

Towns County Herald

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Wednesday, July 31, 2024

Water discussion highlights called city meeting

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The Hiwassee City Council and Acting Mayor Jay Chastain Jr. hosted Engineering Management, Inc. President Fletcher Holliday for a presentation about the Water Treatment Plant in a special called meeting on Wednesday, July 24.

City officials called the meeting to conduct several items of business, to include the water discussion after many city customers experienced water outages over the busy Fourth of July holiday weekend.

Holliday's presentation focused on the installation and capabilities of the long-

awaited third water filter at the city plant. The project is nearly completed and is awaiting approval by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division so it can be put into service.

"The filter has been operational," Holliday said. "We've already completed our 30-day trial run, which EPD requires. The last part is completing an Operations & Maintenance Manual for the operators to use, and that document is almost completed as well."

In the works for several years, the filter project began construction in 2023, and Chastain believes there has been some confusion over the purpose of the new filter, which Holliday attended to clear up.

According to Holliday, the goal of the filter is to provide redundancy to the water treatment system, not to increase the overall amount of water being treated, though an upcoming permit revision will slightly increase the average daily limit the city is allowed to treat.

Two filters are enough to provide the water the city is permitted to draw out of Lake Chatuge, treat and deliver to customers, but the treatment plant has been running a risk of delivery failure without a third filter.

This became apparent about 15 years ago when one of the filters failed, causing a major water disruption until the filter could be re-

paired. Since then, the city has planned to get funding and install the third water filter, completed this year.

The additional filter will help the city accomplish a number of things. First, it will allow the city to continue delivering water uninterrupted should one of the filters experience a problem.

It will also help the city treat more water when needed, such as during the busiest consumption month of the year, July; as long as monthly averages come out as permitted, the city may treat more water on higher demand days to prevent outages like were experienced earlier this month.

The extra filter will en-



Hiwassee Councilman Jonathan Wilson and Acting Mayor Jay Chastain Jr. in the city's July 24 special called meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Board of Health holds recognitions, talks bird flu

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Towns County Health Board held its quarterly meeting on Thursday, July 25, where members held a brief recognition of a longtime employee, a memorial for a beloved coworker, and discussed pertinent information for a disease that has started hopping species.

Environmental Health Manager Tony Berrong was congratulated for 25 years of service at the Health Department.

"I remember his first few years bouncing between here and Union County, so I know he was excited when he got to just stay here," said Health Board Chair Dr. Darren Berrong, who is Tony's brother.

Thanks to the efforts of Vice Chair Lois Palmer, a plaque was presented to honor the memory of former Towns County Health Department Office Manager Laura Beth Ide, who ran the office for five years.

Described by Nurse Manager Lisa Burks as "phenomenal," Ide helped keep spirits up at the height of the



Health Board Chair Dr. Darren Berrong presenting his brother Tony Berrong a "Faithful Service Award" from the state in honor of his 25 years of service at the Health Department.

COVID-19 Pandemic. Ide herself caught COVID and "never bounced back."

Her eventual passing was caused by pulmonary embolism on March 28, 2022. Ide is remembered as a devout Christian, and Burks said that knowing Ide walks with her Savior helps ease the pain of her loss.

"We miss her daily, and we're just tickled Miss Lois did that for us," Burks said.

During the Nursing Report, Burks revealed that 2024 has so far seen slightly more procedures than 2023. There has been an uptick in family planning cases and general labs this quarter, and despite the rising trend of COVID-19 cases, there have been no shots given for the disease.

All throughout the month of June, training ensued for the new Georgia Registry

Inaugural laser light show wows Fairgrounds crowds

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

After much anticipation, the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds held its very first Laser Light Show on Saturday, July 27, after a full afternoon of family fun in the sun.

What started as a day of activities and browsing vendors ended in viewing a night sky filled not with twinkling stars but a dazzling show of neon.

For most of the day, the activity was localized to the Eller Holler area, leaving the baseball fields free for the early birds to set up blankets and chairs.

Bouncy houses and foamy bubble pits awaited eager kids as early as 4 p.m., leaving parents free to shop from a couple of vendors of offering hats, bags and of course glowing toys and jewelry for

their children.

Courtesy of True Youngblood and Jukebox Country, people of all ages got to enjoy live music throughout the evening, whether they took a seat in the bleachers or hung out at the Holler Tavern.

