

North Georgia News

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2 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Senior Center short on funding – and now staff

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Clients of the Union County Senior Center learned last week that their beloved director, Lee Davis, would be resigning from her position. This Friday, March 21, will serve as Davis' last day.

Regarding her impending resignation, Davis deferred comment to her employer, Legacy Link, the nonprofit organization responsible for overseeing senior centers across North Georgia.

By press time, Legacy Link had not responded to a

request for comment on Davis' resignation and other potential staffing issues, which come amid funding challenges that are impacting Senior Center services, and the newspaper did not know the status of a replacement for Davis.

In response to an initial information request last week, Legacy Link Office Manager Ashley Pitts said that, in previous years, due to COVID-19, "the Senior Center was fortunate to receive stimulus funding, which allowed us to expand our meal program and serve additional clients."

"However, due to the growth of the meal programs, the last stimulus funding was exhausted during the first two quarters of this fiscal year," Pitts continued. "Unfortunately, the local funding required to cover these additional costs has not materialized as projected."

"For instance, last year we received over \$20,000 in donations through our 'Buy a Senior a Meal' holiday program, which was crucial in supporting our efforts. This year, we've seen a significant decrease, with donations totaling less than \$8,000. Additionally, other general local donations have

also been lower compared to previous years.

"That said, we have not experienced any significant changes in our federal or state funding. These sources have remained stable. In response to the decrease in local donations and the conclusion of stimulus funding, we are having to scale back some of our meal services to manage costs effectively."

"We understand that these changes may raise concerns, and we're actively working to address the funding gap and continue providing services to our clients."

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County fares well in face of significant storm

By Shawn Jarrard
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Thankfully, Union County dodged the massive storm system that swept across

much of the Central, Southern and Eastern United States March 15 into March 16.

The storm killed several dozen people before arriving in the North Georgia Mountains Saturday evening, but by press

time, there were no locally reported deaths, injuries, structures damaged or storm-related 911 calls aside from issues caused by downed trees and powerlines.

Hours before the storm hit, the National Weather Service was forecasting a 10%-15% chance of overnight tornadoes in the region – for perspective, those odds are 25%-50% higher than the average chance this time of year – with wind gusts potentially north of 80 mph.

On Sunday afternoon, well after the storm passed, Union County Emergency Management Agency Director David Dyer said the highest local wind gust measurements he could find topped out at 47 mph, captured at the Blairsville Municipal Airport.

"Last night, we were under a Wind Advisory, Flood Watch, Hazardous Weather Outlook and a Tornado Watch for most of the night," Dyer said. "The winds were the

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The Butternut Creek Golf Course experienced some flooding from the storm over the weekend. Photo/Facebook

Mayor Moore leads city infrastructure talks



Blairsville Mayor Buddy Moore with Council Members Kayla Hemphill, Rhonda Mahan, Tony Dyer, Mary Ruth Cook and Brock Gordon on March 11. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Blairsville Mayor Buddy Moore led his first meeting as the chief executive of the city on Tuesday, March 11, with council chambers filled at City Hall thanks to civic-minded visitors from the Leadership Union Team of the Blairsville-

City Council meeting as a member of the public, and Mayor Moore asked him to lead the Pledge of Allegiance to kick things off last week.

In their first order of business, council members selected a new mayor pro tempore, retired mayor Jim Conley, who

stepped down from office last month, attended the regular City Council meeting as a member of the public, and Mayor Moore asked him to lead the Pledge of Allegiance to kick things off last week.

In their first order of business, council members selected a new mayor pro tempore, retired mayor Jim Conley, who

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Super Chef Showdown nets Hope House \$23,000



The Ladies of First United Methodist Church won two trophies at the 2025 Super Chef Showdown: People's Choice and the Giver of Hope Award. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

This year's Super Chef Showdown was the biggest ever, and according to a great many palates, the tastiest.

As far as fundraisers go, it's the lifeblood of local charity Hope House, which provides residents in need with everything from prescriptions and medical bills to transportation and rent and utilities.

A whopping 523 tickets were sold to the 13th annual

event, making for a crowded venue at the First United Methodist Church of Union County. Right there to greet those gustatory-minded guests on March 8 was organizer Pam Alexander, wearing a sleek black chef's hat.

"I cannot thank you enough for supporting Hope House," Alexander said with a smile. "Every dime that we make for this thing goes toward Hope House, so we thank you, thank you, thank you."

Beside her was a portrait of Mary Colwell. As a member

of the Hope House Board, Colwell helped keep the organization afloat for years, and she left a lasting legacy that will carry on well after her passing last November.

"Even in death, Mary had in lieu of flowers, send money to Hope House," said Alexander, hoping to honor Colwell's legacy and show her family that she was loved by her fellows. "To do that, to keep with us, even in death – that's an awesome thing."

This year saw a few other

See Super Chefs, Page 12A

Blairsville woman's tragic death leads to murder arrest

By Shawn Jarrard
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A Walton County man has been arrested for the alleged murder of his ex-girlfriend, 54-year-old Blairsville resident Colette Michelle Sease.

The Newton County Sheriff's Office announced the arrest on Wednesday, March 12, noting assistance in the case from the Walton County Sheriff's Office and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

On March 10, Newton County investigators and assisting agencies executed a search warrant at a Walton County residence, where they arrested Travis Abbott, 53, of Loganville.

