

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Winter weather continues to dominate local scene

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Assistant Editor

When Winter Storm Inga moved through the area last week, she brought with her snow, ice and frigid temperatures.

Fortunately, Inga only dropped about a half inch of snow the evening of Jan. 16 on into Jan. 17, but temperatures dipped into the single digits and stayed well below freezing for several days, causing ice to form and stick around for a while.

"Compared to other snow events, this event had the least amount of impact on public safety," said David Dyer, Union County EMA/911 Director and Fire Chief. "There were fewer accidents, no power outages, and no major

responses. "The extreme cold was a concern, but we had no emergency situations resulting from the cold. We monitored the situation and the weather. We updated GEMA and the public with situation reports each day."

Gov. Nathan Deal declared a state of emergency for more than half of Georgia's counties on the first day of the storm, and issued the following statement the next day, on Jan. 17:

"Due to yesterday's winter weather and continued freezing temperatures, ice continues accumulating on our roadways. GDOT is responsible for the maintenance of more than 17,900 miles of state roads and interstates. Currently, there are more than 12,800 miles remaining to be

cleared and treated." Continued Gov. Deal: "In light of this, I urge people to stay home, stay safe and remain off our roadways. We will continue monitoring the weather and will provide updates as necessary."

Looking at the havoc Inga wreaked nearby, it's clear that things could have been much worse in Union County.

At least seven deaths have been attributed directly to the winter storm in Georgia and neighboring states, and some 11 deaths have been linked to sustained low temperatures in Inga's wake.

For Union County Schools Superintendent Dr. Fred Rayfield, the risks just weren't worth it.

The schools only met for half a day the week of Jan. 15. See Inga, Page 2A



Winter Storm Inga visited Union County last week, dropping little snow but causing dangerous road conditions. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

Sheriff Mack Mason: 'The state is passing the buck'

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Assistant Editor

Union County Sheriff Mack Mason isn't asking a whole lot.

He just wants his deputies and jailers to earn a fair, living wage so the county can retain qualified help and provide quality service to Union County residents.

Certainly, his employees have received wage increases in recent years, thanks largely to tax dollars paid by local property owners and the diligence of Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris in managing the county budget.

But Sheriff Mason realizes that local resources simply aren't enough to pay his people what they're worth and keep his office competitive with outside agencies at the same time.

"The state has gone about passing the buck to the counties and the cities," said Sheriff Mason, despite the Sheriff and the county "being the forefront of law enforcement for the state of Georgia."

Two-thirds of local property taxes go to the school system, and education spending accounts for more than half of the multibillion-dollar state budget every year.

Furthermore, educators and elected officials both have state-mandated minimum salaries, but what about local law enforcement?

"My take is, if local law enforcement is going to have to bear the burden of law enforcement within the state of Georgia, why not subsidize law enforcement agencies in the counties and the cities?" Sheriff Mason said.



Union County Sheriff Mack Mason

Continued the sheriff: "To me, it looks like it would be a simple process. The Georgia Sheriffs' Association has already proved, and it's

an undisputed fact as far as I know, that the city police officers and the county deputy sheriffs make 95 percent of the arrests within the state of Georgia.

"Well, what kind of arrests are those? They are state law violations. They're not so much city and county ordinance violations."

Repeated calls from the sheriff and others for meaningful help with local law enforcement assistance from state agencies seem to have fallen on deaf ears, which is especially galling to Sheriff Mason, given that the state has shown no signs of addressing its decades-long retreat from law enforcement efforts.

In 1972, when Sheriff Mason began his law enforcement career as a state trooper, Georgia had 900 troopers serving a population

of roughly 4.8 million people. Today, the number of troopers has dwindled to 780, though the population has more than doubled in that time to over 10 million people.

"This has caused the county sheriffs and the city municipalities with police departments to have to hire more people," said Sheriff Mason. "That is being almost solely paid for by city and county property owners through their property taxes. And I'm sick of it."

"Why, 45 years ago, were there 900 troopers in the state of Georgia, and today we have 780, when per capita, we should have 2,300? And there are no plans to increase the force. Why is that?"