Organized by the efforts of Towns County Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, Fairgrounds Manager Hilda Thomason and Laser Encore, the event was the first of its kind in Hiwassee. While many folks were familiar with Stone Mountain's laser shows, others weren't quite sure what to expect.

"I'm just thinking like I'm going to be in the club outside," said Kayin Campbell, who was there that night with his wife Cindy. Their three little ones, Autumn, Summer and K.J., had a full day of enjoying the children's activities in the Holler, their favorite being the

bouncy house.

They were also happy to befriend Jocelyn Brown's dogs, Pebbles and Bam-Bam. Brown sat nearby with her boyfriend, both of whom had recently moved to Georgia from Texas and jumped at the chance to familiarize themselves with local events.

"I'm looking forward to it; I think it'll be fun," Brown said. "We like to get out and do stuff - you know, especially since we're not from around here."

Shortly after 9:45 p.m., the show began. Visual artistry and animation came together to the backdrop of music from a variety of genres. Across the sky, strobes of undulating colors lit up the darkness and bounced off the trees.

On a screen in front of the field, the lasers depicted stories of brave knights fight-

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The outdoor Laser Light Show on July 27 was unlike anything the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds has hosted before, aided by a fog machine that allowed the lasers to light up the air in the ballfield staging area. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Schools look forward to ag facility, despite delay



The site of the Towns County Schools Agricultural Facility will look remarkably different by January 2025, which is when Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong hopes construction will be finished. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong is excited about the Agricultural Facility going up on campus. Though it only looks like a pile of dirt right now, the plans have been drawn up and Berrong hopes a concrete slab

will appear soon.

"I have been wanting to do something for our (Career, Technical and Agricultural Education) program for a while," Berrong said, "and I didn't think I'd be able to do anything for several more years."

"We have a great CTAE program at our school but don't have many facilities for them.

Our current Ag/Mechanics room is only about one fourth of the size of the new building. The space for them is very limited.

"When they work on electrical projects, they bring in panels and can only work on that. When they finish with electrical, if they want to work

See Ag Facility, Page 7

NC man arrested for child molestation, sexual battery

News Special

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation has arrested and charged Donathan Shelton, 32, of Sylva, North Carolina, with child molestation and sexual battery.

On April 29, 2022, the Towns County Sheriff's Office requested the GBI to assist in a child abuse investigation.

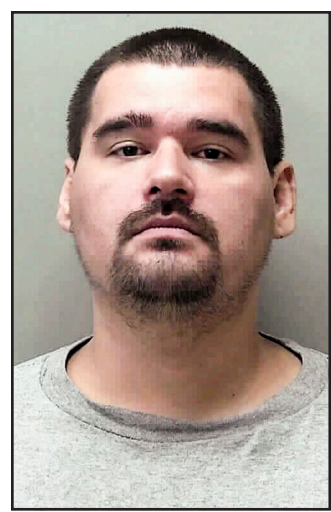
Shelton was arrested in North Carolina for charges stemming from a Jackson County, North Carolina, case. On Oct. 24, 2022, Shelton was indicted by a Towns County Grand Jury for two counts of child molestation and two counts of sexual battery. A

bench warrant was issued for his arrest.

Once Shelton was released from jail in North Carolina, he was extradited to Georgia and booked into the Towns County Detention Center on July 18, 2024, where he is currently being housed.

This investigation is active and ongoing. The case file was given to the Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney's Office for prosecution. It is pending court.

Shelton has been charged only and is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.



Donathan Shelton

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Hiawassee City Meeting...from Page 1

able maintenance and cleaning of any of the filters any time of year by ensuring that at least two filters are always running.

And all three filters could be used at once to decrease the amount of water being treated by each filter, thereby increasing the lifespan of the filters by reducing the stress placed on the individual filters.

Each filter can treat up to a million gallons of water per day, so the city is now capable of treating 3 million gallons daily – well above the 1.62-million-gallon daily average from the busy month of July 2023 – though the city is only permitted to treat up to 2 million gallons per day.

However, under the revised EPD permit expected to be granted in the next 60-90 days, the third filter can be used to help treat up to the permitted withdrawal limit of 2.72 million gallons a day, with the monthly average not to exceed a new maximum of



Last week, EMI President Fletcher Holliday offered some sobering details about Hiawassee's longstanding water loss problem, now over 50%. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

2.04 million gallons treated daily. So, the third filter could be used to expand treatment

eventually want to do as the county grows, Hiawassee officials must solve a longstanding water loss problem.

