

## Santa and Mrs. Claus to visit the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds once more December 26th

Children will get one more chance to visit with Santa and Mrs. Claus when the Christmas couple appears for the final night of the renowned Mountain Country Christmas in Lights at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds in Hiawassee on Saturday, Dec. 26.

The walkthrough Christmas lights extravaganza will run from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday. Admission is \$6, with children 12 and under allowed in free.

"The Fairgrounds (has been) 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.

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, and they learn the concept of 'Home Made' just the way grandma used to do it!" the website says.

Be sure to head over to the barn while you're there.



Santa Claus at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds

where the ever-popular hot-dog and marshmallow roast will take place, and check out the many booths filled by local businesses and community organizations alike.

There are even arts and crafts available in the Exhibit Hall, where Jerry Taylor will be performing Christmas music in the Organ Loft museum of antique reed organs.

Come on down to the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds Saturday for one final family Christmas experience of 2020 before Santa and Mrs. Claus head back to the North Pole.

Next week, the Fairgrounds will host a New Year's Eve celebration on Thursday, Dec. 31. Admission is free, and people can purchase hot chocolate, barbecue and hotdogs while they're there.

Fireworks will begin at 8:45 p.m., so be sure to dress warmly and get there early to grab a good viewing spot!

As the website says, "We've all had enough of 2020, so come out to the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds and help us usher in 2021 with bang!"

## County Budget...from Page 1A

Also new in the budget? Money for a brand-new deputy to serve as a dedicated Animal Control Officer at the Towns County Sheriff's Office.

Prior to Bradshaw coming into office in 2017, animal control duties were handled on a case-by-case basis by two Road Department employees. Once commissioner, Bradshaw asked the Sheriff's Office to take on those responsibilities generally.

Now, in partnership with Sheriff-Elect Kenneth "Ode" Henderson, funds have been budgeted to provide a specially trained animal control officer in Towns. Fortunately, animal control is needed only infrequently, so the deputy will mostly work as a regular law enforcement officer.

"(Henderson is) going to hire a deputy/animal control person," Bradshaw said. "It's such a small county, so the person would wear two hats, serve as a deputy and animal control. That person would have to do training outside of normal deputy training to be an animal control person."

"I appreciate the sheriff-elect working with us to make that possible."

All told, the newly budgeted expense will include the new deputy's salary as well as money that was previously allotted elsewhere in the budget, County Finance Director Andrea Anderson said.

"We've pulled all that out and put it under animal control, so the \$104,500 covers a lot more than salary," Anderson said. "It is salary, benefits, training, travel, supplies, the \$30,000 we give the Humane Society shelter, and the \$7,500 we give to the spay and neuter program every year."

Additionally, the Sheriff's Office will be receiving about \$30,000 for new uniforms and to re-decal patrol cars.

Separately, the Herald has learned that several Sheriff's Office employees have been out with COVID-19, though it has been made clear that the county's law enforcement needs are being fully covered.

In other budget news, Bradshaw was excited to announce a 50-cent per hour raise for all county employees, effective Jan. 1.

This will be about \$150,000 in additional yearly expense moving forward, though library employees will



County Finance Director Andrea Anderson received a lot of credit from Bradshaw in the Dec. 16 budget presentation for her hard work crunching the numbers. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

not be included in the raise, with a reason given that library systems are hybrid state/county funded.

"I'm excited that, by the help of (County Clerk Linda Hedden) and Andrea, we've been able to supply all the services and even upgrade a lot and give raises, and we haven't had to raise the millage rate," Bradshaw said. "The millage rate hasn't been raised since '08. That's a long time."

All told, the \$11,265,590 balanced budget for 2021 is \$90,600 higher than the 2020 proposed budget and utilizes about \$1.1 million of the total \$4.9 million in current General Fund reserves.

2021 beginning reserves are up \$900,000 over the 2020 fund balance, as the county didn't have to use reserves this year due to a spending freeze put in place at the start of the pandemic, plus revenue increases like better-than-expected tax collections, as well as CARES Act money.

When (former Commissioner Bill Kendall) came in, he actually had to borrow money to make payroll - there wasn't a reserve in place," Bradshaw said. "He got through the Recession, built up the reserve, and we're maintaining it. We will continue to maintain it at long as we possibly can."

