

# Towns County Herald

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## TCHS earns Title I award; BOE talks SPLOST

By Daysha Pandolph  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

The Towns County Board of Education gathered for its regular monthly meeting on Monday, Dec. 4, to discuss academic, financial and physical updates across the system, and to make a significant award presentation.

Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong presented Towns County High School Principal Bryan Thomason with a Title I Reward School award from the Georgia Department of Education.

According to the Department of Education, Title I schools receive federal money "based on the number of low-income families in each district" to assist "children most in need of educational help."

And as a Title I school, TCHS has experienced major improvement in student per-

formance based on recent data, hence being named a Title I Reward School.

"(This) means Towns County High School is making more gains than anyone else in the state, or at least in the Top 5%," Berrong said.

In other business, the board unanimously approved the following 2024 Board of Education officer nominations: Caroleen Woods as chairman and David Phillips as vice chairman.

Also in the meeting, the board approved paying for projects listed in the 2023 SPLOST referendum from the General Fund, then reimbursing the General Fund as SPLOST proceeds come in.

"We expect the (SPLOST) revenue to start coming in in January, but it is a possibility that it will not start until April," Berrong said. "So, we don't know how much money we will have actually

gained in revenue by this summer, but we still want to have projects started this summer."

Towns County School System Facilities/Maintenance Director Erica Chastain shared plans for how the schools will use the new SPLOST, starting with the projects intended for the upcoming summer.

The 20-year old flooring in the Elementary School needs replacing, and the playground restrooms there need renovating.

They'll also be adding air conditioning to the High School gym, augmenting the grant-funded agricultural facility, and renovating the Middle and High School courtyard with outdoor carpet "so that you don't have to bring mowers in there and worry about mud or rain," Berrong said.

He also shared the idea of repositioning the walkways to solve drainage problems and creating study areas for stu-

dents, as well as designing a meeting area for teachers and students.

The board also plans to spend SPLOST money renovating the Middle and High School offices for safety reasons.

Currently, the front office has a very open layout, providing easy access to any administrator and, in turn, to school hallways. To eliminate the risks involved with this kind of layout, the schools plan to install more walls throughout the office area.

"We applied for a grant for that, and out of \$250,000, we did get \$100,000," Chastain said. "Only a few systems in the state got that, so we were very appreciative that we got \$100,000."

"But they would not approve (the office renovation) project because they won't approve anything of building

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Superintendent Berrong presented High School Principal Bryan Thomason with the prestigious Title I Reward School award in the Dec. 4 board meeting. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

## Councilwoman Mitchell says goodbye after eight years

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

Outgoing Hiawassee City Councilwoman Anne Mitchell received a very fond farewell in the last regularly scheduled city meeting of the year on Tuesday, Dec. 5.

After two terms on the City Council, Mitchell decided not to seek re-election this year, and she will be vacating her seat at the end of 2023.

In honor of her eight years of service, Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales presented Mitchell with her favorite flowers on behalf of the city, and her sisters Grace Howard and Maggie Oliver attended, with Howard offering remarks to let everyone learn more about Mitchell outside her

council role.

"It has been a long eight years, hasn't it?" Howard began. "It has been, but it's been an interesting time, I know, for you. And I thought as a way of saying goodbye and thank you from your family, we would reflect just a little bit on some things other than City Council, because you have been in this community for a long time."

"So, who is Anne Mitchell? Well, she's a sister, she's a mother, she's a grandmother, she's a cousin, she's an aunt, she's a friend, and she never met a stranger, did she? Not that anybody would say she did."

Howard highlighted Mitchell's status as a fifth-generation Towns Countian, noting that while she and her

husband lived away from the community for many years as active members of the military, Mitchell moved back home to Hiawassee when she was ready to retire.

Mitchell served as the first director of the Towns County Chamber of Commerce, where, under her leadership, the first Rhododendron Festival was started at the Hamilton Gardens—a tradition that continues to this day.

At the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, Mitchell took on soap and hominy-making in the Pioneer Village when a new volunteer was needed to fill those positions during fairs, and the proceeds from the soap she made and sold went to local charitable

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Anne Mitchell was thrilled to receive a gift basket and flowers in her final regularly scheduled meeting as a Hiawassee City Councilwoman last week, pictured here with Mayor Liz Ordiales and Councilwoman Patsy Owens. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Council discusses special election, January sewer rate increase

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

In their regular meeting on Tuesday, Dec. 5, Young Harris Mayor Andrea Gibby and the City Council discussed their need to hold a Special Election after the resignation of Councilwoman-Elect Dana Cable.

