers supported the first reading of the repeal ordinance in the November council meeting, and Noblet's vote on Dec. 5 will likely make or break the repeal measure, as a council tie would call for Mayor Pro Tem Anne Mitchell to cast a tiebreaking vote, and she has been in support of the franchise fee.

"I really don't know yet – I'm going to have to go home and pray about it and sleep on it," said Noblet concerning her feelings on the franchise fee ordinance following the Nov. 27 public hearing.

Even if the ordinance fails to be repealed, the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC continues to hold its stance that it will not be collecting the fees from Hiawassee customers until such time that the city passes an ordinance the EMC recognizes as valid.

The results of the Dec. 5 franchise fee repeal ordinance vote were not available at press time.