

# North Georgia News

75¢

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## Collins hosts jam-packed first county meeting

By Shawn Jarrard  
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The first meeting of Union County Sole Commissioner Harold Collins on Jan. 16 drew a standing-room only crowd

of more than 200 residents, all of whom were eager to see how county business would be conducted under the first new commissioner in 24 years.

It was the largest gathering for a regular county

meeting in recent memory and had to be moved to the large Jury Assembly Room of the Union County Courthouse to accommodate so many guests, and Collins opened by asking people to bear with him for his inaugural outing.

That night, Collins issued several decisions that clearly set him apart from his predecessor. Some of his decisions even reversed or modified actions taken last month by former commissioner Lamar Paris that he said did "not meet the minimum legal requirements for acceptance by Union County."

### NEW BUSINESS

As the first order of new business, Collins welcomed Jared Ogden and Sid Turner of the Blue Ridge Mountain Chapter Sons of the American Revolution, a fraternal order of patriots that champions community engagement and education about American history.

The men gave public

safety awards on behalf of their organization, first presenting father and son firefighters Union County Fire Lt. Ernie Pruitt and Fire Lt. Doug Pruitt with Medals of Heroism for their bravery in averting catastrophe during a major propane leak in Suches last September.

Next, Ogden and Turner presented Union County Sheriff's Sgt. Alan Patton and Sgt. Brandon Hogsed with Life Saving Awards for their roles in saving the life of an injured man who was in the process of committing suicide, also last September.

In other business, the commissioner adopted the updated Local Emergency Operations Plan "to provide a comprehensive framework for countywide emergency management during the event of a period of major emergency."

Emergency Management Agency Director David Dyer addressed this in the meeting, saying that the updated plan serves as a base plan to enable better implementation



New Commissioner Harold Collins described the crowd size at his first county meeting as "overwhelming" last week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

of individual emergency responses.

### APPOINTMENTS

Collins also ratified county appointments made by Paris in the December county meeting. He had to re-do the appointments because the individual terms began on Jan.

1, 2025, after Paris left office, meaning Collins was the one with the proper legal authority to make the appointments.

Longtime Elections Board Chair Libby Stevens received an affidavit of appointment from Collins to serve as the commissioner's selection to the Board of Elections for the term of Jan. 1, 2025, through Dec. 31, 2028.

The commissioner also re-appointed Dr. Elizabeth Wiles and William Stone to the Union County Board of Health for six-year terms running Jan. 1, 2025, to Dec. 31, 2030, mirroring Paris' actions from December.

As for Paris' Dec. 19 appointment of Courtney Waller to the Union County Development Authority Board of Directors, Collins invoked his authority as the current commissioner to remove her effective Jan. 16, and he substituted in Wesley Hopgood as her replacement.

Hopgood served as Collins' campaign manager. See County Meeting, Page 6A

## UCSO continues scam awareness at library

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

As the dedicated local Financial Crimes Investigator, Union County Sheriff's Sgt. Robert "Bob" Calamari has held 12 classes on scam awareness and prevention since November 2023.

He taught his most recent class at the Union County Public Library on Tuesday, Jan. 14, as part of the ongoing effort by the Sheriff's Office to educate the public about fraud and scam prevention.

According to Sheriff Shawn Dyer, fraud targeting the elderly is a major problem in Union County, as there is "more money lost on (scams) than anything else going on."

And Calamari shared some statistics to illustrate that fact. From January 2022 to November 2023, there were 55 fraud cases in Union County. From November 2023 to November 2024, there were



UCSO Sgt. Bob Calamari leading the Jan. 14 scam awareness class at the Union County Public Library. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

117 cases, demonstrating an escalation echoed across the country by reports sourced from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Between November 2023 and November of 2024, Union County saw 117 cases. See UCSO Scam Class, Page 7A

## Lingering ice results in extended school closure

By Shawn Jarrard  
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Every day last week, Union County Schools made the difficult decision to cancel on-campus instruction for students, though in-person classes for Friday, Jan. 17, were made optional to provide flexibility to families who felt comfortable dropping their kids off at school.

The reason for the closures was the extended period of icy backroads stemming from the Jan. 10 winter storm that dumped between 2 and 3 inches of snow throughout the county.

