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those will be held Jan. 25 in Clay County and Jan. 26 in Blairsville. That policy was passed unanimously, so everybody voted for it. I think everybody on the board is in favor of doing that. We want people to understand what we're trying to do, and we want as much input as we can possibly get from our members."

The first meeting will take place on Monday, Jan. 25, in the Multi-Purpose Room of the Clay County Courthouse in North Carolina at 6 p.m., with the second Town Hall Meeting scheduled for Tuesday, Jan. 26, at the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center at 6 p.m. in Blairsville.

Board Secretary Roy Perren is heading up the General Manager Search Committee, and he gave an update to the process in the media Q&A that Tuesday.

"We have put out requests for proposals for search firms to apply to be the search firm to do the search," said Perren. "And we, to this point, have had several who have expressed interest. We sent it out to probably about 15 different firms, and we received two of the proposals today - have not looked at them yet at all."

"So that's where we're at in that. The search committee will recommend the search firm to the full board, and once that's done, then the search firm will help us in looking for candidates for the position."

In a continued spirit of transparency, the board has posted to www.brmemc.com a public survey called the General Manager Search Survey, which is meant to take the membership's concerns and considerations to heart.

"The Board of Directors of Blue Ridge Mountain EMC and its General Manager Search Committee want to hear from the membership concerning the next EMC General Manager," according to the website. "The board and committee feel strongly that in order to attract and hire the right person for the job, they need to know the qualities and levels of education and experience our membership believes is most important in the EMC's next leader. The following anonymous survey was developed to meet this goal. Thank you for taking the time to provide this much-needed feedback."

The board also reported on the total cost of the BRMEMC New Headquarters Project - \$33,107,829.88 - which opened in October of 2012.

"We've had every nickel accounted for for this building, from the dirt all the way to

the shingles on the roof," said Steven Phillips, president of the BRMEMC board of directors. "We've got every dime, even as far as the carpet on the floors."

A comprehensive summary of the New Headquarters Project has also been made available on the BRMEMC website, and it offers an itemized list of which contractors were used for the project and how much they were paid.

The report takes into account every aspect of the project, from start to finish, including interior design costs and costs of furnishings, as well as how much it cost to purchase the 102 acres - property costs, survey costs, closing costs, etc. - within which the complex resides.

Also, the board reported in the media Q&A that the EMC was in good financial health, with positive margins. And though the latest financial audit was not made available as of press time Monday, Phillips did say that the board planned to post the results of that audit to the website in the near future.

When asked whether or not the board had plans to make board meetings or parts of board meetings open to the public, Cummings, who chairs the board's Policy Committee, said that he had been looking into the various possibilities, including live-streaming board meetings, or moving to a larger venue to accommodate for membership attendance.

"We did recently go to a meeting in Nashville, and we were able to talk with other EMCs from across the country - not just Georgia, but across the whole country, and we kind of polled them to find out how they do some of the board meetings, and we've got some good ideas that we want to put in policy that will allow us to open up some of our board meetings," said Cummings.

The tidal shift toward transparency found within the current board of directors began with the election of board members Steven Phillips, Chris Logan and Charles Jenkins in September of 2014, and continued in September of 2015 with the election of Mickey Cummings, Roy Perren and Larry Williams.

Having listened to the membership, the board of directors continues to put into place many new policies and practices aimed directly at transparency.

In an open letter provided to area news agencies, the board listed various policy changes that have been enacted since September 2014, including a conflict of interest policy prohibiting board members

from having profitable business relationships with the EMC.

Furthermore, the board took away the ability of its board members and board attorney to obtain medical benefits through the EMC, and the board has also made security deposits for service based on personal credit ratings, to reward members with good credit.

Also in that open letter, which is available on the BRMEMC website, the board announced that it would be hiring an auditor to conduct a forensic audit of the EMC, which would leave no financial stone unturned, and will certainly go a long way toward enticing a new general manager with an open and clean financial slate.

A freer flow of information is central to the board's push towards transparency to the membership, as evidenced by the various documents the board has been publishing to its website.

"Before the last election, the minutes of the board were placed in the North Georgia News and Towns County Herald," said Phillips during the Q&A. "Since we've got the new board, the minutes are on the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC website each month, so anybody can go to the website and read it at any time. Also, we have a Facebook page, which is updated regularly. So if anybody is interested in reading the minutes of the meetings that we have here, they are posted on our website."