For roughly 15 years, the city has been aware that more than 40% of treated water is being lost somewhere in the distribution system, and maintenance employees have kept busy over the years hunting leaks to repair them.

Holliday said this problem could be due to multiple factors, including broken lines and older meters that are inaccurately measuring what is being distributed – but the loss problem is only getting worse.

As of the 2023 audit, the city was seeing 53% loss of treated water, and council members discussed the imperative of getting to the bottom of the unaccounted water problem in the July 24 called meeting.

Moving forward, the city will be examining options to isolate the loss and address the issue more aggressively – beyond just manually

searching for leaks – to reach a loss target of 15% or less to save money, increase available treated water supply and potentially qualify for higher treatment permitting in the future.

To do this, the city will consider a proposal from EMI to conduct a special study known as a Capital Improvement Plan to provide “a plethora of information that you could use in order to ... establish where your water loss is and how to formulate a plan to reduce it,” Holliday said.

The study would also include a 10-year forecast for growth purposes and a water rate study, and while a CIP will be pricey – upwards of \$35,000 – the four to six-month study would put the city in a position to know how to stop wasting money treating water that is going into the ground.

In other business, the council approved the purchase of a Dodge 2500 truck for \$63,900. Three bids came in for a new truck, which will be

used by the Water Department.

Council members also held a first reading to enact new Rules of Decorum to govern public interactions at City Council meetings at the behest of Acting Mayor Chastain.

The rules are being put in place to keep meetings from becoming “extended free-for-alls,” according to City Attorney Thomas Mitchell – in essence, to ensure civility during public comment periods, which arose as an issue in a recent meeting.

A full list of rules proposed for public comment is available at Hiawassee City Hall, to include speaking time limits, to whom remarks may be addressed, the acceptable tone of comments, rules enforcement, how to address disruptions, number of speakers, speaking priority, etc.

The council was expected to hold a second reading and possible approval of the Rules of Decorum in a called meeting on Monday, July 29, that occurred after press time at 6 p.m. inside City Hall.

Board of Health...from Page 1

of Immunizations Transactions and Services Program.

“It provides the Health Department, the physicians and school nurses with immunization histories – yours and everybody else’s,” Burks

said. “So, we can stay up to date on your current immunizations, or if you need immunizations.”

The official transition to the program was on June 21, though Burks said that the

nurses have faced “a bit of a learning curve.”

District 2 Public Health Director Dr. Zachary Taylor offered a brief update on what health care officials are seeing – and what patients need

to be on the lookout for. COVID-19 cases are on the rise, he said, but not nearly in the same numbers as the height of the pandemic.

“It’s generally our most vulnerable population that’s being hospitalized, and that’s our elderly population,” Taylor said. “We still need to understand it’s here with us. We have here at the Health Department free test kits if anyone needs them.”

Taylor also offered more information on the multistate outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), or “bird flu.” As the name suggests, the disease originally only sickened wild birds before it infected poultry, but later jumped to dairy cows and then humans.

Current statistics suggest over 100 million chickens have been infected, and 163 dairy herds have been affected,

with 48 states seeing outbreaks in poultry and 13 in cattle. As of April, 11 cases have been reported in humans, all occurring in just three states – Texas, Colorado and Michigan.

Most of these human cases stem from workers exposed to sick animals, with seven patients linked to contact with poultry and four with dairy cattle. It’s worth noting that all human infections involved “mild illnesses,” and assessments deem the national health risk to the general population as “low.”

“The poultry farmers were probably infected during the disposing of the bodies of the animals,” Taylor said, explaining that when a single bird tests positive, the entire flock must be culled. Dairy workers were likely infected by handling milking equipment since the virus attacks the cows’ udders.

The symptoms of bird flu are largely the same as any other type of influenza, including signs such as fever with chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle aches and more.

Georgia hasn’t seen a case of bird flu since early 2022, and there have been no cases observed in cattle. Still, the Department of Public Health recommends that everyone over the age of 6 months stay up to date on their seasonal influenza vaccines.

Those who work with birds should be mindful of the health of their flock. If the animals become infected, handlers should monitor their own wellbeing for 10 days since last contact. Public Health should be notified at 866-782-4584 as soon as symptoms start in order to provide testing.