Trouble areas stubbornly persisted on sideroads primarily because of shady spots not melting quickly enough and overnight lows in the teens and 20s refreezing both runoff and road ice that managed to melt in daylight hours.

Citing safety as the No. 1 priority for students, Union



Union County Schools had to clear a lot of snow and ice from its campuses last week. Photo/Facebook

County Schools canceled on-campus instruction for five days, including Friday, Jan. 10, plus Monday, Jan. 13, through Thursday, Jan. 16, with Jan. 17 being the optional campus day. School Superintendent John Hill said that about 800 of the district's roughly 3,050 students were affected. See School Closures, Page 9A

## Blairsville Sorghum Festival Club donates to Fire Dept.



Members of the Blairsville Sorghum Festival Club and the Union County Fire Department got together recently to highlight what the club's major donation paid for at the Fire Department. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

As part of its annual major community give-back, the Blairsville Sorghum Festival Club recently made a sizable donation to the Union County Fire Department

that enabled purchases that will ultimately benefit both organizations.

Club Member Lisa Kane was uncomfortable sharing the exact dollar amount publicly because it sounded "braggy."

"(In 2024), they were gracious enough to say, 'Hey,

we're going to donate you some money to the Fire Department to buy some equipment,'" said Fire Chief David Dyer on Dec. 19 when representatives from both groups met at Meeks Park to take a look at the new equipment. See UCFD Donation, Page 2A

## Union County Grand Jury performs vital legal functions

By Shawn Jarrard  
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Many people are familiar with the indictment process of the Union County Grand Jury, which regularly results in official charges being filed against alleged criminal offenders.

And while the Grand Jury spends most of its time hearing evidence to decide whether to formally charge people accused of crimes, the deliberative body serves other purposes as well, like making certain county-level appointments and inspecting public offices and facilities.

Grand jurors also act as an important safeguard against unwarranted prosecutions by providing a citizen-led check and balance on the criminal justice system.

Here in Union County, the Grand Jury is empaneled with 23 new members twice each year, once in January and



The Union County Grand Jury meets in Room 206 of the Union County Courthouse. again in July.

Similar to criminal jury selection, grand jurors are randomly chosen from among the 18-and-up population of local U.S. citizens who have lived in the county at least six months, do not have felony convictions, have not been declared mentally incompetent, and are not elected officials. And like criminal trial

jurors, grand jurors are paid \$35 a day as compensation for their time, and many jurors must be excused from work to perform their legal duties.

That's essentially where the similarities between the two types of jury end; simply put, a grand jury decides if there is enough evidence to initiate a prosecution in the Union County Courthouse. See Grand Jury, Page 2A



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## UCFD Donation...from Page 1A

That included a new vehicle – specifically a Polaris off-roader – along with six tents, 100 traffic cones and a trailer. A small portion of those helpful items were parked in Sorghum Field near the syrup-cooking pan for a commemorative photo.

Dyer revealed that the items had been on the department’s “wish list,” but there hadn’t been an opportunity to purchase them until the generous donation made that possible.

On the one hand, the items will be helpful in search and rescue operations and Fire Department events. On the other, they benefit the Sorghum Festival and other Meeks Park festivals, whether that means better transport or organization for things like parking.

The Fire Department

has worked with the Sorghum Festival for years, directing traffic and ensuring visitors stay safe while enjoying a county staple founded on history and heritage.

For its part, the nonprofit Blairsville Sorghum Festival, while serving as the name of the event itself, has also come to represent its organizers – known years ago as the Jaycees.

“All the money we make on the festival goes back into the community ... with the exception of (2024),” Kane said. “We did send \$15,000 that Angie did with donations and T-shirt sales to our friends (recovering from Hurricane Helene) in North Carolina.”

Angie Dills, another important hand in making sure the festival goes off without a hitch, said the funds that go back into the community help

locals in need. That typically looks like covering power or maintenance bills, buying food or handling medical bills.

Still, for all the good the Sorghum Festival organizers do, Kane and Dills agreed that the group wouldn’t be able to pull it off without the help of the Fire Department. That’s why they made their donation for the equipment in the first place.

“They do the parking of the vendors, the parking of the customers – I mean, they do the whole (thing). If they did not do that, there’d be no way that this festival could go. The traffic would be unreal,” Kane stated, with Dills concurring. “They’re pretty good fellers.”

Dyer laughed at that and is fully on board with helping out at the next festival, always the second and third weekends in October.

