

Towns Firewise Coalition serves as model for counties nationwide



Towns County has the most active Firewise Citizens Coalition in the state. Pictured here: Coalition members having a lunch meeting at Brother's Restaurant last week.

By Mark Smith
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YOUNG HARRIS – Members of the Towns County Firewise Citizens Coalition highlighted the group's accomplishments for the year on Tuesday, Dec. 17, at Brother's Restaurant.

Coalition President Michael Courey conducted the meeting, and he reported that the coalition had received a \$4,600 Wildfire Mitigation Grant in 2019, issued by the U.S. Forest Service and administered through the Chastatee-Chattahoochee RC&D Council.

The \$4,600 was allocated to Tate City, a local Firewise Community, for fire mitigation tools, street signs and other emergency management initiatives.

Chest-Chat RC&D Director Frank Riley, who attended the meeting, was instrumental in procuring the grant.

In other highlights, the cities of Hiawassee and Young Harris both became officially recognized Firewise Communities in 2019, and Coalition Member Brenda Hunt was successful in getting a Firewise page on the Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce website.

Wildlands Urban Interface Specialist Anthony English of the Georgia Forestry Commission developed a map of Towns County Firewise Communities, showing their locations and individual Firewise liaison contacts.

Coalition Member Judy Potter of Tate City wrote a Community Leadership Guide that includes, among other

things, how to become a Firewise Community, how to maintain Firewise status, and considerations for developing a wildfire evacuation plan.

There were two Firewise Community leadership meetings, one in April and one in October. Both focused on wildfire mitigation and maintaining and renewing Firewise status. Though they're termed community leadership meetings, anyone interested in Firewise for their community is welcome.

The coalition had exhibits at several events throughout the year: the January and June Towns County Civic Association meetings; a Young Harris College Athletics baseball game in April; the Georgia Mountain Experiment Station in March; Earth day in April; Wildfire Preparation Day in May.

Also, the Home & Garden Show and the Made in Georgia Expo in June; Ranger Station Exhibit in July at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds; Towns County Business Showcase in September; and the Union County Farmers Market in October.

There were prescribed fire meetings around the state in February, June and December, which coalition members attended.

Prescribed fires are also known as controlled burns, where wildfires are set in a controlled fashion and closely monitored to burn off undergrowth that might otherwise become fuel for a future wildfire.

There were a great many other accomplishments mentioned by Courey, too numerous to list. Suffice it to say that the Towns County

Firewise Citizens Coalition works very hard to educate the community on the dangers of wildfire and how to mitigate exposure.

"It's so impressive how much time they've put into their efforts this past year," Forest Service Fire Management Officer Mike Davis said that day. "Just a phenomenal amount of work, and we really appreciate what they've done, how they've reached out to the community and helped us."

"We still believe that the Firewise Program is a great program for the homeowner."

Georgia Forestry Wildfire Mitigation Specialist Mark Wiles, also at the meeting, said he was pleased with the work of the coalition.

"Towns County is really impressive," Wiles said. "We've got a large number of communities here in this county. And I work with Firewise Communities all across the state, from south Georgia all the way up to the mountains. This community has the most activity."

Wiles brought up the town of Paradise, California, which burned in November 2018. He said it's happening more often and that wildfires are predicted to increase by 50% over the next 20 years due to population growth and changing weather, among other things.

But Davis brought up Falls Creek Ranch, a community near Durango, Colorado, that was in the midst of a wildfire in June of 2018. The wildfire consumed a total of 54,000 acres, but not one house was prepared. They are a Firewise Community.

Photo by Mark Smith

Love Light Tree...from Page 1A

that has been honored this year," said Brenda Hitchcock, chairperson for the Love Light Program.

"This past spring, we were able to give four scholarships to Towns County students who are going into the medical field. We have one young man who is studying to be a doctor, and he is planning to come back to Towns County to practice."

"We appreciate everybody that helps us, and it is an honor to be here. Our chief of staff will light the tree, and we have some worship and music to enjoy, so it is a great program."

The Love Light Tree was lit by Dr. Robert Stahlkuppe that evening, with attendees taking pictures and admiring the tree as the lights turned on.

Isreal Rogers from Meadow Grove Baptist Church delivered the invocation, along with a message about Christmas



Brenda Hitchcock with the Chatuge Regional Hospital Auxiliary is the chairperson for the annual Love Light Ceremony.

Photo by Jarrett Whitener

and stories about Jesus as a baby.

Stuart Nichols, also of Meadow Grove, played a few Christmas songs to get everybody in the holiday spirit in appreciating the Love Light Tree, with some audience

members joining in on the singing.

The Love Light Tree will remain at Chatuge Regional Hospital through December, and the auxiliary encourages people to come and see it, lights and all.

County Meeting...from Page 1A

QR code to access information about tourist attractions in the area.

The code scanner caught the attention of Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce President Candace Lee, who said in the commission meeting last week that she asked the team about borrowing the technology for the chamber office.

Also during the meeting, Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter Sons of the American Revolution Vice President Sid Turner presented Towns County Paramedic Curtis Walls with an award recognizing him for his dedication to preserving life.

"Walls began his career in emergency medicine in 1982 and exhibits exceptional leadership skills, true professionalism, dedicated service, genuine compassion and consistent humility in the day-to-day operations of Towns County," Turner said.

In other business, Bradshaw talked about the county's need for a new ambulance. After receiving just one bid, Bradshaw opened the bid to purchase a new Frazer Ambulance for \$126,342.52. Bradshaw said the bid also included a 2011 trade-in.