Health Board Vice Chair Lois Palmer had this memorial plaque made up for Towns County Health Department staff in honor of their former Office Manager Laura Beth Ide, who passed away two years ago.

FOLTC Bookstores' Inventory Reduction Sale August 1st - 30th



The Friends are having another Inventory Reduction Sale at both FOLTC bookstores during the entire month of August. Every item on the shelves will be sold at reduced prices. (Please note that books will NOT be restocked during the sale.)

The Inventory Reduction Sale will take place August 1st to August 30th during regular library hours. Mountain Regional Library, 698 Miller St., Young Harris, is open on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 10 AM – 5 PM. Towns County Public Library, 99 S. Berrong St., Hiawassee, is open on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays

from 10 AM – 6 PM.

This will be an “honor system” book sale. Exact change or checks written to FOLTC must be placed in each bookstores’ red money box. Adult hardback books will cost \$1 each. Paperbacks and all children’s and young adult books will be \$.25 each or 5/\$1. CDs, DVDs, and jigsaw puzzles will be \$.25 each.

Book donations will not be accepted in August. Please visit the website at www.foltc.com if you wish to donate books after the sale. Click on the ‘Events’ tab and then ‘Book Donations’ for the list of the types of items that are accepted to be placed in the bookstores and those that are

not accepted.

Friends of the Libraries of Towns County bookstores are able to operate and raise funds for our libraries thanks to the generous donations of preowned books by members of FOLTC and our communities. Every book that is purchased generates funds that are given to Mountain Regional Library and Towns County Public Library to supplement their revenue for new books and other library materials, children’s and adult programs, staff development, and other requests by library staff.

Please join Friends of the Libraries of Towns County (FOLTC) and help support your essential public libraries!

The membership form can be found on the website. Follow on Facebook at: Friends Of The Libraries Of Towns County.

S.A.F.E. (Support in Abusive Family Emergencies)

Annual Fashion Show and Silent Auction

Saturday, August 3, 2024
Starts at 12:00 p.m. Doors will open at 11:15 a.m.
so you can shop the silent auction items
Civic Center, Blairsville

Lunch and snacks will be available for purchase.
For more information, contact: safefundraising8@gmail.com
Admission - \$5
Donations accepted through card, cash and check
All proceeds go to: Support in Abusive Family Emergencies, Inc.
S.A.F.E. Crisis Line: 706-379-3000

Sponsors: Wynne Works Insurance, Shelnut Auto Sales, Shawn's Home Furnishings and Young's Wrecker Service

Laser Light Show ...from Page 1



Youngsters enjoyed the bubble pit in the run-up to the darkness required to host the laser show over the weekend.

ing dragons, charming Martians surfing between planets, and even dancing lumberjacks. Betwixt and between, patterns danced to the beat of each song to create a veritable kaleidoscope around the audience.

"I've never seen anything like that," remarked Mercedes Hulsey, comparing the visuals to rolling clouds or waves on the sea. Her husband, Chris Hulsey, was no

stranger to watching laser shows, but he was of the belief that the Fairgrounds had the better performance.

"This one was totally different," Hulsey elaborated. "This one was a lot better than others."

Many attendees had additional fun while they watched the display, whether that meant singing, dancing or waving glowsticks. Although some folks had to leave at var-

ious points before the end, a great deal stayed for the entire 45 minutes.

Kourtney Queen and her young son Walker were some of those people, and they cheered when laser "fireworks" went off to signal the end of the show. They both enjoyed seeing references to popular characters like SpongeBob, Scooby-Doo and even the Charmin bear mas-



Homegrown talent True Youngblood & Jukebox Country put on an entertaining show for guests of the laser show Saturday.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

cot. "I've enjoyed it, and I think that they should do it again," suggested Queen, who added she would gladly return for another year should the lasers become an annual summer treat.

As the lights across the field came back on to help guide folks out, the consensus was definitely positive. Bradshaw himself was pleased with

the "very, very big crowd," calling the lasers themselves "awesome."

"We're going to try (to put it on again next year)," Bradshaw stated.

On their way out, longtime friends Janet Jones, Toni Calabro and Tina Sharpton were still sharing laughs in the wake of a good time. They were part of the singers in the crowd, and Sharpton joked

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

that the trio should have gotten up and danced.

"It was awesome," Jones said regarding the show itself, with Calabro and Sharpton echoing the sentiment. They, like the Hulseys, were blown away by the visuals, and they hope to return for the next iteration. "The graphics were cute, but the way the sky rolled - that was really cool."