Abbott has been charged with murder and concealing Sease's death. He is being held at the Walton County Detention Center and will be transferred to the Newton County Detention Center at a later date.

An investigation into Sease's death began March 3 when deputies responded to a report of a possible drowning in a lake off Georgia 212 in Covington. However, a preliminary investigation determined the victim's death

was a homicide, and the investigation remains active.

In the arrest announcement, Newton County Sheriff Ezell Brown extended his deepest condolences to Sease's family.

According to her obituary, the Rockledge, Florida, native "brought light and love into the lives of everyone she met, leaving an indelible mark on her family, friends, and community."

"Colette had a charismatic and free-spirited nature that drew people to her," the obituary reads. "Her loving and generous heart made everyone around her feel special and cherished."

"To her family and friends, she was larger than life—a beacon of positivity who always saw the best in people. Colette took immense pride in her roles as a mother, daughter, grandmother, aunt, sister, and friend."

"Her unwavering love and support were the foundation of her family, and her legacy of kindness will live on in the hearts of those who knew her."

A celebration of Colette's life will be held at a later date,



Colette Michelle Sease

"where loved ones can gather to honor her memory and share stories of her remarkable life."

In the meantime, people are invited to sign her online obituary and leave condolences at www.peachtreerecreation.com.

"Colette's vibrant spirit, boundless love, and unwavering generosity will be deeply missed, but her legacy will continue to inspire all who were fortunate enough to know her. May she rest in eternal peace. Forever in our hearts, always in our memories," the obituary concludes.



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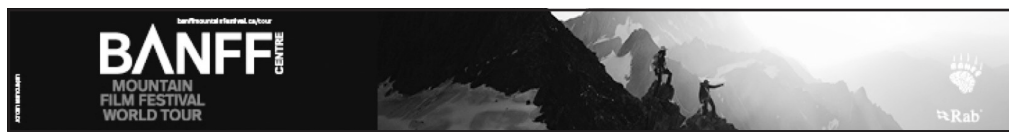
Donate to the 2025 Student Shoe Drive Now See Page 7A

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Banff Centre Mountain Film Festival World Tour

Banff Centre Mountain Film Festival World Tour is coming to Blairsville, Georgia on Saturday, March 29.

Hosted by the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club (GATC), the festival brings the spirit of outdoor adventure to the Union County Fine Arts Center, at Union County High School at 2 p.m. Saturday, March 29.

Anyone looking for adventure in the great outdoors without getting outside or who may want to experience the thrill, excitement and inspiration conveyed by the stories of individuals who follow their adventure passions around the world are encouraged to attend, said Lynne Beeson, GATC president.

"The series of adventure films provided by the Blairsville Banff Film Festival will not only captivate you, but it will engage you to pursue adventures of your own," she

said, adding that "you will be inspired."

The Banff Centre Mountain Film and Book Festival is one of the largest and most prestigious mountain festivals in the world. Hot on the heels of the festival held annually in Banff, Alberta, the world tour hits the road with stops planned in over 600 communities and more than 40 countries across the globe, including Blairsville in its Georgia stops. The tour celebrates amazing achievements in outdoor storytelling and filmmaking worldwide.

From the over 400 entries submitted into the festival each year, award-winners and audience favorites are among the films that are carefully selected to play in theatres around the world. In 2025, the festival will include feature films such as "Jamrock," "The Smoke That Thunders," "The Last Observers," and more.

These films capture travel to remote vistas, analyzing topical environmental issues, and bringing audiences up-close and personal with adrenaline-packed action sports to audiences, providing exhilarating and provocative exploration of the mountain world.

Tickets and information can be found at eventbrite.com or through GATC. Ticket purchases will benefit GATC with its efforts to promote appreciation, management, maintenance, and protection of the Appalachian Trail (AT) and other natural outdoor places, Beeson said.

Screenings of the Banff Centre Mountain Film Festival World Tour in Canada and the USA are presented by: Rab, and Banff & Lake Louise Tourism, Sponsored by: BUFF@Oboz, YETI, Kicking Horse Coffee, World Expeditions, The Lake Louise Ski Resort & Summer Gondola.

Senior Center ...from Page 1A

There has been some speculation – much of it on social media – that the funding hardship, program changes and even Davis' departure are the result of actions taken by Union County Sole Commissioner Harold Collins. But outgoing Director Davis said this is simply not true.

"The new commissioner has had absolutely zero to do with any of this – it has nothing to do with any new administration at all," Davis said. "Somebody told me they heard that (Commissioner Collins) was taking our fundraising money from the Pancake Breakfast (fundraiser on March 8).

"And I said, 'Who in the world told you that? That is the most ridiculous thing – he's been nothing but helpful.'"

As for Collins, he has been actively promoting the Senior Center and asking community members to offer their support for the facility located at 95 Senior Center Drive in Blairsville.

"Its mission is to support and advocate for aging adults and individuals with disabilities to be their link to a better life," Collins said in

a recent newspaper column. "The Union County Senior Center serves adults 60 years and older who reside in Union County. The Center offers a number of wellness and socialization opportunities for senior citizens in our community.

