

# Towns County Herald

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## City talks charter changes, parrot-feather & more

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

The City of Hiawassee is poised to make two amendments to its City Charter, one to establish procedures for removing city officers and another to tighten up the meeting attendance requirement for elected officials.

Charter changes must be made either with approval from the Georgia General Assembly or via Home Rule Amendment, which is a process built into the Georgia Constitution to give municipalities greater control over local governance. These changes fall into the latter category.

Council members first discussed amending the City Charter in a special called

meeting on Tuesday, Nov. 21, in which City Attorney Thomas Mitchell said that, while the charter allows officers to be removed for cause, it does not specify procedures for doing so.

The amendment would add a sentence to the charter clarifying that “the City Council, by ordinance, may provide the procedures.”

This amendment follows council discussions over the last month or so around the possibility of removing Mayor Liz Ordiales for violating the City Charter by failing to obtain council approval for at least two contracts she signed, which Ordiales has described as a “procedural error.”

Ordiales requested that any removal ordinance estab-

lished pursuant to the charter amendment provide for the reimbursement of legal fees incurred by elected officials who defeat a removal challenge, which Attorney Mitchell said could be included.

“In the engagement letter that I have with the attorney that I have hired, it states that the city will reimburse me if I prevail with no issues,” Ordiales said. “I think it needs to be part of that ordinance and needs to be explained.”

In the Nov. 27 council work session, Ordiales said she had identified other parts of the charter that needed updating considering that the document is now 30 years old.

She suggested starting with another Home Rule  
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Hiawassee City Clerk Bonnie Kendrick swearing in City Billing Clerk Marta Izquierdo as deputy city clerk in a called meeting on Nov. 21. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Enchanted Valley brightens with annual tree lighting

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Young Harris rang in the holidays with the city’s traditional Christmas Tree Lighting. As the sun set on Friday, Dec. 1, families of all ages came together to celebrate the season at City Hall.

Normally outdoors, this year’s festivities were moved inside following weather concerns.

“This is my favorite time of the year,” Mayor Andrea Gibby said. “There’s something really special and magical about this night, and our community just loves each other.”

“They come out, and it’s really just a great time to come together and see each other, and that makes me happy.”

The Enotah Garden Club was behind the holly, tinsel and general air of yuletide bliss. Having decorated the interior of City Hall weeks earlier, club members returned to set up a booth just outside the building, then furnished

the tradition with homemade sweet treats.

So many different goodies tucked away in plastic bags made up a veritable smorgasbord of cookies, with hot chocolate on tap for all comers – complete, of course, with marshmallows. Thirsty kiddos also had the option of juice, and parents were free to take coffee or water.

Beth Connors, a member of the Garden Club, has only been with the organization for two years but has come to enjoy her experience with the group, especially as it relates to Christmas.

“It’s great – it’s all about the kids,” she said, ranking children’s reactions as her favorite part of the night, though, if she’s honest, Connors is quite fond of Saint Nick, also. “You want to be on the right side of Santa.”

Rounding up the entirety of Towns County’s kindergarten class was not unlike herding cats that evening, but once all made it to their desti-

See Annual Tree Lighting, Page 4A



TCES Music Teacher Jordan Trotman directed local kindergarteners in an adorable Christmas performance at Young Harris City Hall on Friday. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## FBLA students attend Fall Leadership Conference



TCHS FBLA students Dhriti Patel, Kya Smith, Cece Pizarro, Lilly Cannon, Jadalynn Reynolds, Madison Molina, Loftin Turpin and Aidan Stimens in Athens last month for a regional competition. Photo/Submitted

News Special  
Towns County Herald

Eight Towns County High School Future Business Leaders of America students attended the Fall Leadership Conference at The Classic Center in Athens, Georgia, Nov. 15-16.

The students were Dhriti Patel, Kya Smith, Cece Pizarro, Lilly Cannon, Jadalynn Reynolds, Madison Molina, Loftin Turpin and Aidan Stimens.