"Also on our website is each board member and their email address, so if you need representing in your county, you can email anybody on the board, because the email address is there, and the person that represents you - Cherokee County, Clay County, Towns County, whatever, is on there, so that's something else that we've done so far."

Phillips and the board expressed their appreciation for the BRMEMC employees and all of the EMC's members, and pledged their continued support as a united board in their goals of transparency.

"We're just getting started," said Phillips. "We've done a lot up to this point, and I know a lot of people want it done immediately, but we've got the search for the general manager, and we're also looking at the audit and a lot of different things, so we've got a lot of stuff on our plates."

"But we've really been working hard. As far as the board, the board is working good, they're working together. Everybody has got their strong points, and it's really been a pleasure. It's been a lot of work,

Homecoming...from Page 1

that are on the court, but we also have people who are in Robotics and the Chess Club and everything else, so it spans the whole entire high school," she said.

She explained that Homecoming would proceed as it typically does.

"Thursday, we'll have an assembly to crown the king and the prince, so we'll have a king for the seniors, and then the prince will be the runner-up. And then Saturday between the girls' and the boys' varsity games, we'll do the girls, they'll be escorted out by their fathers or somebody comparable to that," she said.

"We'll announce the queen and the princess for seniors, but then every class has a princess, so there will be a freshman princess and

a junior and a sophomore princess," she added.

Senior Sterling Hedden, an athlete and lover of golf, is no stranger to the Homecoming Court - he's been nominated several times now.

"I try to be a role model. I try to kind of set an example and do things the right way, to do my work, and that kind of stuff. It's just doing what you're asked and following the rules, and not just getting by with half-ing. Try to exceed," he said.

He added that being on the Homecoming court allowed him to set an example for others.

"I think that it's being a role model. It kind of shows your class that they can look up to you. That's what I think," he said.

For Jocelyn Byers, a basketball player and senior, the Homecoming Court is all about camaraderie.

"I think characteristics are just getting involved and playing sports and being friends with everybody. I think that's just about it, just being all around involved with things," she said.

"I think the best thing is just memories with my friends. These are going to be the memories of high school that I have," she added.

"The big part is that these people are just very likeable. They get along with everybody. I don't think it's the biggest popularity contest, but I do think people vote to get away from it just being athletes. They want their friends to win. They don't want all the athletes to take all the glory. It's not stereotypical," said Vardo.

SPLOST...from Page 1

"The roof of the middle and high school pretty much has to be replaced in the next year or two," said Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong. "We don't really have an option. We've had three classrooms flood when we had the rain over Christmas. And that's not the first time we've had flooding, because that was a lot of rain, obviously, but we've had a lot of issues with our roof, and that alone is going to cost us about \$800,000 to replace."

And the repair list continues. "We've got a lot of heating and air issues," said Dr. Berrong. "We have a fire alarm issue, that the wiring is so old in the building, since it was built in 1977, that we're going to have to get our fire alarms to work properly, and for it to be a safe place for our kids, we're going to have to replace those as well. That alone is going to cost us about \$500,000, to get all the re-wiring. So we have numerous projects."

Dr. Berrong was clear that the SPLOST money would be used strictly for upkeep and maintenance of current school infrastructure, and not go toward building new campuses or campus additions.

"If we had to build a new school system, then we're talking \$15 million to \$20 million, if not more than that, so it's important to us that we keep the building up to the best of our abilities so our kids have a nice place to go and we don't have to go building new campuses," he said.

A draft of the resolution calling for the referendum on the May ballot for a 1 percent Sales and Use Tax states that it is the opinion of the Board of Education that the tax should be imposed and collected for up to four years for the raising of up to \$8.5 million for renovating the schools.

"This will be a four-year SPLOST," said Dr. Berrong. "You can run up to a maximum of five years, and quite frankly,

I'm not sure that I know of another school that, if they're doing one, that didn't do it for five years.

"My hope is that, we're trying to show that the school system, we're not just trying to go out there and get a lot of people's money. That we're actually looking at what we need and trying to do that in a manner to where we save the taxpayers as much money as possible, but we still get what we need to do for our school. I'm also not certain of any school that has actually passed a SPLOST in the past, and then dropped it like Towns County Schools did five years ago. So I think that speaks a lot to what the school is trying to do in trying to be fiscally responsible with the community as well."

And even if the referendum fails at the ballot box on May 24, Dr. Berrong said he doesn't plan on raising the millage rate in the fall - they'll just make do, like they always have.