"Currently, the Center serves 107 clients. These services include a variety of exercise classes, line dancing classes, an art room stocked with materials, a sewing room with classes for those who wish to learn to sew, karaoke, a pool table, crafting classes, and a daily meal service."

Collins has also outlined the very real impact the Senior Center's meal programs have had on the lives of local seniors, including the serving of 10,330 meals to congregate members and the delivery of 31,422 meals to homebound older adults in 2024.

Additionally, he has discussed the hardship brought about by the "discontinuation of the federal stimulus funding paired with the growth of meals provided within the community," which have required the Senior Center to adjust its meal services by

cutting the number of meals provided.

"As a result, the Center is operating with a waitlist for meals, and all new clients must pay \$6.58 per meal," Collins said. "In addition, the Center provides Meals on Wheels, serving 115 clients with home-delivered meals through the dedication of volunteers and staff members.

"To continue the support of this program, the Center offers a 'private pay' option of \$5.05 per delivered meal, but the Center realizes that some of the seniors cannot currently afford to pay that amount."

The commissioner pointed to efforts that are underway "to raise funds for these essential programs," highlighting the recent Heart Tree display in the center lobby, and he recommended people contribute in person or via mail, with checks payable to "Union County Senior Center."

Other recent fundraising efforts include a book sale, fabric sale, music event, and various raffles to benefit the meal programs," Collins said. "I encourage members of the community to support the Senior Center as they continue to provide these valuable services to our aging population."

District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch: Week Eight Under the Gold Dome

By: Sen. Steve Gooch (R-Dahlonega)

We've reached one of the biggest milestones of the legislative session—Cross-over Day, the final opportunity for bills to pass their original chamber and remain eligible to become law. This week was fast-paced, with the Senate passing bills that advance key priorities for Georgia families, students, small businesses, and law enforcement. As we move into the final stretch of the session, our focus now shifts to working with the House to finalize these measures.

Ensuring school safety remains a top priority, Senate Republicans have passed three key bills that take proactive steps to protect students and educators. SB 17 requires all schools to install mobile panic alert systems and provide school mapping data to law enforcement. In emergencies, faster response times can save lives. SB 61 ensures juveniles charged with attempted murder or terroristic threats against a school are prosecuted as adults, reinforcing that schools must be places of learning, not fear. SB 179 mandates that students' academic and disciplinary records be transferred within 10 days, with parents or guardians notified within 5 days, ensuring schools have the necessary information to provide oversight and support. These common-sense measures help schools remain vigilant and prepared against potential threats.

Georgia stands firmly with those who put their lives on the line to protect us, including law enforcement officers, firefighters, and military veterans. This session, we passed critical measures to provide veterans with retirement security and measures to support the physical safety of first responders. SB 31 eliminates state taxes on military retirement income, making Georgia fully competitive with neighboring states and a more attractive place for veterans to retire and work. These bills ensure that those who serve

our communities and country receive the support and recognition they deserve. SB 236 provides protections for first responders to ensure they can perform their duties without being interfered with or harassed by bad actors.

Access to quality education is the foundation of success, and Senate Republicans have worked to expand opportunities for students across Georgia. SB 85, the Georgia Foster Care Scholarship Act, increases financial aid for foster youth pursuing higher education, helping them overcome barriers and build a brighter future. SB 126 lowers the eligibility age for students to enroll in a completion special school from 18 to 16, providing a more flexible pathway to earning a diploma. These bills reflect our commitment to ensuring every student has the resources and opportunities they need to succeed.

At a time when federal oversight is increasing, transparency in government is more important than ever. SB 177 strengthens disclosure requirements for foreign-funded political activities, ensuring that potentially hostile foreign actors cannot influence Georgia's political system. Protecting the integrity of our government and preventing outside interference is essential to preserving the trust of Georgia's citizens.

The Senate also took steps to protect hardworking Georgians from fraud and unfair business practices. SB 119 allows certain manufactured homes, including mobile homes, to be classified as real property, ensuring that rural homeowners have the same legal protections as other property owners. This change helps them build equity and secure their financial future.

On a personal note, I was proud to see SB 291 pass, establishing an "America First" specialty license plate to reinforce national pride. My legislative priorities are always rooted in advancing the interests of this great na-



Georgia State Senator Steve Gooch Senate Majority Whip

tion, and this initiative allows Georgians to display their patriotic commitment proudly.

With SB 291, America First will remain a calling sign of true American patriots for years to come.

I also had the honor of welcoming U.S. Small Business Administrator Kelly Loeffler to the State Capitol. As a proud Georgian and dedicated public servant, she has always provided exceptional support to our small businesses, which create two out of every three new jobs and form the backbone of Georgia's economy. Her efforts to advance President Trump's America First agenda have helped crack down on fraud, cut red tape, and reduce reliance on foreign supply chains, empowering small businesses to succeed. It was my privilege to present SR 247, commending Ms. Loeffler for her leadership and commitment to Georgia's economic growth.

The Senate also voted to approve the House's amendments to the 2025 amended fiscal year budget. This budget increases funding for the Department of Corrections to support law enforcement and public safety, while maintaining funding for hurricane relief efforts. On Thursday, Governor Brian P. Kemp signed the amended budget into law, helping families and small businesses across Georgia recover and rebuild.

