

Opinions

Everybody has one...

Partners in the Garden

A garden tells us everything we need to know about what it means to be human. As someone who travels from community to community, I've had the privilege of seeing countless gardens - from makeshift urban rooftop plots to sprawling suburban yards to vast rural homesteads. But it was a conversation with an experienced gardener that opened my eyes to the profound nature of our partnership with the Divine.

"People think gardening is about controlling nature," she told me, gently training a vine along its trellis. "But it's really about partnership. We can't create the seed, can't command it to sprout, can't force it to flower. What we can do is create the conditions for growth." She paused, brushing soil from her well-worn gloves. "We work with what G-d has already set in motion."

This wisdom illuminates one of our tradition's most fundamental teachings: that humans are created in G-d's image. But what does this really mean? Look closely at a garden, and you begin to understand. Like the Master Gardener, we don't create from nothing - we can't. Instead, we're given the extraordinary ability to nurture, shape, and guide what already exists. We can't invent photosynthesis, but we can decide where to plant. We can't manufacture rain, but we can build irrigation systems. We can't design a seed, but we can choose when to sow it.

This is the profound meaning behind G-d's mandate in Genesis to "subdue the earth." According to Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of blessed memory, this directive isn't about domination but about sacred partnership. When G-d created humans in His image, He wasn't describing our physical form but our potential role: to be conscious partners in the ongoing work of creation.

Consider how a gardener approaches their plot. They must first observe and understand - where does the sun fall? How does water flow? What does the soil need? Then they make choices: which plants will thrive here? How should they be arranged? When should they be pruned? This is precisely how G-d invites us to engage with His world - not as passive inhabitants, but as active participants in its unfolding.

Yet this partnership also teaches us humility. Every gardener knows that despite their best efforts, some seeds won't sprout.

See *Hambourger*, page 5A

Echos from Sinai
"Torah for Everyone"
Rabbi
Yonatan
Hambourger



Walk On High Places

Patty Morin lives with unspeakable grief. In 2023, her daughter Rachel, a 37-year-old mother of five, was murdered on a hiking trail in Maryland. Because Patty was willing to talk about it, you can listen and learn. To her, pain and suffering do not speak the last word, thanks be to God.

Patty has testified before Congress and granted interviews to journalists, describing the circumstances that led to Rachel's death. What is less reported is Patty's summary of her journey through the valley of the shadow of death. "Even though I have walked fifty years as a Christian, for the first time I saw God," she said. "I realized that God was God, that He was sovereign over all things, and I just wanted to fall on my face and worship God." This response would be hard to grasp even if you spoke to Patty personally.

Psychologist Larry Crabb offers some insight. He wrote the book "SoulTalk" after his cancer diagnosis and his brother's death in a plane crash. He explains that some versions of religion prompt you to deny such pain and pretend you are not hurting. Suffering must mean you're not living right (the mistake of Job's friends). So, you soldier on, nursing your pain alone. "That leads to pride or despair," Crabb writes, "never to brokenness. Religion keeps the power of God merely trickling through our lives, like water through a twisted hose. Only brokenness straightens out the kinks. Then revival comes. Living water gushes. What is most alive within us, a passionate desire for God himself, comes pouring out."

We see this desire in the prophet Habakkuk even as he witnessed injustice, violence, and deprivations. The Babylonians threatened his nation. Why would God allow it? Through his brokenness he wrote, "Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines... and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and He has made my feet like hind's feet, and makes me walk on my high places" (Hab. 3:17-19).

I have witnessed survivors of disasters turn Godward. Like Patty, brokenness caused them to experience God in a new way.

See *Fowler*, page 5A

All Things New

Wayne Fowler



From Your Commissioner

I was recently asked about the changes to the Building & Development Board that oversees variances for building codes. This board was set up to have full authority to hear and decide on all variances, and these positions were filled by builders, graders and plumbers. All those serving on the board are very knowledgeable in their field, and their commitment to serving on this board shows their commitment to our community.

Upon reviewing the duties of the variance board and how the variance process works, I noticed there was no opportunity for allowing public comment related to the hearing of any variances. Here's an example: the variance board could have given a variance to a multi-family housing proposal to let apartments be built closer than 1,000 feet to another complex without notifying any of the adjoining property owners or allowing for any public comment.

