

# North Georgia News

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## New 911 Center to be built for \$3.8 million

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

Union County Sole Commissioner Harold Collins hosted his regular monthly meeting on April 17, with a marked decline in public attendance.

Only a couple dozen community members showed up to the large Jury Assembly Room of the Union County Courthouse last Thursday, a stark contrast from the standing-room only crowds that filled the first three meetings of the year under the new commissioner.

Regardless, Collins had plenty of county business teed up, including a notice of award for a contract to build the new Union County E-911 Center adjacent to Fire Department Headquarters on Shoe Factory Road.

Winkler & Winkler Inc., a Blairsville-based general contracting firm, won the contract and will complete the

job for \$3,868,241 in SPLOST funds.

County Purchasing Agent Pam Hawkins explained the award and bidding process, noting that the request for proposals on the project went live Jan. 29, which resulted in 13 contractor proposals being submitted by the March 12 deadline.

"We have spent the last four or five weeks reviewing these proposals," Hawkins said. "We asked contractors to submit a qualifications proposal separately from their price, and we reviewed who's qualified and who's not for such a project and then opened the pricing proposals."

"We finally narrowed it down to award it to Winkler & Winkler. Out of the 13 proposals we received, the prices ranged from \$3.743 million to \$4,646,792. We learned a long time ago to not go with the lowest bid, because you kind of get what you pay for."

"We had a contractor years ago that we went with the low bid because it was a situation where we had to, and that general contractor failed to pay their subcontractors, and we had to get the bond money involved. So, we try to find the most qualified for the best price, and that's what we did."

"The building is approximately 8,000 total square feet. The bottom of the facility will be the 911 Dispatch Center; they're going to have a brand-new, great facility, and we're going to be super proud of that, and they're going to be excited to be in it. It should last a very long time."

Upstairs will feature about 4,500 square feet of space to house the 911 Mapping Office and serve other uses, like records storage, much better than the repurposed old nursing home facility where the Dispatch Center currently resides on Hunt Martin Street, Hawkins said.

And while a project start

date had not been set as of the county meeting, 911 Director David Dyer said afterward that construction is expected to begin "as soon as possible," hopefully to be completed with move-in after 18 months.

The contract only includes building construction, and the county will be purchasing all new equipment for the center, but Dyer said the timing should work out to coincide with contract renewals coming due for new equipment, potentially incorporating more of the latest technology known as Next Gen 911.

As opposed to the current 911 Center that is situated in the basement of the decades-old former nursing home/hospital facility, the new two-story building will be built to specifications to meet the needs of a modern dispatch center for years to come.

"The two main areas of the Dispatch Center that we are most concerned about are the actual dispatch room where the



Harold Collins  
Sole Commissioner

dispatchers are going to spend most of their time," Dyer said, "and the server room, which has got all of our high-priced equipment in it. The rest of it is essentially an office building. "So, we wanted to put a

lot of emphasis in the Dispatch Center and that server room to make sure that our equipment is protected and our dispatchers can do their job and have a good place to do it."

See County Meeting, Page 2A

## Dispatchers receive love in appreciation gathering



Union County E-911 Dispatch is one big family, as displayed in the April 14 appreciation dinner held in the dispatchers' honor. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

When a call is placed to 911, the voices that answer are guiding lights in more ways than one. In people's darkest times, these voices organize for help to arrive and shine hope for those desperate to receive that aid.

On Monday, April 14, as part of National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week, the dedicated dispatchers of Union County E-911 – those whose voices operate calmly in the background of local emergencies – were brought to the forefront and celebrated.

"It's a good day to save lives," stated the handmade display on the front board of the 911 Center. Like a quilt, its block was one of a number of inspiring and humorous quotes and pictures – all handmade and put together by the dispatchers themselves to mark the occasion.

The timing of emergencies waits for nothing, so some of the dispatchers

stepped away to take calls throughout the course of the evening. Still, everyone earned recognition for the heart they put into work that is more than just a job.

Union County Fire Chief and 911 Director David Dyer helped Lt. Millie Baxter open the proceedings.

"The way you do your job and how well you do your job really does make a big difference in how we (first responders) do our job," Dyer said, voicing his appreciation.