Back in August, Councilman Steve Clark did not qualify for re-election, but Young Harris resident Dana Cable showed interest in the position to succeed Clark on the council, qualifying unopposed for a four-year term that was due to start in January.

Mayor Gibby described

Cable's change of heart that evening, saying that, "due to her gallery and other things that she's doing in the community, she is not prepared to be on the council at this stage."

When reached for comment, Cable told the Towns County Herald she plans to stay involved in city affairs.

"It was keeping me up at night where I could make a better impact in the community," Cable said. "I chose to focus on the Young Harris Main Street Board, creative placemaking, and the arts in community; that is where my heart is at. I didn't want to be overstretched."

City Attorney Marvin

Harkins said that the City Charter allows the existing councilmember, in this case Clark, to continue serving and fill that role "until a successor is appointed."

This means that Clark, whose current term is set to expire at the end of the month, will remain in his council position until a suitable replacement can be elected.

According to Harkins, the earliest opportunity to hold a Special Election will be during the Presidential Preference Primary on Tuesday, March 12, 2024.

"We're not held to having to do it in March," Gibby

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Young Harris City Councilmen Donald Keys and Steve Clark in a recent meeting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## TCHS students inducted into National Technical Honor Society

News Special  
Towns County Herald

Thirteen Towns County High School students were recently inducted into the National Technical Honor Society.

These students are Aiden Stimens, Wes Pate, Junior Gerena, Jadalynne Reynolds, Nathan Garrett, Loftin Turpin, Kya Smith, Gabe Eller, Madison Molena, Josie Poston, Hailey Gibson, Lillie Cannon and Connor Chastain.

The National Technical Honor Society is an educational honor organization that exists to honor, recognize, and empower students in Career & Technical Education.

As the honor society for Career & Technical Education, NTHS serves over 100,000 active members an-

nually in both high school and college chapters across the country. Since its founding in 1984, nearly 1 million students have become NTHS alumni.

NTHS honors the achievements of top CTE students, provides close to \$300,000 in scholarships annually, and strives to help connect education and industry to build a highly skilled workforce.

Members must be nominated by their CTAE teacher, be a high school junior or senior in good standing, have a high academic overall GPA, have successfully completed at least one CTAE pathway, and be an active leader in their pathway Career, Technical Student Organization.

Congratulations on this great achievement!



(Back Row, L-R) Aiden Stimens, Wes Pate, Junior Gerena, Jadalynne Reynolds, Nathan Garrett, Loftin Turpin, Kya Smith and Gabe Eller. (Front Row, L-R) Madison Molena, Josie Poston, Hailey Gibson and Lillie Cannon. Not Pictured: Connor Chastain

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# Ag Agent Williams discusses upcoming class, UGA Extension

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

People are invited to participate in the upcoming Mountain Gardening Course by Jacob Williams, the University of Georgia Agricultural and Natural Resources Extension Agent for Towns and Union counties.

Williams discussed the course during a recent appearance at the weekly meeting of the Mountain Movers & Shakers.

Set for four sessions between Jan. 16, 2024, and Feb. 6, 2024, the course is being hosted by the Young Harris College Institute for Continuing Learning. Registration is open at <https://www.iclyhc.org/event-5473779>, with a fee of just \$25.

"This course will talk about gardening," Williams said in the description. "Whether you are an experienced gardener or want to learn more about gardening in the mountains, there's always something new to learn in the plant world."

"We will learn about growing vegetables, fruits, and ornamentals. We will also talk

about insect pests and beneficials, how to control the former and encourage the latter. Plant disease control will be discussed with organic and conventional methods.

"We'll also talk about wildlife and how you can manage their impact on your garden. If you want to learn how to prune fruit trees, or what types of plants to put in the ground, come join us! No green thumb required."

Williams is also planning to teach another Master Naturalist class at some point next year, announced during his talk with the Movers & Shakers.

The in-depth Master Naturalist class is conducted largely outside and offers a broader look at invasive species, native species like salamanders, tree and plant identification, watershed management, mushrooms and more.

As part of a wider discussion with the nonpartisan civic group, Williams provided some information on the responsibilities of the Extension Program.

Soil and water testing is a popular duty, whether for ag-

riculturists looking for the most optimal planting conditions or homeowners concerned about the quality of their well water.

Results typically return in about a week, and the price of a typical soil test is \$12. Information about everything from pH levels, nutrients and minerals can be gleaned from one sample, including searching for specific compounds like zinc and iron.

"I have (seen) a lot of folks who move in here who have spent most of their life on municipal water. Now that they have a well, they're not sure how to take care of it, how to make sure that their water is clean, so we offer well water testing services," Williams said in example.

That said, Extension's testing services aren't limited to soil or well water.