"A lot of these projects we need to get to fairly soon, and quite frankly, with the funds that we currently have right now, there's no way I can go and do those projects without getting a SPLOST passed," said Dr. Berrong. "If it doesn't pass, the last thing I want to do is raise taxes for anybody, so that's not something that I would look at attempting to do. We would just have to look down the road and see how we can spread these projects out, but still keep the building safe for our kids, and just do the best we can."

Currently, Towns County Schools receive - and is one of the few school systems in the state to receive - a permanent 1 cent of sales tax per dollar for maintenance, dating back to the days of Bill Kendall as superintendent.

One challenge Dr. Berrong and the board foresee is that right now, the county has a 1 cent SPLOST in place until next year, which would make the sales tax 8 percent on the dollar for at least one year in Towns County.

Estimated SPLOST projects include HVAC and roof repairs, plus money for textbooks, technology, rewiring and relighting, security, and remodeling.

Jerry Taylor, Towns County historian and Board of Education member, recalled the times when schools would not stand for more than 40 years.

"When a school got 35 years old, they tore it down, because it was beyond repair. They never kept them up, but it's important to keep them up. They can last," he said.

Hiawassee...from Page 1

he said.

"Two, I'd like to get that main highways that are thru streets. That would include Main Street, Highway 76, Bell Creek Road, and Bell Street. These are roads that people drive through from North Carolina to Atlanta or from Clayton to Blairsville, or vice versa. There's a lot of traffic on those roads, and it's on those roads that you tend to see the most litter," he explained.

"You don't tend to see that much litter on the side streets that are residential streets. So I was hoping that we could find a way to get those streets picked up more frequently than once or twice a year and possibly see if we couldn't even get the detainees or maybe our service groups in the community to help out with that," he added.

Finally, he's working to get more trash receptacles installed, in the hopes that those who litter will have more, and better places, to deposit their garbage.

"We could mount some trash receptacles along Main Street where we already have those park benches so if someone's walking along the street drinking soda or water or something and they sit down to finish their soda or eat a

candy bar they could deposit it in the trashcan there, or if they're walking along they can deposit it, or in the case of someone like me who doesn't eat or drink while walking, but I pass those trash cans, I see a piece of litter on the ground and I pick it up, I have a place to put it."

These are Smith's ideas and have yet to be approved by the Hiawassee City Council. He's hopeful, however, that they might come to fruition.

"I don't think it would involve much cost. I've already purchased a trashcan for \$200 out of my own money, and I'm going to pay to install it as well, as my contribution to the city. It's not that much. I'm just going to meet with the mayor and ask her which park bench she would prefer I put it by, and we'll see how it goes," he said.

"We could get volunteers like myself to empty it once a week or so whenever it's filled or perhaps one of the city employees could do it, or perhaps once a week or so one of the city trash collectors would be willing to stop by and empty it once a week. We just have to try a couple options out. It's worth a shot," he said.

Youth...from Page 1

I've had for about 10 years at Blue Ridge Mountain EMC is to be a Washington Youth Tour Coordinator for the co-op, and we've sponsored this trip to Washington for 30 years now," said McCombs, a former educator with a passion for history.

According to McCombs, the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC began sending delegates to take part in the Youth Tour back in 1985, though the history of the program goes back more than 50 years.

"In 1957, Lyndon Johnson, at an NRECA (National Rural Electric Cooperative Association) annual meeting, spoke, and he was a senator then," said McCombs. "He told the crowd, you guys need to send some kids to Washington, and let them know what the flag stands for and represents."

"So a few co-ops took that to heart and started sending students to Washington with that idea in mind. Well, in 1965, Georgia sent its first delegation, which amounted to just about a dozen students who went on that first trip."

Walker, Underwood and Worley appear in the latest edition of Georgia EMC's GEORGIA Magazine, and in the Jan. 12 board meeting, the students shared what they treasured most about their trip.

an impact on my life, one thing that I've had to do when pursuing my college search is fill out applications, and applications require essays," said Underwood, who plans to play football for the Georgia Institute of Technology while pursuing an engineering degree. "A lot of the essays ask you about - sometimes they say, what one event in your life has really changed you the most, and for all the essays, I included the Washington Youth Tour as that event."

"Part of the reason was the people, and although that is cliché, the aspirations that they had just really opened up my mind to the aspirations that I can have. Coming back to this town where the opportunities are limited, as we are poverty stricken to some extent, it just really opened my mind to the capabilities and possibilities that we should have here and that we can have here. That's really been the thing that I've taken away from this trip the most."