As part of the regional

conference, students enjoyed “a dynamic general session, informative leadership training workshops, the always thrilling Battle of the Chapters, the opportunity to participate in one of the world’s largest MONOPOLY® Tournaments, and many other activities.”

All Towns County competitors placed in the Top 10 in their events, and two of the students will advance to state-level competition in March 2024: Cece Pizarro in Client

Service, and Loftin Turpin in Improv Speaking.

FBLA’s mission is to inspire and prepare students “to become community-minded business leaders in a global society through relevant career preparation and leadership experiences.”

“These young people worked hard and represented our school and community well,” said Business Teacher and FBLA Adviser Ruth Taylor. “Congratulations to all!”

## Young Harris hosts GMRC for planning discussion

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

On Nov. 28, the City of Young Harris welcomed representatives from the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission for a second planning session regarding future development of the downtown area.

Attendees from the public had the choice of coming to an 11:30 a.m. or 5:30 p.m. meeting depending on what best fit their schedules.

GMRC Regional Planner Joe Rothwell was welcomed by Main Street Director Rosemary Royston along with a full house of guests.

Rothwell described the goal of that day’s gathering as discussing “what businesses can go downtown and how the downtown can further be shaped.”

He recapped the first planning meeting as having been about what area residents wanted to see become of Downtown Young Harris, with a look at statistics like population and growth estimates, and he explained the second meeting’s focus as an examination of those options.

Guests had chances before and after the presentation to vote on aesthetic choices for things like lampposts, benches, welcome and navigational signs, and even trash cans. Some items had more options than others, but each was de-



GMRC Regional Planner Joe Rothwell led a planning meeting discussion last week at Young Harris City Hall. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

cently varied between a slick, modern style and a more natural feel.

To avoid “reinventing the wheel,” Rothwell presented options that have worked for other communities.

For example, Clarksville maintains a historic-minded building plan to retain its look with all new buildings. And Senoia buildings “undulate,” a phenomenon whereby the roofs of buildings are only slightly shorter or taller than each other, causing a sort of “wave” visual effect.

“Lots of little things can help fill in the gaps and create that sense of place and maintain it,” Rothwell said before presenting some ideas that Duluth had in installing “pocket” green

spaces like urbanized parks. Another park was tucked in the end of a New York alleyway.

But green spaces are only one option. One guest expressed interest in dining facilities, and it may benefit Young Harris to have a gas station – so long as it’s positioned in the most convenient place and isn’t too close to downtown events.

“It’s just (about) what kind of wear you want,” posited Rothwell, once again driving home the point of “getting ahead of the curve” by growing responsibly.

When residents can choose how their community develops, it prevents unwanted businesses and organizations from moving in and converting  
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Lake Levels

BASKETBALL

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12/8 7 PM  
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# Annual Tree Lighting...from Page 1A



Families enjoyed cookies and other goodies during the annual Young Harris Christmas Tree Lighting Dec. 1, sponsored by the City of Young Harris and the Enotah Garden Club.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

ation, they were indeed more adorable than a passel of kittens under the tree.

Before their performance, Pastor Stephen Soulen of the newly renovated Sharp Memorial Methodist Church addressed them with an important message.

“A wise man a long time ago – it’s in the Bible, it says, ‘Love is patient.’ Wait, wait. So, when you wait, when your parents say wait, it is a loving thing to wait,” advised Soulen, applying the message to waiting for Christmas in the short term while hoping the lesson

lasts a lifetime.

Once it was showtime, Towns County Elementary School Music Teacher Jordan Trotman directed her little ones to perform with a mix of singing as well as signing and other choreography, like miming the decorating of a tree.

Speaking of trees, a particularly big hit was the song “Baby Christmas Tree.” Any parent familiar with “Baby Shark” should recognize the general theme.

Afterward, a very special guest made an appearance, as Santa Claus himself came down from the North Pole to read “The Night Before Christmas” to a very eager audience. Not only that, but he let them in on the secret to how he gets into houses without chimneys.

Carefully, kids passed around Santa’s magic keys that were still cold from the arctic air, listening with rapt ears to the classic Christmas tale. Afterward, they enjoyed photos, and each got a chance to sit on Santa’s lap and share their list.