"They're wanting to build all these roads, they're wanting more people to come in here. More people equates

to more traffic, more traffic and more people equate to more problems. Why aren't they keeping up with it on their end of the state law enforcement?"

And Mason said the trend isn't exclusive to troopers – the number of Georgia Bureau of Investigation agents serving the 14 northeast Georgia counties of Region 8 has gone from 10 agents some 35 years ago, to just six today.

"Locally, Union County Sheriff's Office calls for service have increased," said Sheriff Mason. "For example, in the two-year period from June 1, 2015, to June 1, 2017, my office saw a 53 percent increase in calls for service."

"Let me be clear on this issue. The increase is for calls for service, no real increase in crimes against persons." See Mason, Page 2A

Paris sets qualifying fees, talks weather and more

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Assistant Editor

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris set the qualifying fees for 2018 local elections in his Jan. 18 regular county meeting.

"The only local election this year is for three seats that will be on the Union County School Board – that still comes through this office to approve," said Paris. "These qualifying fees are hereby set at \$108 per seat."

Those looking to qualify for one of the three BOE seats must do so during the qualifying period, which will run March 5 through March 9.

2018 is a big election year for statewide offices, as Georgians will be electing a new governor, lieutenant governor and secretary of state.

Voters will also be choosing the next state attorney general, commissioner of agriculture, state superintendent of schools and more.

On the federal side, all of Georgia's 14 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives will be up for election this year, and Georgians will also be deciding who to elect to state senate and house seats in the Georgia General Assembly.

Union County voters will see an ESPLOST referendum on the May 22 General Primary Election ballot, as the Union County Board of Education is asking voters to renew the local 1-cent sales tax known as the Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax.

If passed, the ESPLOST will continue for another five years, collecting a projected \$21 million in sales taxes for various



Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris

projects and improvements to facilities and more throughout the school system.

For those who are not See Paris, Page 3A

ESPLOST V headed to ballots for May 22 election

By Shawn Jarrard
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By unanimous vote, members of the Union County Board of Education adopted the ESPLOST V resolution and ballot question in their Jan. 16 regular monthly meeting.

What does this mean for Union County residents?

Union County voters will be presented with a ballot referendum in the May 22 General Primary Election, asking them to continue their support of the ESPLOST.

An ESPLOST (Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax) is a 1-cent sales tax that is collected by school systems for up to five years, for the purposes of building new facilities, renovating existing



Union County Board of Education Members Janna Akins and Tony Hunter share a presentation from board attorney Cory Kirby. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

facilities, upgrading HVAC systems in the schools, adding to aging bus fleets, updating technology and more.

The current sales tax in Union County is 7 cents on the dollar, which includes a See ESPLOST, Page 3A

BOE hires Hill to lead schools as next superintendent

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Assistant Editor

It's official – John Hill will be the next superintendent of Union County Schools, effective July 1, 2018.

Members of the Union County Board of Education showed unanimous support for Hill in their monthly meeting on Jan. 16, first approving him as their choice of superintendent, then accepting his contract.

"After review of the needs of the county – and we decided as a board to look internally first, we received some excellent applicants – John Hill was our sole finalist," said Board Chair Cindy Odom.

Currently, Hill serves the



John Hill, left, with Union County Board of Education Chair Cindy Odom. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

schools as director of human resources and operations at the board office, where he said he's looking forward to

working with Superintendent Dr. Fred Rayfield this semester in preparation for his new job See Hill, Page 3A

UGA biologist conducts coyote seminar at GMREC

By Lily Avery
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

It was all things coyote at the Georgia Mountain Research and Education Center on Friday, Jan. 19, as part of the Community Council's monthly educational seminar.

Ph.D. candidate Sarah Webster from the University of Georgia Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources shared information about the biology of the North American coyote, and how to properly manage the widespread predator.

Known as "prairie wolves" or "song dogs," the coyote is one of North America's most popular native



Sarah Webster is a Ph.D. candidate of the University of Georgia's Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources and the Beasley Wildlife Lab, pictured here holding a coyote pelt. Photo/Lily Avery

predators, belonging to the same family as gray wolves, red wolves and jackals.

Originating in the Midwestern United States See Coyote, Page 6A

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