## Grand Jury...from Page 1A

County Superior Court, while a criminal jury decides guilty or not guilty at trial based on that evidence.

Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley and his office act as the designated legal advisers for the Grand Jury, presenting criminal cases to grand jurors and providing them with any requested information and legal advice.

Based on the evidence his office presents, to include law enforcement testimony, Langley said the Grand Jury can vote yes to bring charges, which creates what is known as a “true bill of indictment” consisting of written accusations against an alleged offender.

Or, members can vote no, thereby declining to bring an official charge or charges if they are not convinced by a case or elements of a case.

“Basically, a Grand Jury is a check on the power of the prosecutor and law enforcement to bring serious cases,” Langley said. “The Grand Jury checks them off to say, ‘Yes, there’s probable cause ... They may be innocent, or they may be guilty, but there’s enough evidence here that is justified to go forward (to trial).’

“It’s a protection for the citizen against a capricious prosecution that has no basis.”

Members of the Grand Jury can even come up with their own criminal charges and direct the district attorney to present said charges to them, but Langley said that’s a very rare occurrence.

“They don’t have specific information to do that, usually,” Langley said. “Usually, it’s our office creating an indictment and presenting it to them, and then they vote on that indictment, but they can direct me to change the indictment.”

“Almost always, those indicted are people who have already been arrested by law enforcement, but they can indict someone who hasn’t been arrested by law enforcement. And then, that generates a bench warrant stemming from the Grand Jury for that person to be arrested.

“But that’s fairly rare. We do that in maybe 1 out of 100 cases – probably less than that.”

Grand jurors meet at least twice during their six-month term, as state law requires that people incarcerated without bond or the ability to make bond be formally charged within 90 days of being arrested.

In a typical term, a Grand Jury will meet for a total of three or four days inside the Union County Courthouse, though additional meetings can be called by the District Attorney’s Office depending on the prosecutorial workload.

On top of its indictment powers, the Grand Jury is responsible for providing oversight of the various elected official offices in the county by receiving written reports on the finances and operations of each.

If eight or more members deem it necessary, the Grand Jury is also empowered to investigate any and all public offices, buildings, authorities and records and even has subpoena power to compel witnesses to appear for questioning in such matters.

At least once each year, the Grand Jury must inspect the conditions and operations of the county jail, at which point members receive a tour from the Union County Sheriff’s Office.

And in Union County, the Grand Jury is tasked with making appointments to the Board of Equalization and nominations to the Board of Registrars.

Additionally, the Grand Jury can make constructive, nonbinding recommendations that are published at the conclusion of each meeting as part of the official presentments.

Self-generated by members of the Grand Jury, recommendations are made on majority vote and are merely suggestions to the public offices they pertain to. Some recommendations are fairly common and recur every so often among different grand juries, like the building of a new jail.

This month, for example, the Grand Jury recommended that the Sheriff’s Office obtain dash cameras for patrol cars; that the county pursue the construction of a larger jail with courtroom capabilities; and that the county gauge public interest in and seek a location for a paved bike trail/recreation path.

If they wish, county officials may choose to follow the recommendations from the Grand Jury but are not beholden to them.

“For the department heads and elected office holders, it’s 23 citizens voting on something saying, ‘We think this should happen,’ or ‘This would be a good idea,’” Langley said. “Wise leaders should carefully consider anything 23 citizens recommend, but there’s no cost analysis or feasibility study or anything like that behind it – it’s just what these citizens would like to see happen.”

Added Langley, “We’ve had several grand juries in the past recommend a new jail. The challenge for that is, a new jail is a very expensive, huge project for the county to undertake. Therefore, they’ve always been hesitant to do that.”

Langley acknowledged that a new jail will be needed at some point but said that such a major expense – potentially in the tens of millions of dollars – would require considerable public deliberations by elected officials and voters alike.

“It’s a huge decision for the county on when and how to build a new jail – it’s a big investment,” Langley said.

Former Commissioner Lamar Paris purchased the Old Shoe Factory property in 2020 as a future jail site. But there has never been an established timeline on building a new jail, and it seems highly unlikely that the Grand Jury recommendation this month will get the process started.

Langley said that such recommendations used to carry more weight under the old grand jury selection process, which until 2012 required that a local committee fill the grand jury pool with “the most intelligent and upright members of the community.”