A few special guests were present, too, and readily echoed Dyer's sentiment that Union County's dispatchers are a special breed.

Sheriff Shawn Dyer, as a fellow first responder, had some insight into the inner workings of emergency response: "Our office really appreciates what y'all do. Trust me, they know that you're our lifeline."

Firefighter Travis Gibson spoke on behalf of the Fire Department, saying his fellow firemen appreciate everything. See E-911 Appreciation, Page 7A

## History comes alive with Patriots' Day observance

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The spirit of America's founding is alive and well in Blairsville, as demonstrated on Saturday, April 19, in a tradition dutifully upheld each year by local patriots.

For at least a decade now, the Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter Sons of the American Revolution and Old Unicoi Trail Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution have met on the historic town square for a public celebration of Patriots' Day.

Dressed in their colonial best to drum up that eponymous patriotism with education, they set about their commemorative task in particularly dramatic fashion – with an explosive display of the power of flintlock firearms.

Gathering around 10 a.m. on the Old Courthouse Lawn, the men dressed in the differing uniforms that marked America's earliest defenders while the women took shelter from the sun beneath ruffled bonnets and other true-to-period attire.

Much of the Sons and

Daughters' interactions with the public came in the form of waving at passing cars, who often slowed so drivers could wave back. A few, inspired and appreciative, even honked.

But some folks needed to have a closer look or a chat, and many walked over to do just that. History buffs and those simply wanting to learn more asked for photos and information, regarding either the purpose of the reenactors or their ancestors.

Public outreach is a major initiative of the volunteer SAR and DAR, with an eye toward education and fostering an interest in America's history – especially its hard-won independence – and the occasion serves as a good way for group members to channel their patriotic pride.

Larger celebrations are hosted by the national organizations in places like Boston, and though two members the Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter went up North for just such a gathering, the others had plenty of fun back at home.

"I've always been an American history fan,"



The collective efforts of the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution work to preserve the revolutionary history of the United States. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

admitted Doug Jamison, eager to demonstrate his knowledge with factoids at the ready. "It's probably my third, fourth time (on the square)."

Sid Turner, another long-time member, explained that Patriots' Day has a double meaning in Georgia.

The first shots of the

American Revolution were fired on April 19, 1775, in Lexington, Massachusetts, but on April 19, 1778, the Georgia State Navy intercepted British

ships as part of the Frederica Naval Battle.

As it so happens, John Mayes, the descendant of See Patriots' Day, Page 12A

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# County Meeting...from Page 1A

911 Lt. Millie Baxter, who runs the day-to-day operations at the center, said the new building will expand on current capabilities to enable even more operators to work at once, and dispatchers are excited to transition to a facility designed specifically for their important work.

Also in the April 17 meeting, Collins welcomed multiple dispatchers to thank them with a proclamation declaring April 13-19 as National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week in Union County.

## HORSE ARENA LEASE

Collins accepted a lease agreement with the Union County Saddle Club to formalize Horse Arena responsibility as belonging to club members, who have always run the county-owned facility anyway.

The one-year lease will cost the club a total of \$3,000 and includes the arena, concession stand and parking areas, with the money to be used by the county to offset the taxpayer expense to cover the facility with the required property liability insurance.

As part of the new arrangement, which reportedly satisfies both parties, the Saddle Club has also taken over all expenses at the arena, including full payment of utilities, the lion's share of which was covered by the county in the past.

Together, these changes will save taxpayers thousands of dollars per year – a goal Collins campaigned on generally before winning election last November. For example, in 2024, the county had \$10,521 in net expenditures at the Horse Arena, and moving forward, that figure will be zero.

