

# Hiawassee officials meet for two-day retreat

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Hiawassee Mayor Barbara Mathis and all five city councilmembers met for a “City Council Planning Retreat” last weekend, conducted by the Carl Vinson Institute.

The retreat took place the mornings of Friday, Dec. 2, and Saturday, Dec. 3, at the Holiday Inn Express off Big Sky Drive.

Longtime Senior Public Service Associate Gordon Maner represented the University of Georgia’s Carl Vinson Institute of Government in the retreat.

Over the course of the two days, all involved worked through some of their differences and turned their attention to the future of the city in an attempt to create a shared vision for Hiawassee.

Those involved were councilmembers Jay Chastain, Rayette Ross, Kris Berrong, Liz Ordiales, Anne Mitchell, Mayor Mathis, City Manager Rick Stancil, City Clerk Cenlya Galloway and Deputy Clerk Teresa Kelley.

“We have a new council here, and we talked about coming together as a council,” said Maner, looking back on Day 1 of the retreat. “We talked about relationships, and how do we move forward together as a unified council. It was very productive.”

Hiawassee residents who have attended the monthly council meetings may have noticed some tension between certain members of the council and city hall – one of the goals of the retreat was to show everyone that they can be all on the same page.

“If you have a new council like we have here, part of it is relationship building and getting everybody on the same sheet on music,” said Maner. “Another is to set some short-term goals.”

“Sometimes retreats are more long-term focused, like doing the vision statement, mission statement and long-term priorities. But all retreats have sort of a different function they serve. They do two or three things – usually it’s about relationship building and also goal setting and problem solving.”

Maner is a veteran of this line of work, having partly



Mayor Barbara Mathis and others from city hall met last week to discuss a range of issues with the Carl Vinson Institute of Government. Photo/Shawn Jarrard



Hiawassee Mayor Barbara Mathis and Councilwoman Anne Mitchell

retired while still conducting about 50 such meetings all around the state every year.

At the end of Day 2, everyone went around and shared what they liked about the retreat, and while each individual seemed to like different aspects of the retreat, everyone could agree that they wanted the Carl Vinson Institute to conduct another such meeting with them this time next year.

Some of the consensus reached during the relationship-building portion of the retreat had to do with showing respect for one another, sharing and listening to opinions without being quick to judge, all the while agreeing that it’s okay to disagree.

Other points included: following the rule of order by addressing the chair, or in this case, the mayor; being supportive of one another,

and keeping an open mind to making decisions that take into account the greatest good for the greatest number; proceeding always in a legal and orderly fashion; and values such as loyalty, the ability to compromise, and upfront honesty were stressed.

Much of Day 2 was devoted to united goal setting, and much of that conversation dealt with economic development for Downtown Hiawassee and Main Street.

Councilwomen Ordiales and Mitchell agreed to take the beginning steps on points of action discussed in the retreat, including researching the real possibility of bringing on an economic development specialist in some capacity, either with the county and City of Young Harris, or for use in Hiawassee exclusively at first.

# Empty Stocking...from Page 1A

very deeply about all of you,” said Sheriff Clinton. “I really am humbled by the opportunity to serve as your sheriff.”

Sheriff Clinton briefly shared what he considers to be one of the main goals throughout his career in office, the certification and accreditation of the Towns County Sheriff’s Office.

“When I came into office in 2007, (accreditation) was one of my main goals,” said Sheriff Clinton. “I wasn’t sure if we could accomplish that here – a lot of things have to work together, and it’s been tough.”

“In 2012, we became a state accredited agency. We have to renew that every three years, and we re-accredited in 2015. It’s something I’m proud of.”

“This is not something that we have to do, this is something I think you all deserve. If we’re following the standards and policy, then it will keep our agency out of state liability. It protects everybody, and it’s an important thing to me. It’s something we want to keep moving forward with in the future.”

Towns County is one of 22 counties out of 159 in Georgia that has a state-accredited sheriff’s office through the GACP.

Sheriff Clinton went on to talk about his office’s annual Christmas endeavor with the Empty Stocking Fund, something that is a huge motivator behind the annual Sheriff’s Christmas Parade that occurred in late November.

“One of the things I love to do is help kids,” said Sheriff Clinton. “Right now we’re doing our Christmas drive for kids in Towns County. That’s something I hope people will get involved in.”

“This is for children in Towns County. These are children in unique situations that otherwise, Christmas morning would just be another morning of not having anything.”

“We concentrate on ages up to 12 years old. We don’t exclude kids who are older than that, we just take it case by case.”

The sheriff’s office works exclusively with families in need within the county to provide children not only with toys on Christmas, but also with items that are specifically from the child’s wish list.