“But (state lawmakers) changed that in 2012 to make anyone that had lived in the county for at least six months eligible to be on the Grand Jury,” Langley said. “So today,

there’s no selection process that intentionally puts prominent people on the Grand Jury in the way that previously existed.

“Under the old law, where a committee picked names, put them in a pool, and then it was randomly selected from that select pool, you tended to have a lot of community leaders on the Grand Jury, and therefore a recommendation had an impressiveness or authority to it.”

Importantly, Georgia law makes clear that grand juries are “meant to be non-political bodies,” Langley said, and therefore recommendations are statutorily prohibited from containing personal attacks.

Langley noted that the Grand Jury “is not a public forum,” so residents who are not empaneled cannot simply come in and observe the grand jurors’ work.

“By law, it’s a secret proceeding,” Langley said. “And the reason for that is, the Grand Jury can make an inquiry about whether or not somebody committed a crime. Hearsay is allowed in Grand Jury, but it’s not out in the public courtroom except for certain exceptions.”

“And therefore, things could be said about someone that shouldn’t be out there in the public because it turns out not to be true, and someone could be slandered if the public is allowed to come in and observe Grand Jury.”

The only information that is publicly available regarding Grand Jury deliberations are the presentments, including indictments and attached reports, that are signed off by the Superior Court Judge, filed in the Superior Court Clerk’s Office, and published in the legal organ.

Langley said the Grand Jury can invite or command someone to come speak to them, “but the general public can’t just say, ‘I want to speak to the Grand Jury and take up the Grand Jury’s time’; that’s up to the Grand Jury.”

Presentations from the public are not common but can occur if eight or more grand jurors decide to invite someone in, with the idea that such presentations might spur a majority of the Grand Jury to support, for example, a specific recommendation from other community members.

# County Meeting...from Page 1A



The local chapter Sons of the American Revolution thanked UCFD Lt. Ernie Pruitt and Lt. Doug Pruitt for recent acts of heroism on Jan. 16. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

and the commissioner said after the meeting he feels that his friend will do an excellent job at the Development Authority. Hopgood's term will last from Jan. 16, 2025, to Dec. 30, 2028.

Since local government authorities are housed under the county government, their volunteer board members serve at the pleasure of the commissioner, and Collins said he will be reviewing all county-specific boards for potential changes moving forward.

## HOTEL-MOTEL TAXES

Collins modified another decision by the previous administration by substantially adjusting the distribution of the hotel-motel tax receipts going to the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce.

In December, then-commissioner Paris allocated 70% of Fiscal Year 2025 hotel-motel tax revenues to the chamber. Since Collins campaigned on decreasing the distribution to the chamber if elected, he lowered that figure to 40% last Thursday.

## ORDINANCE REVISIONS

Also in the meeting, Collins held a first reading to revise the Union County Code of Ordinances related to the Construction Board of Adjustment and Appeals regarding the issuance of variances for construction that does not meet codified building specifications.

The Construction Board consists of five members and two alternates appointed by the commissioner. The purview of the board is to hear appeals and requests for variances for Sections 18, 44, 46, 62, and 78 of the Code of Ordinances.

These code sections deal with all types of construction overseen by the county Building Department, including apartment complexes, septic systems, mobile homes, RV parks, billboards, cell towers and more.

With the first reading that evening, Collins started the process of amending the authority of the Construction Board to transfer variance approval power from the board to the commissioner, giving Collins final say over which variances are approved.

Another ordinance revision outlines a public hearing process for variance requests and appeals "where the citizens of Union County have a right to be heard and express their opinions before the Construction Board of Adjustment and Appeals hears the appeal."

After a public hearing on the intended revisions – to be scheduled and announced soon – and a second reading and enactment of the revisions in an upcoming county meeting, Construction Board decisions will serve as recommendations only for the commissioner's consideration.

"The Commissioner of Union County will approve or disapprove the recommendation for variance of the ordinance," a revision reads, going on to say, "Every decision of the Commissioner shall be final, subject however to such remedy as any aggrieved party might have at law or in equity."

These changes line up with Collins' campaign pledge to better watch growth and development in the county, giving him direct control over variance approval as opposed to a board appointed by his office.