As we approach the final weeks of the legislative session, I encourage you to reach out with any questions, concerns, or input. It is an honor to serve you under the Gold Dome, and I remain committed to advancing legislation that strengthens our communities, upholds our values, and ensures a brighter future for all Georgians.

City Meeting...from Page 1A

tempore. Moore had been the longtime mayor pro tem before his appointment to mayor last month, and that Tuesday, the council nominated and selected Councilwoman Rhonda Mahan to fill the position for 2025.

If Moore should ever become unable to fulfil his duties as mayor for any reason, Mahan will lead the city as mayor in a temporary capacity. Mahan has served as mayor pro tem in the past, having been on the council since January 2002.

Two big infrastructure discussions highlighted the meeting, one involving a major project at the Blairsville Airport and another having to do with gauging the city's interest in expanding its sewer system.

Several years ago, the city was awarded a \$2.5 million grant through the state to level the local runway to correct a line-of-sight issue along its length as well as to extend the Runway 8 approach to improve safety for incoming pilots.

This project will help the city move closer to its goal of hosting an officially designated Regional Airport.

It will be an extensive project requiring land and easement acquisition for obstruction clearing, after which the runway will need to be torn up and re-poured, necessitating the airport's closure for a time. Closure estimates have ranged from two to 12 months.

Citing a more frequent safety issue, members of the city's Airport Advisory Board have recommended changing the project from a runway overhaul to the installation of a taxiway to keep planes off

the runway when they need to be moved.

Moore said he understood the need for a taxiway but that changing the project now introduces unknowns they do not have time to adequately address, especially since money has already been spent on the runway project.

For example, it is unclear if the grant money can simply be shifted over to a new project after having been approved to level the runway. Hovering over all of this is the fact that the clock is ticking on utilizing the grant; if another drawdown is not made soon, the grant could expire.

Ultimately, the council agreed with Moore's reasoning, voting unanimously to continue the runway project as planned.

The airport is busier than ever, according to Airport Manager Dan Firebaugh; improvements there remain a priority for the city, and Moore said City Hall would revisit the creation of a taxiway in the future.

As for the sewer extension discussion, Moore said he had heard that the Blairsville Cinema was struggling to expand for lack of septic capacity. The movie theater is about 3 miles east of where the sewer lines stop at city limits.

Factoring in loan forgiveness, the cost to run 3 miles of sewer lines would be about \$3.8 million to the city, and Moore was wanting to know if the council had any appetite for taking on debt while increasing sewer rates by as much as 20% to make it happen.



From the viewing gallery, former mayor Jim Conley offered his perspective on an infrastructure issue in the March 11 regular city meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Such an expansion would potentially benefit everyone in that stretch of Georgia 515, upping the commercial development value of properties there, and City Attorney Marvin Harkins said such deliberations usually included planning to account for future development and growth.

City Clerk Kaye McCann said that 18 of 22 parcel owners on GA 515 who responded to a survey from City Hall showed interest in hooking up to city sewer.

Moore asked former mayor Conley's opinion, and he said, "If the city can afford to do it, I say go for it."

Councilwoman Mahan expressed reservations about the affordability, noting that "everyone's rates would have to go up, and do we really want to increase everyone's rates right now in this economy?"

"That's the question," Moore said, adding that the reason he was bringing the

issue up now was that the city's engineer is looking to make a June 1 application deadline for grant money to help with the project.

Referencing the commercial benefit of expanding the lines outside city limits and into the county's jurisdiction, Councilwoman Mary Ruth Cook asked, "But with the present commissioner, is he going to let those developments happen?"

"That's my question, too," Councilwoman Kayla Hemphill said.

Fire Chief David Dyer chimed in from a public safety standpoint, noting that new commercial development there would increase the number of properties local first responders would be responsible for protecting.

Moore and the council decided to table the discussion for a future meeting, and the mayor said he would be in touch with engineers for details on doing the project in phases, perhaps a half mile at a time.

In other business, Moore asked the council to consider providing "Paid Parental Leave" for city employees. He and the council expressed surprise that they did not already offer this, and the council approved six-week maternity/paternity leave for employees with new babies at home.

During his monthly Department Head report, Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter commended local and state law enforcement for safely ending the midday pursuit of a suspect who attempted "to run over two deputies" at the Union County Sheriff's Office on March 7.

There have been three chases in the city over the last month, all of which Baxter said were conducted with considerations for safety to the public and severity of violation, resulting in the first of the three chases being called off and the eventual apprehension of that suspect.

"We've been criticized, Sheriff (Shawn) Dyer's been criticized, (but) we made the right decision," Baxter said of the March 7 chase. "If we didn't stop him, something bad was going to happen to somebody else."

"For all those people who are second guessing that, that's what happened. And I'll stand right here and tell anybody that, and I have since it happened. We would love to say that we control these chases - we don't. And thank God nobody was hurt in this thing."

"As y'all know, we don't know why all this is happening all of a sudden. In general, it's not just us, it's the counties around us who are having lots of things go on, so it's just different times."

Mayor Moore called for a round of applause to honor the efforts of local law enforcement keeping residents safe.

