

# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, January 22, 2020

## DDA extends Arby's closing date; new board members welcomed

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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In what is likely to be one of the final steps before Arby's Restaurant becomes a done deal, the Blairsville Downtown Development Authority Board has extended the restaurant's closing date from Jan. 18 to Jan. 29.

DDA Board Members voted to approve the closing date extension in their Jan. 13 regular meeting, signaling a green light for the project barring any unforeseen circumstances.

The developer requested the extension to accommodate a new project appraisal he'd been unable to secure for this lender due to the winter holidays, DDA Board Chair Paul Thompson said.

If everything goes according to plan between now and the end of January, money will exchange hands and the land will be transferred to the Arby's developer or before Jan. 29, after which

construction can begin.

Based on conversations the DDA Board has had with the developer, Arby's construction is likely to begin in early spring, weather permitting.

Arby's corporate board members approved the project on Dec. 16, setting in motion the closing procedures and paving the way for a potential spring 2020 restaurant opening date.

These details are consistent with conversations Union County Development Authority Executive Director Mitch Griggs has had with both the developer and Arby's corporate representatives during his efforts to recruit the project to the Haralson Property site starting in November 2018.

Should the deal fall through for any reason, the Arby's developer will forfeit \$15,000 already committed in earnest money, the DDA Board said.

As far as Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen, the restaurant has experienced

various delays due to construction and equipment delivery issues, as previously reported.

Also, Popeyes' franchisee is facing staffing issues at two other locations he's opening, and the delays there have caused delays in Blairsville, so it's possible the local opening may be delayed further.

In LongHorn Steakhouse news, construction on the restaurant is moving right along, with some senior staff having already been hired, Griggs said.

No open date has been announced, but stakeholders are shooting for an end of first quarter 2020 completion window for LongHorn.

The DDA Board welcomed two new members on Jan. 13 for their first meeting of 2020: Betty Easter and June McEldowney.

Easter is a longtime member of the Blairsville City Council and is serving as the DDA's new council liaison in Blairsville. See *Downtown Development*, Page 2A



Betty Easter and June McEldowney are the two newest members of the Blairsville Downtown Development Authority, pictured here after their first meeting on Monday, Jan. 13. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Relay For Life embraces 'Roaring Twenties' to fight cancer

By Jarrett Whitener  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Relay For Life of Union County has worked with the community for years to help raise money to support the fight against cancer and provide a welcoming group for cancer survivors.

That's why, for yet another year running, the local Relay will undertake a massive fundraising campaign, with a 2020 kickoff event scheduled for Thursday, Jan. 23, at 6 p.m. in the Fellowship Hall



of Mountain Presbyterian Church.

During the kickoff, fundraising sponsors will divide into teams to gather donations in the coming months ahead

of the annual Relay event that comes to the Union County Farmers Market at the end of each May.

This year's Relay For Life theme is "Roaring to Fight Cancers in the '20s," evoking the "Roaring Twenties" of the early 1900s.

"We are focusing on roaring into 2020 and roaring to fight cancer," Union County Relay's Allyson McGraw said. "Each team takes their own little take of what the theme is, but in general, we are looking

See *Relay For Life*, Page 2A

## Gowder brothers, Heaton to face federal sentencing in March



Mike Gowder



David Gowder



James Heaton

By Linda Erbele  
North Georgia News

Three Blairsville men are set to be sentenced in March in connection with federal prescription drug crimes, according to court documents made available Jan. 15.

U.S. District Judge Richard W. Oden

former hospital CEO Mike Gowder and Blairsville-based physician Dr. James Heaton to appear at the U.S. Courthouse in Gainesville on March 25.

Former Union General Hospital Emergency Room Director Dr. David Gowder, brother of Mike Gowder, will be sentenced in a separate

hearing on March 23. Following seven days of testimony, on Oct. 24, 2019, a federal jury found Mike Gowder and Heaton guilty on more than 100 counts each related to illegal prescription drug practices.

Heaton was found guilty. See *Sentencing*, Page 2A

## Community leaders highlight need for mental health resources



Suzanne Moore, Linda Erbele and Cat Armato of NAMI Union County hosted a Civic Dinner in November to solicit feedback from community stakeholders regarding local mental health issues. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard  
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Mental illness is known for stealing away loved ones, often with no warning and always leaving grief in its wake.