For example, if a child wants a bicycle for Christmas



Towns County Sheriff Chris Clinton



Towns County Elementary School student Bella Rose gave her 4-H DPA speech at the Friday, Dec. 2, meeting of the Mountain Movers and Shakers. Photo/Lily Avery

or a specific doll, the sheriff’s office does everything it can to make that happen.

Rather than the children receiving the gifts from the sheriff’s office on a specific day, the gifts are donated to the families to be given on Christmas morning, as if the gifts came from Santa Claus or mom and dad, just like any other family.

“The point is, that a little kid gets up on Christmas morning and gets something under the tree,” said Sheriff Clinton. “There are a lot of ways to get involved. You can drop off toy donations, and we ask that you give new and unwrapped toys. Those can be dropped off at the jail or at the courthouse office. We do take cash donations, too.”

During the meeting, the Mountain Movers and Shakers made a generous contribution to the Empty Stocking Fund by donating \$644 to help provide special Christmases for the children of Towns County.

Also during the meeting, Towns County Elementary School 4-H student Bella Rose shared her District Project Achievement speech with the group, which focused on the art of Zentangles and how they are beneficial to a person’s mental wellbeing.

This Friday, the Mountain Movers and Shakers will welcome District 50 State Sen. John Wilkinson to speak to the group at 8 a.m. at Mary’s Southern Grill. All those in the community are invited to join.

# Young Harris...from Page 1A

residents have been under the impression that the tree lighting began around 43 years ago.

But this is not so.

Thanks to a recent conversation with retired TCHS Band Director Michael Gerschefski, who directed the music that first year and for many years thereafter, the issue has been cleared up – the Annual Young Harris Christmas Tree Lighting began in the nice, round year of 1970.

That makes the tradition 46 years old, not 43 or 44 years old.

And Mayor Gibby, though she didn’t make the first tree lighting – held in front of the post office, of all places – she did participate several years after that first event when, in the fourth grade, she played recorder during the musical portion of the evening.

Fast forward to last Friday, on Dec. 2. The lighting is taking place in Mayor’s Park, where it has been for nobody remembers how long, and Derrick Nolen is the band director. He brought a select group of students to perform classic Christmas tunes for those in attendance.

Cathy Seis, the music teacher for Towns County Elementary School, continued the musical portion of the 46th Annual Tree Lighting with her kindergarten singers. Little boys and girls sang excitedly for the crowd of smiling onlookers, many with so much gusto that they might have thought Christmas was the very next day.

And it might as well have been, for after the singing finished and the mayor held the countdown to light the big tree, the children began to hear the familiar sound of sleigh bells.

That’s when Santa Claus appeared, gathering up the children to sit around the Christmas tree inside Young Harris City Hall.

The Enotah Garden Club, as usual, played a huge role in decorating city hall for

the big event and Christmas Season, and City of Young Harris employees worked hard leading up to the lighting to make Mayor’s Park as festive as possible.

Towns County Sheriff Chris Clinton brought his family to the lighting, and he was thrilled to see so many community members gathered in one place.

“Christmas to me is obviously about the greatest gift we’ve ever gotten, but it’s also about coming together as family, and I think this, tonight, is a big example of that,” said Sheriff Clinton. “I don’t know what they do everywhere else in the world, but honestly sometimes I feel sorry for people that don’t get to be here, because this is just great.”

Marsha Elliott has been a member of the Enotah Garden Club since she moved to the area in 2003, and she was one of the many individuals who helped to decorate city hall, as well as to prepare and serve refreshments inside after the lighting.

“It’s small town Christmas, and just a wonderful way to begin the holiday season,” said Elliott, adding that the community has shown its appreciation for the decorations when water customers come in to pay their bills at city hall.

Kayla Deyton lives just down the road from Mayor’s Park with her 6-year-old daughter Olivia, and the two have been coming to see the tree lighting since they moved to Young Harris several years ago.

Olivia sang with Ms. Seis’ group earlier that evening, before hopping up on Santa’s lap to request a pink unicorn for Christmas.

“A lot of towns don’t really get together and have people together, and this area is more combined as a family,” said Kayla Deyton. “We’ve lived here for three years now, and I’ve felt more at home here than I have anywhere else that I’ve lived, because they accept you, they understand.”



Bob Gibby, longtime member of the Towns County Board of Education, with daughter Andrea Gibby, longtime mayor of Young Harris. Photo/Shawn Jarrard



The Towns County High School Band, led by Derrick Nolen, performed several pieces of Christmas music at the tree lighting. Photo/Shawn Jarrard



To the delight of all present, teacher Cathy Seis led her elementary school class in the singing of Christmas carols in front of the Young Harris gazebo. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