Moore also asked council members to approve - which they did - a proclamation recognizing the Union County High School Boys Basketball Players for their outstanding accomplishments this season, finishing runner-up at state. The proclamation will be presented to the team this week.

Legislative Update: Georgia Rep. Stan Gunter

After a fast-paced and eventful Crossover Day last week, members of the Georgia House of Representatives returned to the State Capitol on Monday, March 10th for Legislative Day 29, kicking off our ninth week of session. With Crossover Day behind us, the House began to review and vote on legislation that passed over from our Senate counterparts this week. Additionally, my colleagues and I successfully passed the House's version of the Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 budget, House Bill 68. This critical piece of legislation would outline and allocate the necessary funding for the state's operations and services in the upcoming fiscal year, beginning July 1, 2025, and ending June 30, 2026.

With a revenue estimate of \$37.7 billion—marking an increase of \$1.6 billion or 4.4 percent over the original FY 2025 budget—the House's version of HB 68 places a strong emphasis on addressing the critical needs of Georgia's education system to ensure that Georgia students can thrive. As such, a large portion of HB 68 would support a statewide literacy initiative aimed at improving reading outcomes for students in kindergarten through fifth grade, recognizing that reading proficiency by the end of third grade is central to future academic success and beyond. Therefore, the House's version of the FY 2026 budget appropriates \$22.7 million—\$10 million of which includes new funding—to support the recommendations of the Georgia Council on Literacy. HB 68 appropriates \$18.5 million for 116 Regional Education Service Agencies (RESA)-based literacy coaches, providing individualized teacher support to ensure that structured literacy and the science of reading would be implemented effectively. Additionally, HB 68 allots \$2 million for a free universal reading screener that would be available to all school systems as a result of the efforts outlined in House Bill 538, the Georgia Early Literacy Act, which Governor Brian Kemp signed into law in 2023. The House's version of the FY 2026 budget also includes funding for a state-level coaching coordinator position that would support competency-based research and training for literacy coaches and educators.

In addition to investing in literacy initiatives, HB 68 also demonstrates the House's commitment to school safety, proposing a \$25 million investment that would cover the first-year costs of the statewide School and Student Safety (S3) Database—a new tool that would collect and investigate school-based threats across state and local law enforcement agencies. This proposal would also support Behavioral Threat Assessment Management (BTAM) teams, which would address identified threats and enhance overall school safety. Additionally, HB 68 would

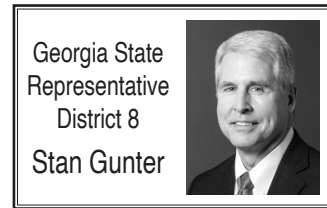
once again fully fund the Quality Basic Education (QBE) program with a record \$14.7 billion in state funds for K-12 education.

In the Technology and Career Education program, the House's version of the FY 2026 budget appropriates \$1.25 million for high-demand equipment grants that would support new and expanding career and technical education labs, including grants for heavy equipment simulators.

While education funding is a substantial part of HB 68, the House's version of the FY 2026 budget also prioritizes funding aimed at enhancing Georgia's courts, correctional systems and public safety sectors. The House's FY 2026 budget provides \$1.6 million to the Council of Accountability Court Judges that would increase participation in accountability courts. This funding would enable an additional 843 Georgians to receive treatment and services for mental health and drug addiction, which offers an alternative to incarceration. Furthermore, since FY 2021, the Georgia General Assembly has made significant investments in Georgia's correctional officers and juvenile correctional officers, recognizing their critical role in maintaining safety and security within the state's correctional facilities. This funding has resulted in a 63.9 percent salary increase for these dedicated public servants, with an additional four percent pay raise that is included in FY 2026; this would amount to \$13.5 million for the Department of Corrections and \$3.1 million for the Department of Juvenile Justice. The House's version of the FY 2026 budget also includes a \$250 million increase for the Department of Corrections, with \$45 million allocated to hire more than 700 new correctional officers, which would improve inmate-staff ratios, underscoring the state's continued support for the hard work and sacrifices of correctional officers who play an essential role in Georgia's justice system.

The House is also working to address homelessness in our state, and this budget includes funding to aid in that effort. The House's version of the FY 2026 budget allocates \$6 million for homelessness initiatives, with an additional \$4 million designated to leverage federal funding for the State Housing Trust Fund for the Homeless.

HB 68 also makes significant investments in maternal health as the House continues its work to improve healthcare outcomes for women across Georgia. More than \$9 million in new funding is included in HB 68 to address maternal health needs, and \$5 million is dedicated to expanding and sustaining labor and delivery services in rural areas of the state. Providing access to maternal healthcare in rural Georgia is paramount, as



Georgia State Representative District 8 Stan Gunter

many rural communities across the state face significant healthcare shortages and barriers to maternal care. This funding would help build the necessary infrastructure to provide high-quality care to mothers in underserved communities. Additionally, HB 68 includes \$1.2 million for the Department of Public Health's Office of Cardiac Care that would be used to provide grants to hospitals to enhance cardiac care, as cardiac complications remain a leading cause of maternal mortality. To further improve maternal healthcare outcomes, \$700,000 is set aside to support quality improvements at birthing facilities that would assist in increasing the number of facilities that meet verified maternal and neonatal care standards.