Also in the budget is "adequate money" to improve the safety of Shake Rag Road leading up to Bell Mountain Park. The one-lane road is in serious need of improvement, and Bradshaw has committed to widening it as much as he can and putting in other safety

measures in 2021.

The county will have to survey the road before construction can begin, but Bradshaw said he looks forward to that occurring as soon as possible.

Shake Rag residents have been lobbying Bradshaw for months and longer to do something about road safety there, with several residents speaking in the Dec. 15 county meeting to express their dismay over the situation. See next week's newspaper for coverage of the Dec. 15 meeting.

"(Andrea has) been working very, very hard on this," Bradshaw said of the proposed budget. "(She presents) it to me, and then we go over it, and we hash it and hash it and hash it. Then go over it and hash it some more."

"I'm very proud of the job she's done," he said, before turning to her briefly in the meeting. "Thank you for all time and hard work that we put in it. It's a very sound budget."

The 2021 Tentative Budget is set to be adopted in a called meeting at the Towns County Courthouse on Wednesday, Dec. 30, at 2 p.m. A full copy of the budget highlighting an extensive view of funding for the upcoming year is available in this edition of the newspaper.

Be sure to check back next week for coverage from the Dec. 15 regular county meeting, to feature a special presentation to retiring Towns County Public Library Branch Manager Debbie Phillips, as well as a discussion from the residents of Bell Mountain living on Shake Rag Road.

## Shop with a Hero...from Page 1A



Hiawassee PD received plenty of volunteer support from good-hearted folks wanting to treat kids to an extra special Christmas shopping experience Friday. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

helpers in the fundraising.

"Every kid got \$200 plus a jacket and some shoes, and that seemed to be a big hit. We wanted to make sure they had something for themselves, because kids always spend money on family or something."

"Kids are always outgrowing clothes, so being able to throw in the shoes and jacket this year was a nice little bonus."

For Smith, the Christmas-focused event always means a lot to him and makes him proud to be an officer serving the area.

"Having our community and people from outside our community for any cause is fantastic," Smith said. "But when it is for the children of our community, it really touches our hearts."

"We always have an



Walmart's electronics department is always a popular area during Shop with a Hero, though kids usually wander the store to buy things for their family members, too. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

outpouring of donations and an outpouring of help. It is just

fantastic to see a community come together like this."

## Phillips...from Page 1A



Phillips' friends wished her the best in retirement Friday, as she prepares to "turn in her library card" after nearly three decades leading the Hiawassee branch. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

I have seen it go from little to what it is now.

"I have always been active in the community and tried for good PR for the library. It is important, and since I have lived here all my life anyway, I know people, and I've tried to be involved with the school and connecting the school and library."

Phillips has always been at the Hiawassee location, where she was hired as branch manager, "and that is what I have been since then."

And that's what makes retirement that much more bittersweet for Phillips, as recognized with cake and a special reception with friends and coworkers on Friday, Dec. 18.

"Our employees have always been really close and part of a family," Phillips said. "I want the best for the place. I feel like this is an extension of my home, especially seeing it through all the renovation."

"I was up here all the time and making sure it was done right, because I knew we

would never get another chance to get this. I was up here all during the day, and I feel like it is part of me, and that is one of the hardest things; I am really going to miss it and the people here that have been so good to me."

From her library family to her community patrons, Phillips will miss everyone following her official retirement, effective Jan. 15. Fortunately, she's not going far.

With her newfound free time, she plans on spending more time with her family and continuing to find ways to be involved with the community.

"My kids have started high school and are going through sports, so I will be able to do all of that without worrying," Phillips said. "It will be easier to do that and be more involved at home with projects and my family."

Retired Mountain Regional Library System Director Donna Howell, who attended the Dec. 18 reception with other friends and coworkers past and present, said Phillips

has been a wonderful friend to her personally, as well as a hard worker for residents over the years.

"The thing I really love about Debbie is that she really pays attention to people and what they need," Howell said. "Practically everything you see in this building is a result of her paying attention."

"There's areas for the children so it won't be so loud, a place where people can sit and have a coffee and read and see town and be part of it. She noticed that this library was the most social, and our goal with this building was to make it like the living room of the community."

"People felt comfortable coming, and I think you see it everywhere. She made this library what it is for the community."

For her years of dedicated public service, Phillips was also honored in the Dec. 15 regular county meeting, which will be covered in detail in the Dec. 30 edition of the Towns County Herald.

## Advanced Voting...from Page 1A

Biden to serve as president-elect.