The night closed on a merry and bright note, with folks grabbing leftover cookies and hot cocoa on their way out to look at the gloriously lit-up tree beside the parking lot in Mayor’s Park. It just goes to show that, rain or shine, the community will still turn out for a decades-long tradition.

In upcoming Christmas event news, the Towns County Sheriff’s Office Christmas Parade is set to take place this

Saturday, Dec. 9, kicking off at 5:30 p.m. to wind through Downtown Hiawassee. The parade was rescheduled from Dec. 2 due to inclement weather.

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# City Business...from Page 1A

Amendment regarding attendance by elected officials to encourage more regular appearances by city officers during in-person meetings.

Currently, the charter states that elected officers who miss "four consecutive city council meetings" automatically vacate their seat, and Ordiales asked that the charter be amended to read "four in-person meetings a year," including work sessions.

Councilwoman Amy Barrett said she did not believe that special called meetings, which can be scheduled with only 24 hours of notice, should count toward that tally, and everyone agreed that just regularly scheduled meetings would be included.

To be enacted, Home Rule Amendments must meet several requirements, such as two readings at successive regular meetings, legal organ advertisement for three weeks between readings, copies delivered to the City Clerk's Office and Superior Court Clerk's Office, etc.

These amendments were expected to be introduced in a pair of first readings during the Tuesday, Dec. 5, regular city meeting that occurred after press time. Second readings and subsequent enactment are slated for January.

Once the City Charter has been amended, the council will enact the "Procedure to Remove an Officer Ordinance" that spells out the specifics of removing elected officials for cause. A first reading of this ordinance was expected in the Dec. 5 meeting.

## Hiawasse PD

In other news from the Nov. 27 work session, the council and mayor talked about approving a new contract for the two Flock Safety cameras in operation by the Hiawasse Police Department.

The cameras are license-plate readers that can alert the police, for example, when someone with active arrest warrants enters the city. Hiawasse Police Chief Jeremy Parker said the cameras have been in operation for several years now.

Council members were expected to approve the new contract in their Dec. 5 meeting to the tune of \$5,000 a year to maintain the two cameras over the next five years.

This price is up from the old contract of \$2,000 per camera, or \$4,000 a year, but locking it in for five years will allow the city to avoid annual price increases for the foreseeable future, Ordiales said.

In his Police Report, Chief Parker said that residents wishing to volunteer as chaperones for the annual Shop With A Hero Christmas Program for kids, coming up on Dec. 15, should email him at [jparker@hiawasseega.gov](mailto:jparker@hiawasseega.gov).

Responding to Councilwoman Barrett's question if the city had hired a fifth officer yet, Parker said no, but that remains a priority. He also said that the department anticipates losing its fourth officer in March, putting the city down to three officers.

"The problem with law enforcement right now, and it's everywhere, is, people are not

wanting to get into this business," Parker said. "So, we definitely need to look at hiring a fifth officer, because in March we'll be back down to four. Then, we'll need to look at hiring a fifth one again."

Ordiales pointed out that the current four officers plus the chief can handle all shifts, and that a fifth officer would act as a swing shift person — something she incorporated when she first came into office. Still, without a fifth officer, the city is paying overtime when an officer is out.

## Other Business

Announced Nov. 27, Hiawasse-based attorney Larry Sorgen has agreed to serve as a member of the city's Ethics Board. Sorgen will fill the remaining term of Councilman-Elect Jonathan Wilson, who should have come off the board when he qualified for office in August.

Sorgen's appointment and swearing-in were expected in the Dec. 5 meeting, which Mayor Ordiales said was none too soon, as the board has a pending ethics complaint to consider.

Council members also spoke of ratifying, in the Dec. 5 meeting, the contract with the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission for grant administration services regarding the Paris Business Center project and the Boardwalk project at Lloyd's Landing and Mayors Park.

Since the Paris Business Center project has been ongoing for several years now, delayed largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the administered grants has had to be extended, and the grant for the boardwalk is getting closer to being awarded for construction.