## OTHER BUSINESS

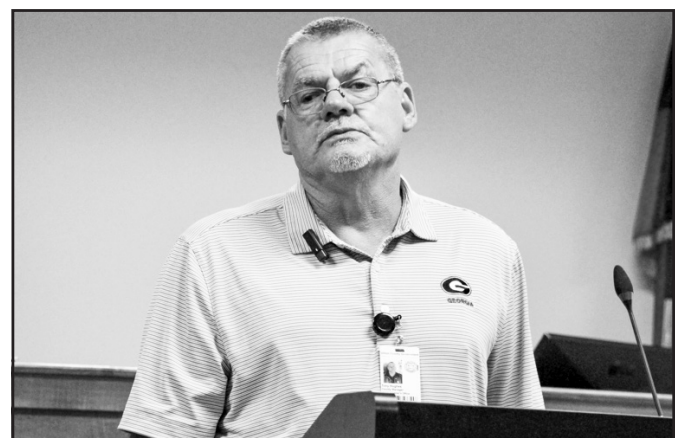
Collins amended the agreement with the Georgia Transportation Infrastructure Bank to extend by a year the expiration date to spend down a \$1 million grant to help pay for the roundabout at Pat Haralson Drive and Deep South Farm Road.

“This gives us some additional time to move forward with the project and still have access to this money,” Collins said. The roundabout will benefit motorists at the busy intersection that features traffic to and from Union General Hospital and the Union County Transfer Station.

Collins also accepted a renegotiated lease agreement for the Fire Station off Jones Creek Road. The agreement has been \$500 a month for many years, and the updated agreement will be \$750 a month for a term of at least three years, to be paid by the county to property owner W.C. Nelson.

The commissioner enacted three ordinance revisions pertaining to alcoholic beverages, short-term rentals and the Construction Board of Adjustment and Appeals. These revisions followed the standard process of first and second readings with public hearings in recent months.

Additionally, Collins issued four other proclamations in the meeting: Child Abuse Prevention Month for April 2025; Sexual Assault Awareness Month for April 2025; Patriots’



County Manager Tony Hughes had a plethora of announcements for April 17 meeting attendees, including information about a \$7,500 saltwater conversion for the Meeks Park Swimming Pool. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Day as April 19, 2025; and Confederate Memorial Day as April 26, 2025.

County Manager Tony Hughes made multiple announcements in his “County Operations Update,” including that: the installation of an emergency exit at Byers Road is moving forward; options are being reviewed to replace Canada Creek Bridge in Suches; the Meeks Park Swimming Pool has been converted to salt water to cut down on annual cleaning costs; the Byron Herbert Reece Farm & Heritage Center is open for the season; Poteete Creek Campground and Beach are also open; the Transfer Station now regularly offers document shredding; the Farmers Market will have an ATM this season; Department Heads are working on the next budget cycle; Hunter Von Hof has been hired to replace Gavin King as County Building & Development Director; and more.

County Finance Director Kay Wilcox led a brief presentation about the inverse relationship between property values and the county millage rate, which provides one explanation why Union County, with its relatively high property values, has one of the lowest millage rates in the state.

She also reported that the new floating homestead exemption authorized by the Georgia General Assembly last year and ratified by voters in November is now live and will result in lower property valuations for taxing purposes in the years ahead.

In his Commissioner’s Comments, Collins touched on the county’s ongoing efforts to complete a vehicle inventory, with county employees still attempting to locate about a dozen vehicles from the fleet that may have been auctioned off previously without being catalogued as such.

He also said the Farmers Market will be getting shopping carts this season, and he has plans of putting a small mill, cooking pan and sorghum cane patch nearby for live heritage demonstrations to promote the Sorghum in the Mountains Festival later this year.

During Q&A, a guest asked what Collins was doing to assist the financially distressed Senior Center. He said his office was working with Legacy Link on options, and he recommended people attend the upcoming Town Hall to express their concerns about this and anything else.

The Town Hall hosted by Union County Government will take place Tuesday, April 29, starting at 6 p.m. inside the Union County Sports Center at 519 Industrial Blvd. in

Blairsville. The meeting will feature a panel of guests to facilitate discussion and take questions from the public.

## DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

One topic that did not come up in the April 17 county meeting was the Union County Development Authority.

Collins dissolved the longstanding Development Authority in February, primarily citing costs and the lack of diversity among board leadership, and he said last month he hoped to have a re-formed authority up and running with a new board by the April meeting.

But the process is taking longer than anticipated and should be completed by the May 15 regular meeting, according to County Clerk Jennifer Mahan.

When Collins decided to dissolve the authority, he originally wanted to take his time in determining the need to re-form such a county agency.