Seeing as the categories of Agriculture and Natural Resources comprise a wide variety of topics, Williams has worked with cattlemen who need to know the quality of their hay or the ponds on their property as much as he has answered the questions of homeowners who

bring in a sample of water to scope out.

"We're not a regulatory agency; we're educational," clarified Williams, and Extension has doubled down on that especially as it relates to mental wellbeing in rural areas. While the organization does not provide psychological help for emotional crises, it does act as a sort of middleman.

"When the state looks at who has a strong foothold in rural communities, Extension is one of the first agencies that comes to mind because Extension has an office in every county in Georgia," said Williams, who added that if an Extension agent is approached by someone in need, they are usually pointed "to local resources."

After fielding a few questions, Williams returned to the topic of the natural world.

"Blight usually means a plant disease," Williams responded following some questions about boxwood blight and other threats to local trees. Some blights are fatal, like with boxwood, and signs of infection can turn up in stems, trunks, leaves and fruit, as is the case with tomatoes.

Invasive species can cause or exacerbate these prob-

lems. Bamboo grows quickly and must be cut back as often as weekly to avoid choking out areas that native plants could grow in.

An infestation of the hemlock woolly adelgid has destroyed plenty of hemlocks after the insects suck the sap out and inject a poison causing needles to fall out and growth to stop.

"We have a lot of (invasive species); the list grows every day," Williams said. "A lot of our invasive species like hemlock woolly adelgids and bamboo have come from Asia because we have a similar climate to them."

While not an invasive species, Williams said that the sugarcane aphid is a pest that has negatively impacted the production of sweet sorghum. This summer, Williams conducted some trials with genetically modified sweet sorghum developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to test its resilience.

As a fun, season-appropriate addition to the presentation, Williams shared the process of why – and how – leaves change their color in the fall.

With shorter daylight hours, chlorophyll begins to die off. It's the substance in



Jacob Williams  
Union/Towns Ag Agent

plants that helps them process sunlight and gives them their signature green color. But as the green fades, other pigments come through.

Depending on the tree species, leaves turn different, warmer colors; one type may display blood red leaves, while another turns gold or deep amber. In forests as diverse as those in the mountains, the results are a gorgeous palette of bright, warm fall colors against a cool blue sky.

The Mountain Movers & Shakers meet every Friday at 8 a.m. inside the Sundance Grill in Hiawassee, usually featuring a guest speaker from the community. The public is invited and encouraged to attend.

## Board of Education...from Page 1

or tearing down walls. What they did approve was \$100,000 worth of upgrades to our camera system."

Looking back on the tax revenue projects, the board is also thinking of creating an indoor sports facility for baseball, soccer, softball and wrestling the following fall semester.

While this plan is not concrete, the suggested facility would be built within the already-existing "pig barn," which sits between the baseball and softball fields and currently serves as a storage unit.

The board is also hoping to pave and add lights to the baseball parking lot during the fall.

In Summer 2025, SPLOST will go toward renovating the concession stands at the baseball and football fields. After years of continuously replacing toilets, plumbing and other structural issues, the board is ready for a possible complete demolition and rebuild of the structure.

While this renovation is projected for the summer of 2025, after some pushback by Board Member David Phillips, the board agreed to re-evaluate the urgency of the project.

"I think that (this project) should move up because it is dangerous going up the stairs of that concession stand," Phillips said. "It's not safe. The steps at least need to have something done to them before next football season."

Other projects planned for that summer include replacing the Middle School gym bleachers, adding lights to the softball field, upgrading the lights at the baseball field and replacing the flooring in the Middle and High School hallways.

Another project that may need to be moved up in the timeline is the paving of school parking lots and relocation of water lines beneath them. At this time, this is projected to take place during Summer 2026.

In the past, these water lines have caused numerous problems. Water lines coming into the school continue to burst year after year, while sewage lines going out repeat-



In the Dec. 4 Board of Education meeting, School Facilities/Maintenance Director Erica Chastain explained the installation of 3M Safety and Security Window Film on all outside windows on campus.

Photo by Daysha Pandolph

edly clog.

Because this issue frequently resurfaces, fixing these pipes may become a priority over other planned SPLOST projects.

In the summer of 2027, the board hopes to update the Transportation Department facilities and renovate the field-house locker rooms.

Other projects in the next five years include updating the concrete bleachers at the football and baseball fields, updating the schools' technology and supplies, tuning up the school buses, upgrading the auditorium, and building a bus drop-off canopy to keep students out of the weather.

Chastain also took a moment that Monday night to share the progress of a \$100,000 grant-funded project that is already in place – the installation of 3M Safety and Security Window Film on all outside doors, windows, skylights and nurses' stations at the schools.