HB 68 is now awaiting consideration and action by the Senate, where it will undergo a similar committee review process. We expect that the Senate may make changes to the House's version, which would lead to the appointment of a conference committee to reconcile any differences between the two versions. Once a final version is agreed upon and passed in both chambers, HB 68 will be sent to the governor's desk for approval and signature into law.

Senate Bill 144, which would allow pesticides registered with the Department of Agriculture commissioner that display a label approved by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or is consistent with the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act human health risk assessment to be considered a sufficient warning of health risk. Provisions regarding this new subsection would not be applicable when the EPA has discovered that a manufacturer has knowingly withheld, misrepresented, concealed or destroyed certain health risks to obtain EPA approval.

My House colleagues and I will return to the State Capitol on Tuesday, March 18th to continue our important work advocating for your needs and interests. With less than 10 legislative days remaining, we are in the final stretch of this legislative session with our final day, or Sine Die, scheduled for April 4th. I encourage you to reach out with any questions, concerns or input you may have about the bills currently under consideration.

Please feel free to schedule a phone call or visit the State Capitol so we can discuss the issues that matter most to you and your family. You can reach my Capitol office at 404-656-5125 and via email at Stan.Gunter@house.ga.gov.

As always, thank you for allowing me to serve as your representative.

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Storm System...from Page 1A



Dozens of trees hit county roadways as a result of sustained high winds and even higher gusts that rolled in with the March 15-16 storm system.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

main concern; we had sustained winds of about 20-30 mph, with gusts up into the 40s.”

“Rain was off and on from most of the night and heavy at approximately 2-4 a.m.,” Dyer posted to Facebook Sunday. “Estimated 2 inches of rain total over the last 24 hours. Multiple trees down and power outages reported.”

Some minor flooding occurred at the Butternut Creek Golf Course, where the creek runs shallow in places. But that was apparently the extent of flood damage in the county, with nearly all waterways flowing full but staying inside their banks during and after the storm.

“The biggest concern was the trees down, powerlines down,” Dyer said. “This storm took down a lot of trees in the roadways; we’ve had over 60-

70 reports of multiple trees on multiple roads.”

A final tally of downed trees was not available by press time, but the Road Department spent Saturday night and Sunday clearing them from roadways, and the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC worked around the clock as well to restore widespread electric outages.

Around 2 p.m. Sunday, the EMC said the system had suffered an estimated 20 broken power poles, but “there’s much more that we haven’t been able to lay our eyes on yet.”

At the peak of the outages around 4 a.m., the EMC was reporting close to 15,000 members without power across its five-county territory, which included disruption to over 6,000 meters in Union County, or about 30% of the meters here.

Dyer said the southeast area near Trackrock and northwesterly parts of the county seemed to be hardest hit, but impacts were felt countywide, with storm-related incidents including powerlines causing some small fires, blown transformers, several fire alarms and a utility box fire.

To his knowledge, Dyer said no tornadoes formed in Union County and there was no hail formation. A tornado warning was issued in nearby McCaysville of Fannin County, but there was no reported debris field associated with the tornado, so it might not have touched ground.

“They’re always concerned about our elevation,” Dyer said of the National Weather Service. “In Blairsville, Georgia, we’re right at 2,000 feet, and so they’re always concerned about the mountains getting these high winds that are moving down into these higher elevations.”

“But watching it all last night, as soon as it came into Georgia, I think it started to lose steam. As it moved up north, northwest, it was the same situation that we usually get into – as soon as it starts hitting these mountains, it loses that momentum and that power, and it just dissipated.”

Fire Station No.1, which serves as the local Emergency Operations Center, hosted multiple weather briefings in the days before the storm, and during the storm, Dyer opened the EOC in a monitoring capacity to enable a quick ramp-up if emergency resource management was needed.

“This was a significant storm,” Dyer said. “You can

see by the death toll that swept through Missouri, Mississippi, Alabama, and all the way into Georgia. But I think once it got to here, it lost steam, and thank God we live where we live, because we’re in that bowl.”

“We’re protected by those mountains that take the punch out of a lot of these storms before they can even get here. So, I think that helped us. It’s very difficult to forecast in the mountains because it’s hard to get radar to work well up here, it’s hard to know what’s going to happen when the winds hit those mountains.”

“They kind of do one of those forecasts of, ‘let’s prepare for the worst and hope for the best,’ and we’re OK with that. We take that information and evaluate it based on what we’ve done before. This time, we were going to monitor (at the EOC).”

“We had 911 Dispatch with more personnel to help take calls. We had the Road Department, of course, fully staffed and ready to go. The Sheriff’s Office was out there on call if they had to help with traffic and if trees were across the road. We were ready.”

And Dyer urges residents to be ready for inclement weather as well, with advice on how to prepare a “Ready Kit,” what to do during power

outages, how to plan for specific types of weather events and more available at <https://www.ready.gov/>.

“Being aware of weather events is a big deal, making sure you have several sources

to receive information,” Dyer added. “Having a NOAA Weather Radio is something that I would recommend to people, because if your cellphone doesn’t pick it up, the weather radio will.”