But former authority board member Mike Kiernen of Panel Built informed Collins that, without the authority, he would not have access to the industrial revenue bonds he was planning to acquire to expand his business, which would create 75 new jobs in the county.

So, Collins contacted former county attorney Boyd Pettit, who has extensive experience with development authorities, and Pettit is working now to finalize a new authority with guidance from Collins to increase transparency and expand the board for greater community representation.

Mahan said the new authority will be set up in such a way as to preserve secrecy where it makes sense, for instance, concerning sensitive negotiation details, while ensuring the authority is “as transparent as possible” with the public and elected officials.

In terms of what the new Development Authority might pursue, Mahan said Collins has a particular interest in recruiting more manufacturing businesses to Union County, and the commissioner will decide later whether to hire a new director to run the authority.

County meetings are livestreamed at the “Union County, Georgia Government” Facebook page, where a recording of this month’s meeting can be found. In addition to county meetings and town halls, Collins said people are always welcome to come see him in his office at the courthouse.

# DNR Law Enforcement seeking info on break-in at check station



Sometime between the hours of 2 p.m. on Sunday, April 13, and 9 a.m. on Monday, April 14, the check station located in the Coopers Creek Wildlife Management Area of Suches was broken into, with the door having been kicked in.

Anyone with information is asked to call the Georgia Department of Natural Resources Investigative Unit at 770-918-6408.



# E-911 Appreciation...from Page 1A



**911 Director David Dyer, 911 Sgt. Lynn Powell and 911 Lt. Mille Baxter during National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week on April 14. Powell is pictured here receiving the Employee of the Year Award.**  
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

911 does to help and the fact that they all have each other's backs. Sole Commissioner Harold Collins was earnest but quick to voice his own admiration of the E-911 crew. "I'm really proud of y'all," Collins began, growing emotional. "I didn't really know what went on (here)

until I took office ... I thank y'all for it." Some guests even brought gifts. Daniel and Deanna Webster, owners of Young's Wrecker Service, presented each dispatcher a black windbreaker decorated with "Union County 911 Dispatcher" on the sleeve

and "The Calm Voice in the Darkness" on the breast. Residents Art and Debbie Miller provided handmade flower planters filled with colorful rock roses to welcome spring, courtesy of Doug Smith's Doug Builds Stuff. The Millers are known to attend the appreciation event annually.

"(We're) real supportive," noted Art, himself a former first responder. "We just wanted to say thank you as residents."  
Union General Hospital's Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett brought the dispatchers personalized cookies and an inspirational word, thanking them for their role in keeping residents safe.  
"Please know that we understand what a huge part of our health care system you guys are," Barnett said, grateful especially for E-911's training in over-the-phone CPR assessment and guidance. "Thank you so much for what you do."  
In the presence of good

company, the next stage of the night involved a quick sit-down for a meal catered by Sicily's. Through it all, the dispatchers and guests shared laughter and memories with friends before reconvening to recognize each individual dispatcher.  
That said, Sgt. Lynn Powell was surprised by being named Employee of the Year. With her longstanding service to the community and plenty of time spent training newbies, Baxter and Dyer agree that Powell has made a positive impact on the whole department.  
"I've been through a lot of people here, and this is a great bunch we have now," said Powell, who was met with

cheers and applause. "There's no one better than anybody else in my opinion."  
One of the final gifts of the evening was a cash donation to each dispatcher by an anonymous donor, which further softened heightened emotions before Dispatcher Maggie Guerrier shared a slideshow that showcased some of the department's best moments over the past couple years.  
"I want to say how much I appreciate everybody. Y'all are my family," Baxter said in closing, tears in her eyes and love in her voice. "I couldn't be more proud of this bunch. I've worked here a long time, and I've never had a family like I have now."

