

MERRY CHRISTMAS

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City Council, Ordiales resolve dispute in mediation

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The Hiwassee City Council and Mayor Liz Ordiales successfully completed a mediation process last week regarding recent allegations that the mayor violated the City Charter by inappropriately signing contracts that first required council approval.

All council members and the mayor met with Special Assistant City Attorney Dana Miles for roughly six hours at City Hall on Friday, Dec. 15, to negotiate terms of the mediation settlement, which are expected to be disclosed and accepted in the next regular city meeting on Jan. 9, 2024.

Mediation is a dispute resolution process that attempts to resolve outstanding issues with a goal of reaching

a settlement between parties – in this case Mayor Ordiales and Council Members Jay Chastain Jr., Nancy Noblet and Amy Barrett – without the need of litigation.

“I’m very pleased to announce that we have reached a mediation agreement,” Miles said Friday. “The parties have executed a mediation agreement term sheet, which will be reduced to a formal written agreement by City Attorney Thomas Mitchell.

“After it is reduced to a formal written agreement by Attorney Mitchell, it will be reviewed by the mayor’s attorney, Christopher Balch, and by me to make sure it complies with the terms that have been agreed to today.

“Until that time, these terms will remain confidential until it’s put into a final for-

mal agreement that everybody agrees is correct as to form and substance and signs it, at which time that agreement will be made public.”

Added Miles, “Assuming signature and everything works as it should, it’ll be released to the public at the Jan. 9 meeting. And that resolves all issues and will result in the termination of the investigation that was authorized at the Nov. 7 meeting.”

City Attorney Mitchell first detailed the issues at hand during an Oct. 30 special called meeting in response to complaints by Council Members Chastain, Noblet and Barrett that Ordiales had inappropriately signed at least two contracts on behalf of the city.

One of the contracts was for the paving of Ordiales’ home road of Bradshaw Lane

using state grant money and SPLOST funds.

Ordiales has said that 10 other people live on her road, which has been on the paving list for seven years, and that “we have never, not once, asked for paving approval from the city” since she first acquired state LMIG funds after becoming mayor – at least until her road was paved.

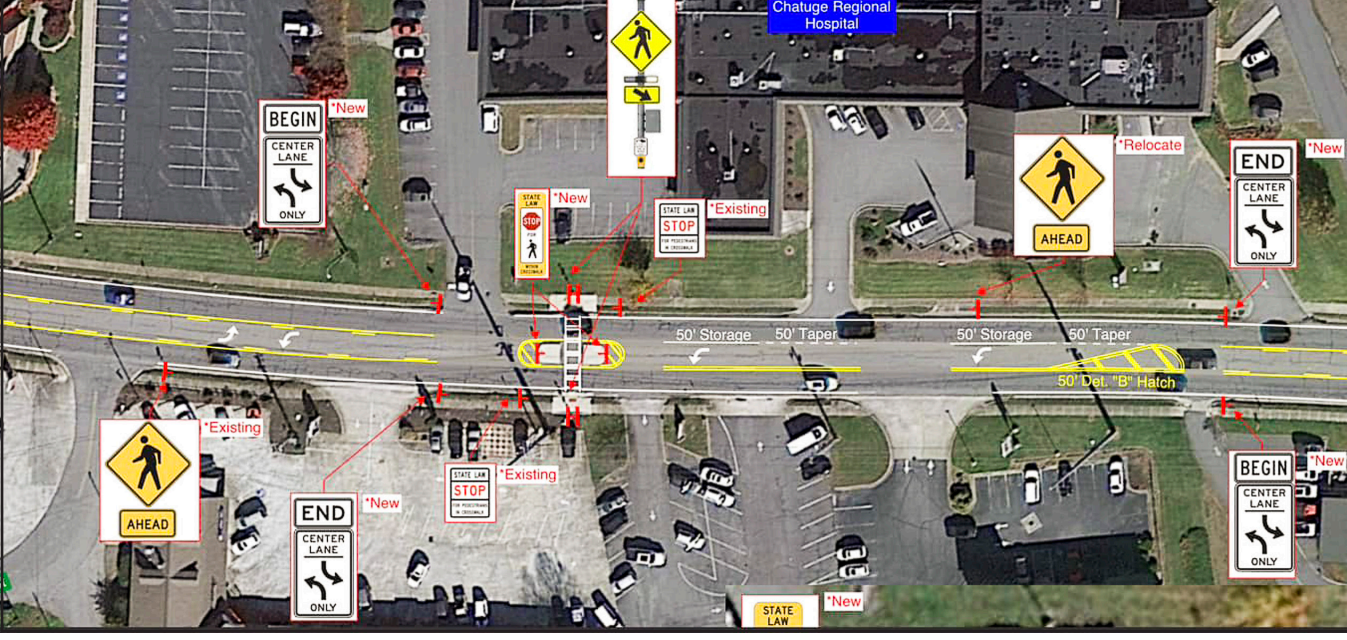
The other contract consisted of a construction amendment committing the city to an additional \$1.2 million in backing for the pandemic-delayed, partially grant-funded Paris Business Center Project that is being managed by the Hiwassee Downtown Development Authority.