Kanute Rarey to be Guest Reader at Mountain Wordsmiths March 27

By Carroll S. Taylor

Mountain Wordsmiths continues our 2025 season of featured readers on Thursday, March 27, at 10:30 a.m. via Zoom. The monthly event is sponsored by North Carolina Writers’ Network-West. This month’s gathering will feature writer and storyteller Kanute Rarey.

Born and raised on a family farm in Ohio, Rarey’s early years were “rich with material” for family stories. He played with cats and dogs on the farm, helped feed the chickens, and rolled down hills in the pasture field behind the barn. Then, his life was shaken by the sudden death of his mother when he was six.

From his first week-long workshop in 2015 with national storyteller, Elizabeth Ellis, at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, NC, Rarey says, “Elizabeth opened the door to that canary cage and the bird flew out.”

His first step in storytelling and one that he is most proud of is a program he developed in 2016 for folks at area care centers, senior cen-



Kanute Rarey

ters and retirement communities. Called “Reminiscing, Storytelling and Capturing Personal History,” it combines discussion and story to remind us of the present and the past and helps us find joy in the moment.

In 2015, he started helping with the annual Georgia Mountain Storytelling Festival, a growing festival and the first of its kind in the area. In 2018, he started a storytelling group, Mountain Area Storytellers.

Rarey enjoys sharing with others his lively stories and poetry. They are often about his adventures discover-

ing the world and his unique experiences in life that brought him to the mountains. “I am in awe of the many wonderful writers we have in our community. It is a joy each day to wake to the morning sun as it breaks across our surrounding mountain tops and lights each new day”.

NCWN-West continues to use technology to share our writing. We offer writing events and writing classes both online and in person. Mountain Wordsmiths’ gatherings always take place on Zoom. Attendees are welcome to bring a poem or short prose piece to read during Open Mic. Please limit the reading to 3-5 minutes.

Those wishing to attend Mountain Wordsmiths may contact Carroll Taylor at vibiaperpetua@gmail.com or ncwngeorgiarep@gmail.com to receive the Zoom link. Our group is informal, and we welcome those who would simply like to listen to the beauty of wordsmithing. All who attend can enjoy their morning cup of coffee or tea as we share our thoughts about writing.

Call PUP Before Strays Multiply

PUP stands for Prevent Unwanted Pets, a 501(c)3 group of volunteers who for many years have been helping people spay and neuter their pets and/or strays. Spring is

here and stray cats and dogs will be mating. If you are feeding any strays at your back door please read the following. Of course, it applies to pets also.

To spay/neuter cuts

down on cancer in both males and females, decreases the urge to roam, to be aggressive, and mark territory. Cats can get pregnant at four months old, so be sure to get them spayed early. Operation PUP will help financially with spay/neuter and being a 501(c)3 means donations to us are tax deductible. “Spay/neuter is the kindest way to end overpopulation.” Thank you for being part of the solution. Call Sandy at 203-788-2038.

ARFS: Give Your Pain Purpose

If you have lost a dearly loved pet and your heart is grieving, why not “give your pain purpose” by making a donation to Animal Rescue Financial Support (ARFS) in honor of your cherished fur friend.

ARFS will use your donation to provide medical care for an animal that is suffering and has an owner who cannot afford veterinary expenses.

Memorials can be made

to ARFS, P.O. Box 972, Hiawassee, GA 30546 or on ARFS website (www.arfs-inc.org) by clicking the DONATE button. Please indicate that your donation is a memorial and provide the name of your pet. Memorials will be posted on ARFS’s website, unless you request otherwise.

Let’s not forget that precious pet that gave you so much joy. Let’s give your pain purpose!



Meet Daisy. She is 3 year old terrier mix.



Meet Leonardo. Young adult male cat. He loves people!

For more information about our animals, please call Mountain Shelter Humane Society at (706) 781-3843.

Farmers Market Picnic June 7th



A pet-friendly picnic will be held at the Farmers Market Dog Park on the opening day of the 2025 Farmers Market, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Saturday, June 7th. Bring a finger food. Dog treats will be provided.



Castoff Pet Rescue is proud to present T-Bone. He is a healthy happy cat waiting for that special family to find him. Text June to hear more about T-Bone, 706-400-8612.

If you like winning money playing Bingo come any Wednesday to the Civic Center in Blairsville games start at 7 PM.

Daddy Daughter Dance brings families together



Fathers and daughters had a heartfelt blast at the annual Daddy Daughter Dance this month. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The annual Daddy Daughter Dance returned on March 8, courtesy of the Union County Recreation Department.

Now in its 25th year, the event was made extra special with a theme of “A Night in Paris,” complete with delicate props for photo ops, dinner, a dance floor with professional DJ and, of course, limo rides.

Originally started up by Larry Garrett and Brad Ballard, the event has seen a change in venue as attendance skyrocketed over the years. Tickets must be purchased before the big day, which can be thought of like a prom.

Upon arrival, the lavishly decorated Union County Sports Center welcomes the impeccably dressed guests with painted greetings and a bubble machine – which some of the girls enjoyed playing in. Then

it’s off to one of the three gyms, depending on which activity the guests feel more inclined toward.

Casey Killian traveled with daughter Demi from Murphy, North Carolina, to attend the dance, which they’ve been doing for three years now. They even have a schedule worked out – get their photos taken, then get dinner before heading to the dancefloor.