Ag Facility ...from Page 1

on plumbing, they have to rearrange the entire room. Our facilities just aren't adequate for what we are trying to do."

CTAE programs specialize in teaching a wide range of subjects: Agriculture, Architecture and Construction, Arts, Audio & Visual Technology and Communications, Business Management and Administration, Education and Training, Energy, Finance, Government and Public Administration and more.

"The state awarded us a \$1.75 million grant for the ag facility," Berrong said. "We started with the planning stages about seven months ago when the legislative session ended so that we knew we were getting the money. And then the ESPLOST passed, and that gave us some more revenue so we could get started."

"Right now, the site-work is being done. Initially we thought we would get it done by September or October, but it doesn't look like that is going to happen. So now it looks like January, best-case scenario. Things are going really slow."

Berrong met with construction manager Charles Black Construction Company last week to learn more about the delay, and it turns out the footings for the building have had to be re-engineered, the new plans for which have just arrived. Still, he's hopeful for completion by January.

"This new facility will have everything in its own space," Berrong said. "We'll have an HVAC station; we didn't really have that before. Welding will have its own construction area, a plumbing area, an electrical area, animal science area, a full kitchen and so on."

"Pretty much anything a kid is going to want to do in the field of CTAE when they graduate high school, we will be able to offer them. The program aids a lot of our students. In a year, we probably serve over 100 of our kids in this program."

"Back when I was going to school, if you wanted to get a good-paying job you had to go to college. These kids today are starting off ahead of the game, in my opinion. The trade careers are a great option. It's one of the most exciting things I've done here at Towns County Schools."

Berrong's vision is right in line with what is happening nationally. Technical colleges around the country have seen a large increase in enrollment. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, enrollment in such programs increased 11.5% from spring 2021 to 2022, and 4.4% from spring 2022 to 2023.

Also, the initial cost of attending trade school is one of the biggest benefits this type of education has to offer. According to College Board figures, the average cost of attending a public, four-year school worked out to \$10,740 for in-state tuition in 2022. The average for trade school was as little as \$5,000 per year.

Many young people who are choosing trade school over a traditional four-year degree say that they are doing so because it is much more affordable, and they can see a direct path to a job. It appears kids and parents are looking for relevance in what they are learning. They want to be able to connect what they are doing today with what they will be doing tomorrow, without incurring the exorbitant costs of traditional higher education.

Technical education also happens on a much shorter timeline. Students can often learn a trade and enter a related profession in 18 to 24 months, rather than spending four years or longer to earn a bachelor's degree.

"Sabrina Garrett and Todd Flanagan teach the ag classes, and they are terrific," Berrong said. "I even look forward to the days when we bring some of the elementary kids over to get them interested in CTAE."

Citizens for a Better America meeting Aug. 15

Are you happy about the way things are going in Cherokee County, NC, the U.S. and the world?

Let's work together to create change, peacefully & patriotically!

We have an information packed meeting and guest speaker in store for you at the Citizens for a Better America monthly meeting. This month's topic will be "Voter Integrity" with guest speaker David Warren (via live Zoom) from the NC Voter Integrity Team. Bring your questions. We are

all concerned with this topic and making our vote count.

Thursday, August 15th at Legends Steakhouse in the private meeting room, 42 Tennessee Street, downtown Murphy, NC. Food ordering starts at 5 PM, meeting starts promptly at 6-7:30 PM.

This meeting is free & open to the public.

For more information: Website: <http://www.CitizensForABetterAmerica.com>; Email: Contact@CitizensForABetterAmerica.com; call: (828) 494-7403.

Hiawassee Garden Club 74th Annual Flower Show at GA Mtn. Fairgrounds

It's one month until Hiawassee Garden Club's Annual NGC Standard Flower Show. The Flower Show is the 74th consecutive show held by the Hiawassee Garden Club at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

This year's show is titled "Elements and Weather on Earth." Horticulture and flower designs will be exhibited. Any amateur grower may enter Horticulture in specified classes.

If you are interested in entering a specimen in the flower show, guidelines and class list may be picked up at the garden club building, 34 River Street.

Entries will be received at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds Flower Show Building Thursday, August 15 from 10 AM until 6 PM. Please know the botanical names of the plants you plan to enter.

The show runs from August 16th - August 18th.