Even when mental illnesses don't fully claim the

lives of their victims, the wide-ranging spectra of psychiatric ailments have the effect of deranging emotions to the point of causing people to spend their waking hours feeling dread, sorrow or worse.

The numerous problems surrounding all too prevalent mental health disorders – the shunning by society, the losses

to the criminal justice system, the lack of funding and other resources – are enough to discourage many people from seeking treatment.

Thankfully, there's an abundance of hope for the roughly 20% of Americans suffering from mental health issues thanks to organizations

See *Mental Health*, Page 3A

## UCSO helps US Marshals arrest Florida armed robbery suspect

By Shawn Jarrard  
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Acting in concert with the U.S. Marshals Service, the Union County Sheriff's Office arrested an armed robbery suspect from Florida on Thursday, Jan. 16.

Reny Diaz, 21, of Boca Raton, Florida, came onto the radar of local law enforcement after fleeing the Sunshine State's Palm Beach County for alleged "robbery with a firearm," according to an arrest warrant signed Jan. 14.

UCSO Staff Sgt. Lamar Dyer received a phone call from the Atlanta-based U.S. Marshals last Thursday telling him that they had reason to believe Diaz was likely staying at the Lakeside Inn off Murphy

Highway. "We went there, looked at video surveillance and confirmed that he was there the day before," Dyer said. "He left around 9 a.m. (Wednesday) morning. Through their intelligence, they got information that he was pretty much all over the county just riding around."

Nearly a dozen U.S. Marshals joined the Sheriff's Office that day to look for Diaz, and Dyer teamed up with the lead Marshal to drive the county in search of the fugitive from justice.

"One of the other Marshals had stopped and spoken with Deputy Crystal Cox and told her what we were looking for," Dyer said. "While she was on patrol, she observed two males acting suspicious."



Reny Diaz

Cox was sitting in her patrol car watching traffic from the side of the road when the two men initially drove past. A short time later, they passed her again from the opposite

See *Diaz*, Page 2A

## State senators condemn impeachment, begin 2020 Legislative Session

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The 2020 Legislative Session of the Georgia General Assembly convened on Monday, Jan. 13, with legislators eager to get business started at the State Capitol in Atlanta.

Among the pieces of legislation filed before the start of the session was Senate Resolution 538, with a stated aim of "condemning the Congress of the United States for pursuing impeachment

proceedings against President Donald J. Trump; and for other purposes."

Republican State Sens. Steve Gooch and John Wilkinson are the first two signatories on the pre-filed resolution, which moved to the Senate Hopper last Friday on its way to a first reading and committee referral.

Gooch is the District 51 senator for Union County and Wilkinson is the District 50 senator for Towns County.

Impeachment proceedings officially began

last week in Washington, D.C. as U.S. Senators took their oaths as jurors in the trial, which was expected to begin after press time on Tuesday, Jan. 21.

"The whole thing seems to be cooked up as a political stunt by the Democrats in the House," Gooch said. "I was honored (Jan. 15) to be invited to the White House to witness the signing of the China Trade Agreement."

"I flew up there on Tuesday night and I spent (Wednesday) at the White

House participating and watched the event. I was right there in the room, just feet away from the president.

"You had all these CEOs from all over the world, and you had these Chinese leaders – the Deputy Prime Minister of China was there. And we're sitting there signing a trade agreement that is a historic document that could be the biggest trade agreement of our time."

"While all that good news was going on, the Democrats See *Legislative Session*, Page 3A



State Sen. Steve Gooch



State Sen. John Wilkinson

Vol. 111 No. 04  
4 Sections 24 Pages  
Weather  
Thurs: Cloudy Hi 51 Lo 36  
Fri: Rain Hi 46 Lo 32  
Sat: Cloudy Hi 42 Lo 31

Arrests 2D  
Church 2C  
Classifieds 3D  
Opinion 4A  
Legals 4D  
Obits 4C  
Sports 2B

**SPORTS**

**BASKETBALL**  
Jan 21 vs. Social Circle 5 PM  
Jan 24 @ Rabun Co 6:30 PM  
Jan 25 vs. Putnam 3 PM  
Senior Night

**UCS**  
UNION COUNTY PRIMARY SCHOOL

**Parent Sight Word Workshop**  
Jan 27th

See page 2A

Save a life Give Blood

**Blairsville Community Blood Drive**

See page 1C

Georgia Mountain Scottish Rite Association Meeting

Jan 23rd

See page 2D