This was a particular sticking point for Chastain, Noblet and Barrett because



Attorney Dana Miles was pleased with the outcome of last week’s mediation process between the City Council and Mayor Liz Ordiales.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

GDOT changes traffic pattern at hospital crosswalk



The Georgia Department of Transportation implemented these changes last week to the crosswalk area in front of Chatuge Regional Hospital.

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

On Saturday, Dec. 16, the Hiwassee Police Department announced that the Georgia Department of Transportation had made a traffic change on Main Street at the crosswalk in front of Chatuge Regional Hospital.

To make the GDOT crosswalk safer, the state agency “has removed the two-way central turn lane in this area,” dedicating the center lane directly in front of the hospital to left-turning westbound traffic only, according to Hiwassee Police Chief Jeremy Parker.

This means eastbound traffic will no longer be able to access the small stretch of road in front of the hospital that lies immediately east of the crosswalk to just before the main

entrance of the hospital. Completed last Thursday, the state has installed new signage at the crosswalk and leading up to it, as well as new striping, to let people know that the previously two-way central turn lane section of the road directly in front of the hospital is now only to be used by westbound traffic.

“I spoke with the District Engineer after seeing the changes, and I have asked for a few more safety features to be added,” Chief Parker said. “This is in the discussion phase. We do not know if the additional features will be approved.”

In Parker’s mind, crosswalk visibility among motorists is the primary concern, as there have been no reported problems by pedestrians using

‘Shop With A Hero’ tradition provides presents for kids

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – For at least 20 years now, Towns County’s everyday heroes have been making Christmas merry

and bright for well-deserving local children as part of the Shop With A Hero Program.

And under the leadership of the Hiwassee Police Department – and with help from community fundraising – the tradition continued Friday,

Dec. 15, when kids got to head to Walmart to pick out gifts for themselves and their families after early release from school for Christmas break.

In addition to receiving a jacket and a pair of shoes,



Hiwassee PD collaborated with 23 area agencies and organizations to be able to provide a single chaperone for every kid who participated in the 2023 Shop With A Hero Christmas program on Friday.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

TCSO takes around 60 children Christmas shopping



The Towns County Sheriff’s Office was pleased to take 45 kids Christmas shopping at Walmart last Thursday, with additional students having gone the following Monday as well.
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – After a pizza dinner at the Stephens

Lodge in Young Harris, 45 Towns County children packed into a school bus headed for a special shopping spree at Walmart on Thursday, Dec. 14,

thanks to the generous support of community donations.