While the film is not bulletproof, it is bullet retardant, meaning that a bullet could not shatter the glass. An intruder could not break into the building without some other kind of tool, even after shooting through a window.

Even then, it would take several minutes to actually get through the glass, giving the administration time to call for help. The film is also tinted to decrease visibility into the school and regulate temperatures, and the film will provide

protection in extreme weather events.

"The elementary school is 100% done, so we're very excited about that. The high school and middle school area is about 95% finished," Chastain said. "(The company installing the film) is planning on being 100% done by the end of Christmas break."

Added Chastain, "We are immensely grateful for the opportunity to have received this grant; it enables us to take a proactive approach in ensuring the well-being of our students, staff, and visitors."

Chastain also wanted to share that this year is the third and final year of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund money.

This year, the school obtained an English-Language Learner – a student whose primary language is not English. The system hired a teacher to assist the student, and the teacher's salary, health benefit plans, FICA and teacher retirement will be paid out of the ES-SER monies.

These funds will also go toward learning loss, hiring an additional school nurse, providing mental health services to students, purchasing additional cleaning supplies and covering retention payments for all full-time employees.

Other school system updates this month include putting routine drug dog searches into place and finalizing the plan for all grant money on Thursday, Dec. 7.



# Anne Mitchell...from Page 1

causes. She also completed the 2,200 miles of the Appalachian Trail, celebrating her 50th birthday at Mount Katahdin, "so she has that little badge of courage to wear, too," Howard said.

After returning from the Trail, the Mitchells became advocates for the hiking community, transporting hikers from Unicoi Gap to town for re-provisioning, hosting hikers who needed a place to stay, and running a feeding station at Deep Gap.

She was active with the League of Women Voters as well, and also served on the Towns County Board of Education for 12 years, where her service was so well appreciated that the schools named their auditorium in her honor.

Mitchell was involved with the former Hiwassee River Watershed Coalition, performing as both a longtime volunteer and as a board member, and "she tested water at Upper Bell for a long time."

Additionally, she was a prayer minister for Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in Hayesville, North Carolina, was the administrative assistant at the Towns County Food Pantry, and served on the Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge Board for seven years.

"She got interested in City Council about 10 years ago," Howard said. "And because she was interested, she did her homework."

"She was concerned about what was happening or not happening in the city, and it seemed like they were kind

of stuck in a holding pattern. She didn't know where the city was going, and this is her home, so it was important to her to be a part of something.

"So, doing her research as she always did, she came to meetings. She got minutes. She could recite the City Charter page and verse, and she went through it and looked at all the things that were going on in the city. So, she made an informed decision to decide to run for public office."

Continuing, "And she had to run against an incumbent, because all of the City Council members were incumbents, and that was a big scary thing to do, to say, 'OK, I can do this.' But she did.

"One of the reasons she decided to run was because she was concerned about where things were not going. She discovered the city was drowning in debt, and there did not seem to be any way out of it, nothing that was concrete to move the city forward, and the debt was accumulating.

"There was a huge, huge high salary range of administrative dollars going out, no plan to reel that in. So, she took a long, hard look and said, 'I believe I might can make a difference if I can be elected.'

"It took courage for her to do that, and it took courage for her to stay eight years and go through two terms. And this last year has taken courage, I know, also. So, we're proud of her. She's our family, and we're proud of her.

"And this community should be proud of her, too,

because she has never wavered from her effort and her energy and her commitment to make a better place for all of us. And as the Hiwassee city goes, so goes the rest of the county. So, let us hope that that continues, and thank you for your service."

In remarks of her own, Mitchell expressed gratitude for Mayor Ordiales, the years they have served together and the accomplishments they achieved along the way, noting her displeasure with the recent treatment of the mayor following accusations she violated the City Charter.

"This has been a very crappy year," Mitchell said. "What I really want to do is publicly thank Mayor Liz. Everything she has done to move this city forward from starting with the very little things like getting our payroll organized and straightened out, and everybody in the places they need to be with the help of the Vinson Institute.

"Liz did a lot of work on things like that. She did an awful lot of work everywhere. And I, for one, am extremely grateful for her, and I do not believe she deserves to be castigated the way she has been this year.

"People make mistakes. I make mistakes, and I'm sure all of you do. So, thank you Liz for these eight years that you have given us and done your best. She was accused of being a bully; I would say she's more like a bulldozer, and it's get on or get out of the way. And I have no problem with that.

"So, thank you, Liz, and thank you Denise (McKay) for the work that you have done for us so well for the past five years. You're both remarkable women, and I'm proud to have been in an organization where you are."