Walker, who hopes to attend either the University of Georgia or Emory University for a degree in political science, said that for her, the trip was important because of the personal connections she made with other students from around Georgia and the nation.

don't think of the fact that I got to go to Washington - I think of all of the people that I met that really had an impact on my life," said Walker, who said she will forever value the friendships she made while on the tour.

"I am really fortunate to have been able to meet all of these people that have the same goals and ideas - and even people who don't have the same ideas as you. That's the beautiful thing about it. You meet all these different people that you wouldn't meet otherwise."

Worley spoke to the board about the respect he and his peers held for one another, and how much of an impression that made on him during the week-long trip.

"It was really cool to find out that everyone had the same goals or some of the same goals that we had, and what I brought back from the trip was just a respect for everyone," said Worley. "The trip really did make an impact on all three of us, and it was an awesome opportunity."

Worley plans to attend either the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill or North Carolina State University to study biology or biochemistry, with aims of one day going to dental school.

Walker, Underwood and Worley also expressed their appreciation for the board in having allowed them to participate as delegates in the 2015 Washington Youth Tour.

Milsap...from Page 1

artist Rhonda Hampton announced that Georgia Speaker of the House David Ralston and Young Harris College President Cathy Cox were in attendance for the show.

Milsap attended Young Harris College in his youth, and he spoke in some detail about his early education at the Governor Morehead School for the Blind in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he attended from the age of five and received a classical music education.

"I had 12 years of classical training," said Milsap. "I told my counselors, I want to be a professional musician. They said, oh no, we're not going to let you do that - why don't you become a political science teacher, or a lawyer or something like that? So I left and came down here to Atlanta to a Ray Charles concert."

While at that concert, Milsap was led back to Ray Charles' dressing room, where he played for the Rock 'n' Roll legend.

"I played him a couple of songs, and he said, 'You love it, don't you,' and I said, 'I do, everyday - I soak it up everyday,' said Milsap. "And he said, 'Well son, what you need to do, you need to become a professional musician.' So I went back to Raleigh and I said Ray Charles says it's okay if I become a professional musician."

A Country Music success story if ever there was one, Milsap worked his way to Nashville and his lifelong fame, and he would eventually play shows with his hero, Ray Charles.

Ending Saturday's concert on a patriotic note, Milsap performed "America the Beautiful," and called for everyone to get out and vote in this upcoming presidential election cycle.

Though counties from all over Georgia were represented among the fans who attended the show, and came from as far



Ronnie Milsap rocks Anderson Music Hall

away as Florida and the Tri-State area, Paul and Martha Moss of Blairsville were fortunate to be both Ronnie Milsap fans and situated right next door in Union County.

"He's a plain, down-to-earth somebody," said Paul Moss, who purchased tickets for himself and his wife the first day they went on sale. "He'll talk to you, and he's just a great guy. He's a good performer. That's the reason I like his music, and I like all of his music."

Valerie Vickers of Murphy, North Carolina, said that she was Milsap's oldest groupie, having followed him and his music for more than 25 years. She attended the show with her boss and friends.

"He's the best there is," said Vickers, who previously met Milsap through his son. "Even if he couldn't sing, I'd love Ronnie. He's the greatest person in the world. I love that man and his family."

Managing The Halls' Souvenir Booth during the show, Brenda Arnett enjoyed her interactions with Milsap fans.

"It's nice to get to meet everyone," said Arnett, who has managed the booth for 19 years. "The people are very friendly, and it's nice to see everybody

enjoy what's happening here, and to keep the fair going. It's a big plus for the town as well as the entrepreneurs, the restaurants."

Arnett mentioned a need for more Fairgrounds volunteers throughout the year, and believes that the Fairgrounds is integral to the community identity of Towns County - something with which Ronnie and Hilda Miller of Jones County agree.

"We love to come here," said Ronnie Miller, who has seen Milsap perform on multiple occasions. "I bet you we've been here 20 or 30 times in our lives, just to Hiawassee in general. We've been over here a lot of times - we love it up here."

Some exciting announcements came before and during the concert, including the possibility of Dwight Yoakam, Travis Tritt, Chubby Checker and Gregg Allman all coming for separate shows to the Fairgrounds this year, though confirmation is still pending, and Milsap let everyone know that he was working on a brand new album.

Towns County Sheriff's Deputies and CLEA (Citizen Law Enforcement Academy) volunteers covered security for the concert, with at least four deputies and 12 volunteers keeping an eye on safety throughout the show.