There, local volunteers, Towns County Sheriff’s Deputy

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Shop With A Hero...from Page 1



Hiawassee Police Officer JR Murray fraternizing with members of the Blairsville Police Department during the multi-agency Shop With A Hero Dec. 15. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

each student had about \$200 to spend that day to put presents under their family Christmas trees.

And while one boy got his wish granted for a bow, students weren't allowed to purchase weapons. Guns were strictly prohibited, including replicas. Nerf guns and gel ball blasters were a different story, considering they didn't generally pose any mortal threat.

Any video games needed to be approved before purchase, too, but most choices were OK so long as they didn't include violence, gore or explicit content. Something like "Call of Duty," for example, was off the table, but racing games like "Mario Kart" were a go.

This year, the 40 students who got to go shopping were from Towns County Middle School and High School. In a show of overwhelming support, there were more than 40 volunteer chaperones to go around, so, importantly, each child received one-on-one attention at the event.

Speaking of volunteers,

nearly two dozen organizations and agencies provided "heroes" to participate in the shop.

Along with Hiawassee PD, the Towns County Emergency Medical Service, Towns County Fire Department, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post #7807, Towns County Coroner's Office, Department of Natural Resources and other groups decided to give freely of their time.

Even Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court Judge Buck Levins joined in the experience, and Air Life Georgia landed a medical helicopter on the property to the delight of children.

Adjacent Union County first responders also got in on the fun, with the Blairsville Police Department, Union County Dispatch and Union County Fire Department lending a hand.

According to Towns County Family Connection Coordinator Amy Rosser, the growing inclusion of more and more agencies is the work of Hiawassee Police Chief Jeremy Parker. That said, Rosser is the

city's revised Master Fee Schedule prior to the increase taking effect.

The revised Master Fee Schedule is expected to be presented in the January regular city meeting, to require first and second readings in separate meetings before it can be adopted, meaning the rate increase will likely not hit sewer bills until at least March or April of 2024.

one who coordinates the school side of the event.

"(Children) are referred to us by teachers, parents and school administration," Rosser said, though sometimes, there aren't enough funds to take all the little ones, so they go on a waiting list for the next year because "we want a special day for all of our kids in Towns County."

Shopper Leo is a big fan of Pokémon, and while he's fond of Squirtle, nothing could beat spending time with his best human friend; the two of them ventured into the toy aisles and had tons of fun as, nearby, Towns County Coroner Tamela Cooper agreed with her charge: "I love LEGOs."

Meanwhile, one Middle School girl raced off toward the clothes to pick out some pink pajamas for her mother. Her favorite part of Christmas is spending "time with family and friends I don't get to see often," so it was no surprise that her heart was with others when it came to shopping for the holidays.

School Resource Officer Sally Tanner, the girl's chaperone for the outing, agreed, saying that Shop With A Hero is "the best time of the year" largely due to the heartwarming tendency for the children to shop for their loved ones in addition to themselves.

The occasion brought to mind something Rosser said about the event as a whole: "This is not just about toys. It's also about experiencing all of these volunteers – our heroes."

Traffic Pattern Change...from Page 1

the crosswalk to date.

But some drivers just aren't able to see the raised concrete medians that make up either side of the crosswalk, especially during busier times of the day or when the sun is sitting just off the horizon.

On top of what GDOT has already done, Parker is recommending that the visibility of the crosswalk be improved with better, larger signage and additional reflective features to give motorists even more warning that they are coming up on a crosswalk.

"Again, this was done by GDOT," Parker said. "We are aware of your concerns, and we are not in charge of making any changes. All fixtures added to roadways must be approved by GDOT. We will continue working with them to make sure this area is as safe and visible as possible."

The change comes months after three separate accidents occurred at the crosswalk, all on Aug. 23. One of these accidents resulted in a Villa Rica woman suffering a fatal cardiac arrest "likely from the stress of the accident," Towns County Coroner Tamela Cooper said at the time.

Multiple local leaders, including Coroner Cooper and Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, got in touch with the state after the recent accidents to ask if GDOT would either do away with the crosswalk altogether or alter it for safety.