Residents may receive a copy of the ordinance revisions inside the Commissioner's Office at 65 Courthouse Street. And keep an eye out for the

public hearing date and time to attend to offer suggestions that could be incorporated into the revisions before enactment.

Related to the above ordinance revisions, Collins adopted a 120-day emergency moratorium on all applications for variances to give him time to finalize and enact the revisions. The moratorium is expected to be lifted following enactment.

## OTHER BUSINESS

Among other business, Collins accepted an agreement with CorrectHealth Union, LLC for inmate health services at the Union County Jail. The agreement – another agenda item that had to be redone under the proper legal authority – is a 12-month contract for \$192,431.20, effective Jan. 1.

Toward the end of new business, Collins asked County Manager Tony Hughes to provide attendees with an update on county operations.

Hughes thanked everyone for coming before launching into a discussion of the Jan. 10 snowstorm. Hughes officially started his new position on Jan. 7, so he had a lot on his plate within just a few short days of coming on board with the county.

In response to the storm, Hughes said he drove Blood Mountain and notified people on social media about road conditions, which he considers "part of my job" as county manager.

"My personal opinion ... I don't feel like it's the commissioner's job to get out there and do that," Hughes said. "The past administration did different, but that's OK – I have no problem with that. Mr. Collins, I feel like, has got more important things to do."

Hughes commended the Road Department for their work spreading salt and blading county roads during and after the storm. He said the Road Department ran low on salt but did not run out, and that the county had purchased more to re-supply its stockpile.

He noted that at least one subdivision benefited from the county selling salt at cost to spread privately on roads there, but he said no county salt left Union County.

Also, Hughes said he and Collins were made aware after the fact that the Road Department had been previously authorized to mix salt with ground-up recycled glass from the Transfer Station in place of gravel, which is something he remarked other states were known to use to treat roads.

He said the county has been selling a lot of the crushed and smoothed glass for landscaping uses, and that, "from a profit standpoint," the Commissioner's Office would stop using it to treat slick roads and start selling all of it for landscaping purposes.

In terms of Parks & Recreation, Hughes reiterated his commitment to gauging community interest in adult league sports, and Assistant Rec Director Susan Stalcup shared that uniform bidding approved by this Commissioner's Office will save local families money in youth sports.

During his Commissioner's Comments, Collins said he had learned that the county had 988 significantly damaged culverts, working out to 20% of the county's culverts being in need of repair.

"And we've got a bridge in Suches that needs immediate attention," Collins said. "I'm not bashing the (previous) administration, but our infrastructure is dwindling down."

He said other immediate priorities include paving of multiple miles of county roads on Town Creek School Road, Pat Colwell Road and Gaddistown Road.

With about two weeks in office at the time of the meeting, Commissioner Collins said he was still "turning the rocks over and seeing what's under them," but he noted his belief that "we'll be able to really cut a lot of wasteful spending when we get all this done."

"I encourage y'all to come to our next meeting," Collins said. "We'll have more information on this other stuff that we're finding out now we can save money on."

"Our Manager Tony Hughes is doing a great job, he's wide open. We've got the best staff in the United States. I could not have come into this job without this staff right over here, and I think they need a big hand for what they do."

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

With that, Collins adjourned the meeting and took about 30 minutes of questions from the sizeable audience. He deviated from the previous administration's approach of restricting questions to agenda items, instead taking queries on anything people wished to speak about.

Topics broached by the public were varied, including the condition of roads during snow/ice events and concerns over ensuring they are cleared in a timely manner for students to travel safely to school in light of the week of at-home learning due to the Jan. 10 snowstorm.

One guest wanted to know what the commissioner would do with public services available at Meeks Park. Collins said that he does not plan to interrupt services there but will be examining all facilities in search of spending cuts to save taxpayers money.

In response to a question about whether he would be privatizing the Butternut Creek Golf Course, Collins said, "It may come to that, but where it is right now, the Golf Course is making money."

"You've got to figure the salaries, though," he added. "It's not making money with the labor cost, but it is a good revenue for the county with the figures I have seen so far."

"And I plan on having monthly figures (available) when we get all this straightened out so you can see what each department – is it making, losing, breaking even – and that's so the people will be informed."

Collins added that he will keep in place the support that has always existed for the Union County Historical Society and the Canning Plant at the Farmers Market.

Two people asked about the possibility of the county treating private roads during winter weather, and Hughes stepped up to the podium to say that the county would do so if necessary to respond to an emergency.