Donald Trump is still waging legal battles in several states, including Georgia, and it remains to be seen whether he will succeed in overturning Biden's apparent national victory, especially now that the former vice president has secured 270 electoral votes.

Trump has alleged that widespread voting fraud and irregularities interfered with fair and open elections in 2020, which remains to be seen, as the Secretary of State's Office works with the Georgia Bureau of Investigations to look into 132 General Election fraud allegations.

Additionally, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger announced last week that his office would be partnering with the University of Georgia "on a statewide review of signature match in the Peach State."

"The partnership will help instill confidence in Georgia's absentee ballot system in future elections," Raffensperger's office said Thursday.

He has asked the UGA School of Public and International Affairs "to conduct research, including a randomized signature match study of election materials handed at the county level in the Nov. 3 Presidential contest."

"This work will also

include research on processes used at the county level to perform signature-matching," his office said. "The work UGA will perform is a study of a sample of signed envelopes in each county from the presidential election."

"It is intended to be forward-looking, helping to inform and optimize election administration for future electoral contests in the State of Georgia."

For the runoffs, voters are encouraged to make every attempt to cast their ballots early, as the possibility of bad winter weather may impact the electorate's ability to make it to the polls on Jan. 5 Election Day.

Absentee ballots are being automatically mailed to voters who informed the Board Office they were elderly or disabled on a previous application, though all others need to apply to get their mail-in absentee ballot for the runoffs.

People may request mail-in absentee ballots by visiting <https://ballotrequest.sos.ga.gov>, calling the local Board Office at 706-896-4353 or swinging by the office at Lakeview Circle.

After requesting a mailed ballot, voters can track the progress of their ballot - before and after voting - by signing up at <https://georgia.ballotrx.net/voter/>. Those who receive an absentee ballot but decide

to vote in person should bring their mailed ballot to the polls for canceling.

Completed absentee ballots/applications may be mailed or dropped off in person either with Board Office personnel or using the security-monitored drop box located against the building outside the left main entrance.

Voters can also access the My Voter Page at [mvp.sos.ga.gov](http://mvp.sos.ga.gov) ahead of the election for information on voter registration status, mail-in application and ballot status, poll location, registration information on file with the county office, sample ballots and more.

Registered voters who will be at least 18 years of age by Election Day are eligible to vote during early voting, though Dec. 7 was the registration deadline for residents looking to participate in the runoff elections.

Election Day is Tuesday, Jan. 5, 2021, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. That day, voters should report to one of the pre-assigned Towns County voting precincts: Hiawassee at the Civic Center; Young Harris at the Lodge Hall Building, aka Stephens Lodge; and Macedonia at Macedonia Baptist Church.

People are not required to bring their mailed precinct cards, but they must show a valid photo ID to vote.

## Santa Visits...from Page 1A

did the drive-thru Halloween because it was so successful. And so we thought, why can't we do a drive-thru with Santa?

"This was all (Chamber Marketing/Membership Director) Crystal Wagner's idea, both the Halloween and the drive-thru Santa. She has worked very hard to make sure the kids can celebrate holidays this year. She even dressed up in an Easter Bunny costume earlier this year to help the kids celebrate Easter."

Added Lee, "Hiawassee Hometown Pharmacy was nice enough to open up their drive-thru window to keep everyone protected. We're trying our best this year to do all of our events in the safest way possible, and the (pharmacy)

was so generous because the banks were unavailable this year.

"But Bill and Jaime Pierson, (the owners of neighboring RE/MAX Hiawassee Realty and Hiawassee Hometown Pharmacy), were nice enough to allow us to use the drive-thru, and everything has worked out perfect."

For her part, Jaime Pierson acknowledged the chamber's leadership, saying that when they approached her about giving back to the community during the Christmas season, her thoughts shifted to local families and their sacrifices during the pandemic.

"We were led to host the event by the Chamber of

Commerce, and while we all recognize how COVID has changed our lives, I don't believe we are thinking enough about how it's affecting the children," Pierson said. "They've been stripped of school, church and sports. The least we can do is allow a little normalcy so they can see and speak to Santa."

Added Bill, "Nobody would have imagined at this time last year that we would have to do something like this. But the chamber has definitely been proactive and come up with some really great ideas."

For additional information on the Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce and other local events, visit [www.golakechatuge.com](http://www.golakechatuge.com).