Nine-year-old Demi spends months getting ready for the night and chooses her dress and dad’s matching tie. They agree that dancing is their favorite part.

“We’ll be coming until she’s about 60,” said Killian, with Demi adding, “I really like this place.”

Meanwhile, Harold and Nora Collins enjoyed a ride around town in style with their first experience in a limousine.

“It was great,” Commissioner Collins

admitted, with Nora agreeing that she enjoyed it. Collins has attended past dances with his other daughters, and he plans to return next year with Nora, who was on board with the idea.

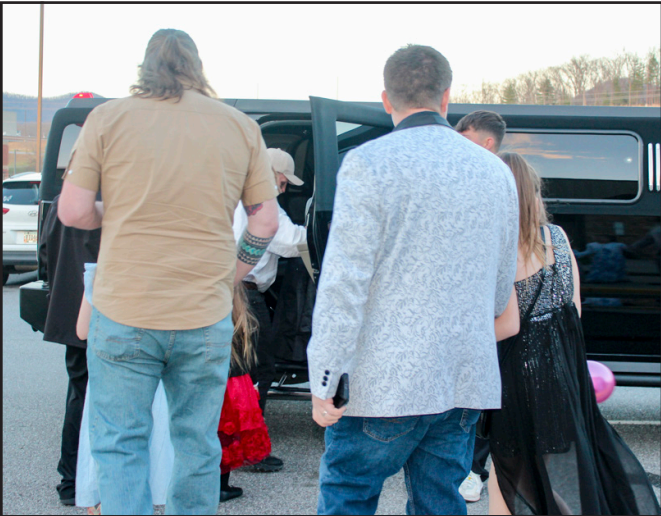
“I think (the Rec Department’s) doing a great job,” Collins added.

Ahead of time, each daddy-daughter pairing is scheduled to ride in one of two limousines like the Collins duo. Called by name, they take turns throughout the night going for rides around the Blairsville Square before returning to pick up right where they left off.

In all, 470 dance tickets were sold this year, and considering that some dads bring more than one daughter, even more people filed into the Sports Center that night. Interestingly, there’s no real age limit on who can attend, but most estimates fall between the girls being 3 and 14.

“As far as I know, this is the largest one we’ve had,” remarked organizer Sandy Godfrey, one of the primary planners alongside Stephanie Holgate and Dustin Rogers. “I went to a Daddy Daughter Dance while I was growing up, and I think it’s really neat that they still offer it.”

Organizers wanted to make a special shout out in thanks to Lucky Dog Restaurant Group for the catering, Melissa’s Custom Cakes for the dessert bar, Jim Wood for lending his musical talents to the DJ booth, Jenni Dixon for her photography, Georgia Limousine for the rides, and the Rec Department employees who help the dance come together every year.



Limousines are always part of the special experience for families at the Daddy Daughter Dance. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Super Chefs...from Page 1A



The Super Chef Showdown enjoyed record-breaking attendance this year at First United Methodist Church. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

changes from the norm. For starters, attendees were advised to stay at their tables and move in lines to reduce the risk of “traffic jams.” The blessing, too, was administered at the start of the event.

This year’s panel of judges included Vincent Taylor, owner of Vincent’s Coppertop Restaurant & Pub in Blairsville; Netflix sensation and sausage champion James “BBQ” Grubbs of Grubbaque; and Sawmill Place owner Amy Kight.

Each judge was impressed with the amount of effort that was put into not just food, but appearances this year. Local organizations serve as the competitors during the Super Chef Showdown, and many of them enjoy getting into the spirit of things.

In particular, the judges cited extravagant displays and decorations, whether for food or booth. One group – the Ladies of First United Methodist Church – took things a step further and dressed up in their vintage Sunday best.

The judges agreed that the foodstuffs featured that fine day made it difficult for them to reach a conclusion. Several varieties of chili and Brunswick stew were available among other choices like short ribs, minestrone soup, lasagna and Creole red beans and rice.

Folks with a sweet tooth also appreciated the dessert options like brownie bites, strawberry pound cake, key lime cheesecake and church window cookies – decorated to look like stained glass with their colorful marshmallow cells.

Despite the difficult decision, the judges made their three picks. First Place went to the Appalachian Shrine Club’s Korean barbecue tacos; Second Place to Union County 911’s sweet and spicy crockpot meatballs; and last but not least, Third Place was awarded to the Tri-State Business Women’s pasta salad.

Still, even if a competitor doesn’t place in the Judge’s Choice category, they have a chance to win the public’s favor through donations. Another

three winners were crowned in this way: the Ladies of FUMC won First Place with their church cookies; Blairsville Police Department took home Second Place with their Brunswick stew; and Twins’ key lime cheesecake earned Third Place.

Special recognition goes to chefs who go above and beyond raising money and promoting the event before it comes time to compete. The Giver of Hope Award made the Ladies of the First United Methodist Church doubly crowned super chefs this year.

In the end, between entry fees, donations, tips and the silent auction, the Hope House raised an outstanding \$23,000. There are already plans in place for next year, Alexander said, as this year’s popularity ensures growth.

“We will probably be looking for another venue to address some of the issues we had because of the amount of people,” disclosed Alexander. “Every year is a learning experience.”