Regarding a question about the imposition of a development impact fee Collins campaigned on, he said he would not make any decision until receiving input from residents in townhall meetings.

After the final question, Collins thanked everyone for coming and invited them to visit him in his office if they ever had any concerns, and he stuck around for another 30 minutes or so to greet and speak with a line of attendees.

The next county meeting will be Thursday, Feb. 20, starting at 6 p.m. inside the Union County Courthouse.



SAR Members Sid Turner and Jared Ogden attended the Jan. 16 county meeting to recognize also the life-saving actions of UCSO Sgt. Alan Patton and Sgt. Brandon Hogsted. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

# UCSO Scam Class...from Page 1A

Countians lost \$901,845 due to fraud, although \$270,000 of that staggering sum has been recovered.

Calamari also shared common examples of scams used by fraudsters – some even seen among residents of Union County.

To the untrained user, electronics can be particularly dangerous; one scheme involves tricking folks using their computers into calling a technical service number for Microsoft when the company doesn't have one, wherein the scammer requests access to a victim's machine.

In those situations, Calamari said the best thing to do is turn off the computer and unplug it from the wall for at least an hour or two, leaving it impervious to further contact. Should any sensitive information be at risk, however, Calamari recommended taking it to a local computer repair shop and having the hard drive wiped.

Unsurprisingly, phones have also become a valuable tool for criminals. With more advanced technology, a cellphone can act like a pocket computer and contain just as much personal information. A real sign of the times, however, is the advent of artificial intelligence.

AI can be used to mimic voices, as exemplified by Calamari when he asked the audience if they could hear him. Like the roomful of yeses, a



**On Jan. 14, UCSO Sheriff Shawn Dyer let people know how common scams have become in Union County.**

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

simple affirmative answer is all a criminal needs. From there, that recording can be used to create a synthetic "voice."

The tactic is especially potent when employed against victims' emotions. Calamari said there has been a rise in cases across the country of criminals using the stolen voices of children and grandchildren to steal thousands from their concerned family members.

"You get a phone call, 'Hey, Grandma, this is Susie Q. I'm in Mexico, I got into a car wreck (or) I'm in jail. Can you send me money?' Hang up the phone and call your granddaughter, because it's all a scam," Calamari warned.

And vigilance must remain high when elderly relatives are at their most

vulnerable. Potential scammers will browse obituaries and prey on grieving partners, claiming that the family overpaid on funeral arrangements or demanding some debt that the deceased owed.

"The telephone will say Mountain View or Cochran Funeral Home," Calamari added, warning that caller ID systems should not necessarily be trusted.

When supposedly contacted by an organization, whether one on the scale of a local funeral home or something as large as the Internal Revenue Service, it's best to err on the side of caution and avoid an immediate response, even if criminals often instill fear into their targets.

There are also certain tells that might reveal the attempt as an impersonator. The IRS, for example, will not threaten to call law enforcement or immigration officials over collections, and it is against Georgia law for Medicare to solicit purchases.

Additionally, most legitimate organizations will not ask for payment through gift cards. If a charity sends correspondence, be sure to read the fine print about where their donations go.

In short, Calamari said if something sounds too good to be true, it is, and he advised people to always practice common sense. Act cautiously, and don't be afraid to hang up on a threatening call or bring a concerning email or letter to the authorities.

If you suspect that you or someone you know has been the victim of fraud, call the Union County Sheriff's Office at 706-439-6066.

## Blairsville PTO Annual Strawberry Fundraiser

The Blairsville PTO is having their annual strawberry fundraiser. All proceeds benefit Union County Schools. 1 flat consist of 8 (1 lb.) containers. The price of 1 flat is \$27.00 1/2 flat consist of 4 (1 lb.) containers. The price of 1/2 flat is \$14.00. Please make checks payable to Blairsville PTO, Inc. Mail payment to Blairsville PTO, Inc., P.O. Box 1476, Blairsville, GA 30514; Attn. Michelle

All orders must be placed by February 19, 2025. Orders will be delivered by the end of February or the beginning of March. If you need more information contact Michelle (770) 503.4094. Thank you for supporting Blairsville Parent/Teacher Organization.