"The Hiawassee Police Department is still working with GDOT to make this area as safe as possible," Parker said Saturday. He added that, by press time, there had been no other accidents there since the city added cones in August to increase visibility at the crosswalk.

Parker is asking people to please pay attention to the signage posted in the area and to refer to the City of Hiawasse Facebook page for the drawing of the new traffic pattern.

"I also want to remind drivers that they may still turn left out of Walgreens and the doctor's office, but they need to completely cross into the westbound lane and make sure they watch for vehicles turning left into those businesses before they pull out," Parker said.

As part of the traffic pattern announcement, Chief Parker took the time to remind

people generally of the laws regarding central turn lanes.

"Please remember: The central turn lane is for left turns only," Parker said. "You cannot use the central turn lane to merge into traffic. You must cross the lane completely to merge into traffic. The central turn lane is for left-hand turns only."

"It is a violation of Georgia law to use the center turn lane for purposes other than turning left. See 'O.C.G.A. 40-6-126 Central Lane for Turning.' You may only enter the turn lane within 300 feet of your left-turn destination."

Honor Flight trips to Washington, D.C. for Veterans

Sponsored (no cost to Veteran) Honor Flight trips to Washington D.C. to see the memorials to the Wars in which they served. Veterans do not have to have been deployed overseas ... just to have served during the War period. World War II, Korea, and Vietnam veterans are included. Spring and Fall flights. If interested, call Paul at 615-232-4445. Thank you!

TCSO Christmas...from Page 1



TCSO deputies had a blast at Walmart Dec. 14 during everyone's favorite time of the year – Shop With The Sheriff for children's Christmases.
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

ties and Administrative Staff, members of the Towns County Sheriff's Auxiliary, and Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw met for the annual Shop With The Sheriff Christmas Program.

And after press time on Monday, Dec. 18, the Sheriff's Office was expected to take 10 to 15 additional children shopping to conclude the 2023 Shop With The Sheriff event.

The beloved holiday tradition is organized every year by the Sheriff's Office in coordination with Towns County Family Connection and the local school system to support children in financial situations at home that may otherwise hinder their Christmas morning experiences.

"It just melts my heart to help these little kids and make sure they're going to have a good Christmas," Sheriff Henderson said Thursday. "It's one of the most rewarding things that anybody can ever do."

Henderson started Shop With The Sheriff after he took office three years ago, transitioning away from the long-running Empty Stocking Fund.

For years, the Sheriff's Office treated its Christmas-time efforts much like Toys for Tots, holding a community toy drive for families in need. Now, the event mirrors the Blairsville Shop With A Cop and involves hands-on Christmas shopping for a more personalized outreach initiative.

On Thursday, each child received \$350 to spend on whatever they desired, with only a few restrictions. To raise the money to make this possi-

ble, the Sheriff's Office called on the generosity of Towns County residents, who overwhelmingly responded.

"The best part of all of it is the fact that it kind of runs itself (donation-wise)," shared TCSO Administrative Supervisor Vicki Ellis, who has been involved with the Sheriff's Office Christmas event for 20 years.

"We don't really have to go out begging and pleading," she added. "People just automatically want to give. They go above and beyond to make sure that these kids have a Christmas just like anybody else would."

That generosity can be seen even in the children themselves, who often make shopping for their families a priority.

"You'd be surprised at how many of them are actually shopping for their siblings, their moms or their dads," Ellis said. "I've never had one kid that did not want to buy something for their family, which is the most precious thing you'll ever see. The process of them painstakingly picking out something (for their families) is just unbelievable."

Ellis was put in charge of organizing the event back in 2004 and hasn't stopped working to improve it since, always making sure to reinforce the partnerships that make Shop With The Sheriff a success.

Each year, the Sheriff's Office teams up with Towns County Schools and Towns County Family Connection to collect information on eligible

children. While this is how they receive the majority of applications, families may also call in to request participation.