Ordiales won election to the City Council at the same time as Mitchell, later going on to election as mayor after Barbara Mathis' early retirement, and the two have served together amiably in that time.

"We have done many, many, many good things," Ordiales said to Mitchell. "It has been quite the struggle at times, needless to say. It has been quite, quite wonderful and just great to have all these good things that we've done and your support that you've done for the city, for this community."

At the close of the meeting, Ordiales announced that



Anne Mitchell's sister, Grace Howard, gave a biographical presentation listing the many accomplishments of the outgoing councilwoman last week.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

cookies were available for people who wanted to stick around and say their good-byes to Mitchell, and many attendees in the packed council chambers of City Hall made

sure to do just that before leaving that evening.

Other business from the Dec. 5 regular meeting will be covered in an upcoming edition of the newspaper.

# Young Harris...from Page 1

said. "It's not a 'you shall' (situation). Sometime next year, we will be calling for a Special Election."

The City of Young Harris has struggled in the past to keep a full council and recruit new candidates, going so far as to amend its charter in recent years to require just five council members instead of six.

"We have to have candidates, so I think there's some pep rallying that needs to be happening in terms of soliciting candidates," Harkins said.

In other news, it was announced that sewer rates will be going up 5%, as was made official last Tuesday night when it was factored into the 2024 Budget. The change will take effect in January after initial discussions in last month's meeting.

As per the Engineering Report, there may be some big changes to the Timberline booster pump project. Clark mentioned a new design that could be used to tackle the situation, which so far has failed to garner construction bids.

"It's basically a submersible pump that's in a tube," Clark said. "It's down in the ground and sealed off, so it's gravity-fed in, and then

the submersible pumps water out of that sealed can.

"All the way at the top of the mountain, we could get rid of the other pump station and the black tank that we talked about up there, but it's going to require a place to pipe," explained Clark, adding that the material alone would be \$75,000 to \$85,000 "depending on the size."

Following the idea for the submersible pump, a new price estimate for the full project must come in before the bidding goes out again. Councilman Dr. John Kelley expressed concern for scenarios of lower pressure, inquiring whether there was a "reservoir" to "keep that pump from burning up."

According to Public Works Supervisor Dean Stanley, the planned positioning of the pump would ensure that "it would never run out of water."

The Young Harris City Council meets on the first Tuesday of every month at 6:30 p.m. inside City Hall located at 50 Irene Berry Drive, barring delays or rescheduling for holidays. These meetings are open to the public, and the community is encouraged to attend.

# Towns County Fire Rescue Seeking New Volunteers



Have you ever wanted to give back to your community or be a part of it in a special way? If so come join us at Towns County Fire and Rescue. We are seeking new volunteers to become a part of our family; we are also looking for Explorer Firefighters to be a part of our explorer program (ages 14-18). No experience is required. We will provide all equipment needed and all training needed which will consist of Firefighting training and basic first aid and CPR. You will assist with special events

in our community and respond to a variety of emergency calls from fires to medical calls and search and rescue calls.

There is a job for everyone in the fire service so come be apart of our great team of firefighters and family to help us better serve our community and county.

For more information and to meet us and check out our equipment come by Fire Station one in Hiwassee City limits at 156 Sims Circle or give us a call at 706-896-2090 anytime from 8 AM to 4 PM, Monday-Friday, we will be happy to speak to you and answer any questions you may have.

# Mountain Home Music Band Christmas Concert, December 16

The ultra popular Mountain Home Music Staff Band, which has opened to great response several Georgia Mountain Fair concerts by Nashville music stars, will present their annual 2023 Christmas Concert on Saturday, December 16, at 7 PM at the Christian Financial Ministries building.

This building was known for many years as the Mountain Home Music Theater with current owner Bob Louder continuing a pattern of hosting a number of noteworthy music events at this venue. The building is located 2.5 miles west of Hiwassee toward Young Harris in a red building on US Highway 76.

Longtime Mountain Home Music Staff Band mem-

bers appearing in this concert will be Larry Berrong playing piano, fiddle, and banjo; his wife Marilyn on vocals; his brother-in-law Danny Burch as emcee and on vocals and rhythm guitar; his nephew Tim Burch on vocals and bass guitar; Jimmy Hooper on Chet Atkins style lead guitar; Jerry Nichols on vocals and rhythm guitar; and Dale Nicholson on drums.

There will be no charge for admission to the concert but donations will be much appreciated to help the host Christian Financial Ministries. For additional information, phone calls can be made to Bob Louder at 678-386-2640. As a bit of added information, Mr. Louder has plans to have an upcoming radio station at this location.