The commissioner accepted the bid to purchase a new ambulance through Frazer for \$126,342.52, noting that, with Frazer, they can simply remove the box from



Sid Turner of SAR presented Paramedic Curtis Walls with an award on Dec. 17 recognizing him for his dedication to preserving life.

Photo by Chad Stack

the existing chassis and mount it onto a newer frame five to six times to keep costs down over time.

Resident Michael Courey of the Towns County Firewise Citizens Coalition presented a wildfire home protection kit during the meeting.

With so many residents living in forested land, Courey said he felt the kit would provide comfort to local homeowners, even when they are away for an extended period of time.

The kit includes two sprinklers that hook onto gutters and connect to a water source to spray water on a home's roof and 30 feet out from the house.

The Wildfire Protection Kit "offers a way of decreasing the risk of a forest fire impacting your home," Courey said.

The Wildfire Associated Structure Protection Kit costs \$175 with the hose connections and \$75 without them and can be purchased online at www.waspwildfire.com or by phone at 1-855-889-4697.

Bradshaw spoke in the meeting about the upcoming 2020 budget and said the county would be finalizing the budget soon.

The next regular county meeting will be held on Tuesday, Jan. 21, at 5:30 p.m. inside the Towns County Courthouse.

Perren...from Page 1A

"I think that's what I like the most about these small shows like this, is that you can interact and meet the person singing and have a conversation with them."

"At the large concert, you would never get to have this kind of fun interacting with the person singing and definitely not be able to talk to them afterward. I think this is

a really neat thing to have, and it is definitely something that I wish we had back home."

At the end of the show, Perren handed out red and green scarves to audience members while he took some pictures with his fans.

The Elvis performer hopes to do more Christmas shows like this in the future, because he enjoys the holiday

and the people who come to watch him perform.

"Hopefully next time we can fill this place up and have everyone singing with me and have a great time," Perren said.

Roy Perren is the principal of Towns County High School, and he serves as a director on the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Board.

DDA...from Page 1A

money. Once the buildings are cleaned out and restored, they will be able to house multiple new businesses in the downtown area.

In other meeting business, Ordiales said once the recently formed Hiawassee DDA Board goes to Madison on Jan. 13 for a two-day training session with Madison DDA Director Monica Callahan, they will have better ideas for what to move forward with in Hiawassee.

"That girl has done wonders in Madison," Ordiales said. "Now, she's been there 28 years, but she has made Madison what it is today. She has done a fantastic job."

Under old business, members discussed their upcoming fundraising event set for Friday, July 3.

The DDA has been



Herb Bruce of the Hiawassee DDA

discussing possible options for a fundraiser and have decided to do a float-in movie night with food trucks. There are several locations that are being looked at around Towns County, and

the final determination will be made early next year.

With an inflatable projector screen, people can set up on the beach, float in the water, and boats can even pull up to enjoy the movie, Ordiales said.

In new business, Ordiales briefed DDA members on a pair of grants that will help them with two mural projects.

The city of Hiawassee recently received approval for two mural grants, one each with the Georgia Council for the Arts and the Georgia Mural Trail program.

One mural is expected to be painted on the side of the Dan Joseph building next to Dollar General in town, and the other mural will go on the wall outside of the new archery store next to Hiawassee Hardware.

The Hiawassee DDA Board will hold their January meeting at the Madison training location.

Jingle Jog...from Page 1A



The Jingle Jog was a collaborative effort between Luckenbach, the Soccer Booster Club, Young Harris College Cross Country and the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

Photo by Chad Stack

said.

She also got help from Young Harris College Cross Country Head Coach Barry Brown and a few of his runners, who pitched in to create the course and officiate the race inside the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

The benefit kicked off on Saturday, Dec. 7, with an Elf Race for participants 8 and under, followed by the regular race featuring runners 18 and up with age categories.

Expecting people to travel for the race, Luckenbach said she was able to get a 10% discount at the Holiday Inn Express in Hiawassee.

"We had several runners come from out of town, and it was great seeing so many people come from out of town to run in the race," she said.

The 5K fun and festive holiday race featured a course inside the Fairgrounds, so runners were able to enjoy the Mountain Country Christmas in Lights at the same time.

The race started just behind the baseball field and continued through the Fairgrounds for 3.1 miles, and college volunteers were

stationed throughout the course to help guide the runners, with Brown providing a timer at the finish line to document the times for each runner.

Towns County High Cross Country runner Liam King crossed the finish line first for the men, while Missy Collins was the top runner for the women and Kiley Coggins was the top runner for the Elf Race.

The Jingle Jog also featured a fun costume contest with several awards categories, including Tacky Christmas Sweater.

After graduating from high school in May, Luckenbach said she plans to pursue a degree and career in public relations, for which she definitely seems suited, as the senior's planning and marketing efforts certainly paid off for the students of Towns County Soccer.

All told, she was able to secure 60 runners for the race to help the booster club raise more than \$1,800 for Towns County Soccer.

Money has already gone toward helping boys and girls to buy soccer warm-up gear – nice athletic pants and jackets

to keep kids warm on the sidelines and during warm-ups throughout the cold soccer season.

Funds raised by the Soccer Booster Club also go toward other equipment plus meals for the kids on away games, and it helps to buy hoodies for the middle school teams, ensuring all high school and middle school soccer players receive a benefit.

"It was a really good community effort," Barrett said following the race. "A special thanks to Hilda and the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds for their collaboration and support, the Soccer Booster Club for volunteers, Barry Brown, the coach of Young Harris College, and his cross country student athletes for mapping the course and handling the awards."

"Big shout-out to Hiawassee Hardware, United Community Bank, Barrett and Associates, and Tranquil Counseling and Consulting, LLC for sponsoring the event. Lastly, we appreciate the community support we witnessed the night of Dec. 7."