"I keep doing this because I love it," Ellis said. "When you come from a background of being impoverished yourself, it hits home. I come from a single-parent family, and my mom struggled when we were growing up. So, I vowed that if I can help a kid and be involved in an organization that can help a kid, then I'm going to do it."

Other participants, such as Sheriff's Auxiliary Director Anna Denton, also said their dedication to the event's success was motivated by their desire to help local children.

"We do it because we have a lot of kids in our area who would not have Christmas if we did not," Denton said. "This is the hard part: the kids have \$350 to spend, and we have to keep them at that. Last year, we had some extra money, but (this year we're on a budget)."

Although the Sheriff's Office was unable to generate enough money to account for any overages in 2023, the sheriff is still extremely grateful for the donations his office has received.

"What makes this possible is the wonderful people and citizens of Towns County that donate money to these kids, and we can never thank them enough," Sheriff Henderson said. "So, I want to say a big thank you to the citizens of Towns County. They stepped up and helped these kids."

Mediation Successful...from Page 1

the project, which was never supposed to take on debt, ballooned in costs this year when improperly approved changes were made to add, among other things, an expensive second-story outdoor dining area.

Ultimately, these council members decided to approve a \$1 million loan "under duress" to complete the project "in a bare bones manner" to protect the city's ability to apply for federal grants, as failing to finish construction would likely result in a loss of future grant opportunities.

For the mayor to have signed the above contracts – and for them to be considered legally binding – she was required by the City Charter to make the contracts available to the city attorney for review and then to the City Council for voting approval, though neither requirement was met.

Ordiales has maintained that her actions were the result of a "procedural error," and Councilwoman Anne Mitchell has contended publicly that the mayor should be forgiven for her mistakes.

Chastain, Noblet and Barrett initially sought Ordiales' resignation, but she declined, and in their Nov. 7 regular meeting, the three council members voted to initiate an investigation into the mayor with an eye toward possible removal from office, going so far as to begin the process of amending the City Charter to provide clear removal procedures.

The council hired an independent attorney, Dana Miles, to conduct the investi-



Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales reached an agreement Dec. 15 to settle an ongoing dispute she has had with three council members.
Photo by Todd Forrest

gation as a Special Assistant City Attorney and to compile a report on his findings. The city is familiar with Miles through his work representing the Towns County Water Authority opposite the city in a past matter.

A semi-retired attorney based in Madison with decades of local government experience, Miles paused his investigation the week before he entered, as a neutral third party, the mutually agreed upon mediation process to resolve the issues between the council and mayor.

As a result of the successful mediation, Miles' investigation will remain on hold until the council accepts the settlement on Jan. 9, after which the investigation will be

terminated with no finalized report expected.

"All the issues that were investigated and discussed between them have been resolved in a positive way for the city," Miles said. "This is a great result for the city, and we're very pleased to have reached a successful conclusion to issues that were tough."

"I congratulate them on reaching an agreement on something that a lot of cities have litigated and spent lots of money over."

The settlement saves the city money by averting litigation between the parties involved as well as the ongoing expense of Miles' investigation – \$400 an hour to investigate, \$200 an hour for travel time, plus reimbursement for any out-of-pocket expenses related to the investigation.

"I very much appreciate the opportunity to have helped y'all out with this, and I thank you for trusting me, and I thank y'all for working together for the good of the city," Miles said to the mayor and council after the Dec. 15 special called meeting adjourned.



Movers and Shakers take Holiday Break, returns January 12th

We wish everyone a very Merry Christmas and a Happy Hannukah!

As is our tradition, we take a long winter's nap and will not meet for the next few weeks, returning to the delightful Sundance Grill

on January 12 with Towns County Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw.

Safe travels for anyone that will be out and about, and have a safe and blessed holiday to everyone in our beautiful mountains. T(Dec20,F1)JH

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