Officials still hope the Paris Business Center will be completed by May 31, 2024, though the time frame may need to be extended because work was paused while the city worked through securing a construction loan, which occurred last month.

The city has been contemplating hiring a project manager to see the Paris Business Center through to completion of construction, but Attorney Mitchell believes they can get by with oversight by the architect, Source Urbanism.

Following this discus-

sion last week, council members agreed to revisit the idea of bringing on a project manager in a couple of months if they perceive the need at a later date.

Councilwoman Barrett initiated a conversation about the parrot-feather infestation in the south end of Lake Chatuge, noting her concern that the highly invasive weed is "the kudzu of Chatuge." If the weed spreads further, it could damage the local economy and quality of life.

Since Hiawasse pulls water out of Lake Chatuge to treat for drinking, Barrett asked if the city was testing the lake for herbicides, which is one option to deal with parrot-feather, and Ordiales said yes.

Resident LaJean Turner, who attended the meeting, said her husband Noel had been testing lake water for years, with no positive results for herbicides or pesticides.

Mentioned in the meeting, multiple local businesses and homeowners have come together to launch a website to bring awareness and action to the issue, including an online petition: <https://www.savelakechatuge.org/>. Callie Moore of MountainTrue was consulted in the creation of the website.

The infestation is currently under environmental review by the Tennessee Valley Authority, and Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw is putting pressure on the TVA to come up with a solution that is amenable to the interests of both the county and its residents on the lake.

Also on Nov. 21, City Clerk Bonnie Kendrick swore in City Billing Clerk Marta Izquierdo as Deputy City Clerk. This is the first time the city has had a deputy clerk, and Izquierdo will fill in for Kendrick when she is unavailable, like last week when she went on vacation.

Notable guests in the special called meeting were Councilwoman Anne Mitchell's son Michael and granddaughter Eliza, visiting from Mississippi, and retired municipal attorney Dana Miles, who has been hired by the city to investigate Ordiales' alleged charter violations.

Miles made clear after the meeting that he was appearing as a guest only and not in a professional capacity, so the city would not be billed for his time there that evening.



Hiawasse Police Chief Jeremy Parker gave several updates in the Nov. 27 City Council work session, noting that he is looking forward to Shop With a Hero this month.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

# Planning Discussion...from Page 1A

the town into something wildly outside of its historic identity.

And that image of the classic small town is something Young Harris residents hold dear, along with their proximity to the mountains that surround their homes. Such a sentiment was echoed, at least, in the results of the aesthetic survey for downtown decorations.

It's worth noting that, by the end of the day, more guests voted on the designs incorporating local materials like wood and stone and were fond of more "historic" looks on buildings rather than the flat steel used so prominently in metro areas.

That said, the results aren't set in stone. It was a good way to gauge the sort of surroundings that citizens want to see developed, particularly around the SR 515/SR 2/US 76 Project, commonly referred to as the "Bypass" due to its construction around the city.

The Georgia Department of Transportation said last week that the 515 project was already underway, to include "grubbing and clearing the area and working on the stream restoration before the holidays."

"There will be no detours this year," said GDOT District 1 Communications Officer Elizabeth Johnson. "Ask me this question again next year in the fall."

Johnson added that "con-



Residents checking out a map in the Nov. 28 GMRC planning meeting in Young Harris.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

tractors typically take off for two weeks during the holiday season and start back up in the New Year," noting that GDOT is "hoping for a mild winter."

As for the GMRC planning initiative, solid decisions won't come into play until next year, but guests left the meeting empowered by the knowledge that they can exert some control over the fate of their community.

Those who attended last week and those who didn't are

urged to think about the sort of businesses they believe will enhance their lives in Young Harris.

Keep an eye out for the next Main Street meeting. There was no set date at press time, but it will take place in January. Questions about the Main Street Program or other community and economic developments can be directed to Rosemary Royston at 706-379-3171 or [roseroyston@cityofyoungharris.net](mailto:roseroyston@cityofyoungharris.net).