# School Closures...from Page 1A



**Icy backroads were a common occurrence across the county all last week, endangering school bus routes.**  
Photo/Facebook

students attended the optional Friday, which was a first-of-its-kind experiment to gauge the interest in such an option.

“Attendance was a little bit better than I figured,” Hill said, noting that school buses did not run for the optional day. “Of course, the rest of the kids were doing at-home learning, so it was about 25% (of the student body on campus).

“It wasn’t terrible considering it was an optional day ... We had a few employees that still had issues getting to work, but we had plenty of people here to serve the children.”

Hill said the schools received good feedback from parents, with some saying they wanted to keep their kids at home while others appreciated having the option of attending after five days without classes.

“I appreciate everyone’s willingness to give it a trial run, and it seemed to work fairly well,” Hill said.

The daily decisions to mix in-person classes last week rested on the fact that nearly all 28 bus routes remained dangerously slick in too many places from compressed snowpack, introducing a greater risk of children being injured in wrecks if buses rolled to pick them up.

“Any time you have a bus accident, even if it’s minor, it’s a very serious situation,” Hill said. “The kids have to be medically checked, and anyone with any minor injury would go to the hospital. The risk/reward of operating a bus in icy conditions – it’s just not there.”

Hill was worried about the system’s young drivers, too, who commute via personal vehicles to the High School and likely have little experience

navigating icy roads. Risks are compounded by the region’s steep mountainous terrain intensifying the hazard for all drivers in icy conditions.

“Buses and teenage drivers on ice is just an extremely scary proposition for me,” Hill said. “We hated to be out as long as we were. We were really appreciative for the work that folks did do from home, but it was just that a lot of places that didn’t get sunlight were still pretty icy.”

Thankfully, warmer daytime temperatures and regular treatment by the county Road Department contributed to a gradual decline in ice on backroads last week, but the schools remained closed out of an abundance of caution because of continued bad driving conditions.

Rain and 50-degree temps Saturday greatly diminished lingering snow and ice, but the National Weather Service has been warning of dangerously cold conditions this week, forecasting several days in a row of subfreezing temps that started Sunday night.

The weather service has also been monitoring the potential for more snow this week, with local predictions at press time Monday hovering around a 30% chance for Tuesday/Wednesday precipitation, though forecasts pointed to a more southerly snow trajectory.

But if it does snow again here, the extreme cold this week will likely make any amount hazardous for travel, and people will want to mind the 4 P’s during intensely cold weather like this, that is, take precautions for People, Pets, Pipes and Plants.

Of course, at some

point, the show must go on, and Superintendent Hill said he was hopeful that classes would resume Tuesday after the long weekend considering the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday on Monday, Jan. 20.

“We’re hoping the rain Saturday will clear things out and the snow stays south, and we can go to school next week,” Hill said. “Normal operations is the goal.”

Still, Hill is prepared to cancel classes again if travel conditions do end up deteriorating beyond the point of being safe.

During the extended closure, schools educated students in a limited yet ongoing capacity, so the kids will get credit toward the 180-day school calendar despite missing in-person classes, with no make-up days required by the end of the year due to this event.

The schools have drawn on past experiences with at-home instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, supplementing older students’ time away from classes with computer-based learning made possible due to a lack of widespread electrical and internet outages from the storm.

Hill said teachers have moved away from online learning at home for younger kids, as educators feel that more hands-on, pencil-and-paper assignments are better for these students if they must stay home.

So, the day before the snowstorm, teachers of younger-grade students sent them home with at least three days’ worth of physical class materials like worksheets. And with the extended closure, teachers communicated additional work to parents through an app used by the

school.

Of course, at-home learning for public school attendees is “never a replacement for the quality they get being one-on-one with a teacher,” but given the circumstances, the schools have gone with the best available options.

Hill believes that any learning loss experienced because of the closures will be made up quickly when students return.

“They’ll bounce back,” Hill said Friday. “We really need to be in school next week if possible, because the teachers will do a good, quick analysis of where the kids are at, what they’re missing.

“They have made some curriculum adjustments this week to account for the loss of face-to-face instruction, so they’ll push pretty hard over the next couple of weeks to get the children caught up.

“My biggest concern is, if we have another event move in next week, that’s going to put the children further behind. And that is concerning.”

At the earliest, Hill said he would be making the call about Tuesday classes on Monday afternoon, and the latest on Tuesday morning, both after press time. Should classes resume this week, Hill advises parents to “bundle your children up,” because it’s going to be incredibly cold.