## First Annual Blairsville Music & Seafood Festival



**Kathleen Cook**

It's Springtime in the beautiful mountains of North Georgia, and what better way to enjoy it is by participating in a festival! For three days

there will be foot-stomping local bands, delicious seafood from Blairsville restaurants, beer & wine garden, local arts & craft vendors, and plenty

of cool activities for kids and adults!  
It will be held at the Mock House (Mountain Life Museum) near the downtown square at 25 Veteran's Memorial Parkway. The days and hours are as follows:  
Friday, April 25; 4 PM to 8 PM; Saturday, April 26; 11 AM to 8 PM; and Sunday, April 27; 11 AM to 8 PM.  
Admission will be \$5 per person. Kids are free. Wristbands will be sold in advance at the Union County Historical Society, Grits and Greens Restaurant, Chamber of Commerce, and at the gate.  
Other activities include cobbler cooking in the 1861 Payne cabin, educational lectures, panning for gold, butter churning, blacksmithing, beekeeping, and touring of the 1906 Grapelle Butt Mock House. Director of the Mountain Life Museum Kathleen Cook invites you to rock a-while as she demonstrates quilt making!  
Come celebrate Spring in the mountains with music, great seafood, and old-time activities!  
-Union County Historical Society



# Patriots' Day ...from Page 1A



Musket fire is always an exciting part of the annual Patriots' Day observance.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## Tickets are now on sale for the 'Gazers of the Galaxy' Workshop

FIND Outdoors announces tickets for "Gazers of the Galaxy" at Brasstown Bald go on sale April 22, 2025. This stargazing workshop offers participants the opportunity to explore the cosmos and view Brasstown Bald's scenic vistas in a whole new way.

"Brasstown Bald is one of the best places in the Southeast to stargaze," said Dru Cosner, Georgia Visitor Centers Manager for FIND Outdoors. "There's nothing quite like seeing the Milky Way stretched across the starry sky at Brasstown Bald. We're excited to welcome visitors to share in that experience."

At 4,784 feet above sea level, Brasstown Bald stands as the highest point in Georgia, offering a truly unrivaled vantage point for observing the night sky. The elevation, combined with its remote location in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest, creates one of the darkest sky environments in the Southeast – ideal for viewing stars, planets and deep space phenomena.

2025 Event Dates: June 28, July 26; Location: Brasstown Bald, 2941 Highway Spur 180, Hiawassee, GA 30546; Admission: General Admission: \$30, Youth (Ages 4-15): \$15.

Attendees will have the



opportunity to use high-powered telescopes to observe the dark, night sky, guided by expert astronomers from the Atlanta Astronomy Club. The event aims to educate while highlighting the beauty of North Georgia's nightscape.

FIND Outdoors hosts "Gazers of the Galaxy" as part of its mission to inspire curiosity and appreciation for nature. Brasstown Bald's breathtaking views by day and exceptionally dark skies by night make it a premier destination for both

learning and awe-inspiring experiences.

Each night's attendance is limited to 60 participants and tickets are available exclusively online at [gofindoutdoors.org](https://gofindoutdoors.org).

Please note that all ticket purchases are non-refundable and cannot be transferred to another date.

For more information and to purchase tickets, visit <https://gofindoutdoors.org/events/gazers-of-the-galaxy-at-brasstown-bald-2/>

John Cutler Braddock – a captain of one of the Georgia ships that routed the British raiding party – was present on Saturday. Mayes dressed in a red naval uniform, ready and willing to share information on Braddock's role in winning America's independence.

Braddock's row galley was formidable at the time, being armed and capable of propulsion, unlike the slower-moving sailboat that was at the mercy of the weather. His craft and the three others that fought alongside him at

Frederica were a boon to the revolution's efforts, but the men made a difference outside just their skills.

Although they were unable to capture any of the enemy, they did "disable" two British ships and delayed the capture of Fort Marris by eight months. It is said that "not one" of the American troops was injured in the process.

Perhaps the greatest aspect of the local Patriots' Day events are their weapon demonstrations. Every hour, the men load and ready their flintlock rifles for fire, aiming and shooting up

and over the circling traffic around the courthouse.

At noon, just as quickly as they appeared, the ghosts of the American Revolution were gone, having performed their duty to spark an interest in America's history, pride in what the country's earliest soldiers fought for, and a bit of cheer.

Their next stop? To grab a bite to eat at a local coffee shop, blending seamlessly back into the modern era. But rest assured, they'll be back next year for another exciting celebration of Patriots' Day.