The Union County School System was not alone in choosing to safeguard students with closures; neighboring mountain schools also closed last week for the same reasons.

Regardless of being in good company, Hill said that canceling classes is rarely an easy call due to the impact on children’s learning and the hardship placed on families.

“It’s a major consideration,” Hill said. “I really dislike not going to school because I realize fully that there are a lot of parents that need to be at work.

“That puts them in a hard spot when they have to go to a job site or an office to work and they don’t have any way to have childcare; that is a major challenge for parents. So, you have to weigh that out with the safety risk of having buses on the road for a regular school day.”

Hill has been involved in making school cancellation decisions for over a decade, which entails checking all bus routes daily, conferring with local first responder agencies, attending special weather briefings and more to make the best decision in uncertain circumstances.

“Sometimes, we get it wrong, but I always want to attempt to err on the side of caution when it comes to the safety of our students,” Hill said. “I just want to thank the parents for being patient with us and providing us some grace.

“Always know that we’re keeping the safety of your children in the forefront of our thinking. So, we appreciate all the support from the parents, because really, they’ve been extremely supportive during this.

“It’s not a tragedy – it’s just part of living in the

mountains, part of winter in Northeast Georgia. And the decisions we make are always in the best interests of safety for your children, which does provide other challenges, but I would rather deal with this any day of the week than have a tragic bus accident that we

can’t fix.

“This is the tradeoff between safety and being here face-to-face, but we’re always going to try to go to school if we feel like it’s safe. And if we do have to close, we’ll pivot, and we’ll do the very best we can with the situation.”

## How to create ‘Fun Art Not Fine Art’ hosted by Tri-County Women’s Connection

Ladies! You are invited to join us for “fun art”, great food, door prizes and our speaker’s motivating story. All this takes place on Friday, February 7, 2025, from 11 AM-1 PM at the Pat Haralson Memorial Civic Center, 165 Wellborn Road, Blairsville. Doors open at 10:30 AM. Bring your family and friends – they will be glad you did!

Delish LLC Catering will prepare a scrumptious lunch of Honey Roasted Chicken with Sweet Potatoes, Spinach Salad with Raspberry Vinaigrette, Cranberry Apple



**Melissa Ray**

Cobbler, coffee, tea and water.

For all “wannabe” artists who are intimidated by a blank canvas, The ART Studio of Georgia in Blairsville is the perfect place to gather, create and paint “Fun Art not Fine Art”. Melissa Ray, owner since 2022, hosts in-studio and on location “fun art” paint parties for you, your friends and family. The ART Studio of Georgia not only offers these in-person classes, but also ‘Paint From Home’ kits, stuffed animal making kits and more. On location paint parties are offered at your home, school, community center or business.

The ART Studio of Georgia was voted Best of Georgia 2024 in Art Studios and Workshops by the Georgia Business Journal! The studio is located at 178 Brackett’s Way, Suite 4, Blairsville. For more information, visit their website [theartstudioGA@gmail.com](http://theartstudioGA@gmail.com). Melissa will bring a pre-

traced canvas, paint brushes and paints so every guest can paint a few brushstrokes to help create a lovely piece of fun art. Make your reservations now!

Our Guest Speaker, Cathy Johnson from Marietta, says that “Sometimes your life is going one way, and then through circumstances beyond your control, it starts going another way – can you relate?” Cathy can and will share her story of struggles and tragedy: “What Stays Together When Life Falls Apart”. She was raised in the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia and moved to Georgia in 1993. Ken and Cathy have been married for 40 years, raised two adult girls and have two grandchildren. Don’t miss this inspiring story!

For reservations, e-mail Jocelyn at [jowabow@aol.com](mailto:jowabow@aol.com) OR text or call Jane at 706-633-7868. The cost is \$20 which includes the program, lunch, coffee, tea, water and dessert. Reservations and payment are due by January 31. Pre-pay with check (payable to TCWC) and mail to Judy Teague, 3245 Mulky Gap Road, Blairsville, GA 30512. If you are paying for other guests, please include their names.

Since the 1980’s, the Blairsville Tri-County Women’s Connection in affiliation with Stonecroft has planned and hosted events for women that provide a positive, upbeat time of fun, food and friendship. We look forward to connecting with you!