I did not feel this fit with the spirit of the ordinance, and felt it needed to be addressed immediately. It is possible that requested variances could have a direct impact on city and county roads, city water and sewer, rivers/streams, neighboring properties, as well as related infrastructure. Not to mention this question, "Would any of these developments (apartments and higher density housing) help with the current issue of affordable housing?" The bottom line is I don't think anyone knows right now, but as Commissioner, I need to consider if the variances being issued are going to align with our goals. Are the board members qualified to be making final decisions that could have an impact on the infrastructure and the economy? Should we as the county be making these decisions without any input at all from the city or general public?

It should not be expected that I accept variance after variance to be approved by a board with no oversight and with no potential impact studies.

The bottom line is this: As a community we need to evaluate ordinances thoroughly before changing them. The ordinances that are in place have obviously done some good at making our community what it is today. I don't plan on changing these ordinances without fully evaluating and investigating them. I would expect nothing less of anyone else who might have taken office.

Union County Commissioner

Harold Collins



Immigration...

Immigration Enforcement Tools

President Trump is using every enforcement tool at his disposal to remove illegal aliens from our country.

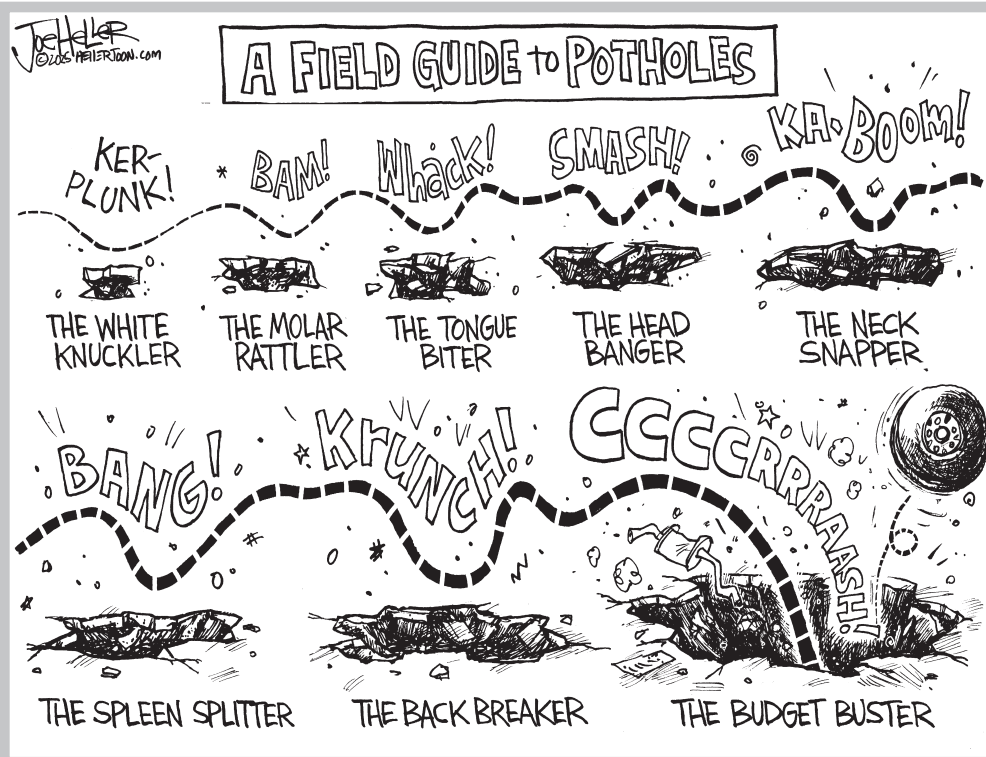
Last week, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) announced the agency has identified 6,300 illegal aliens who were paroled into the United States since 2023 under the Biden-Harris Administration - despite having criminal records or being on the FBI's Terrorist Screening Center watchlist.

Alarming, the Trump Administration confirmed that hundreds of these violent illegals were collecting costly government benefits. In fact, 905 were collecting Medicaid, 41 were gathering unemployment insurance, and 22 received federal student loans.

Folks, not a single illegal alien should receive government benefits of any kind. This serves as a powerful reminder that exposing and

See *Clyde*, page 5A

United States Congressman
Representative
Andrew Clyde



Chamber 2025

A big thanks to Senator Steve Gooch and Representative Stan Gunter for speaking at this year's Chamber "Legislative Update." We are blessed to have legislators that are active in our community that work to protect North Georgia. From lowering the state income tax rate to approving tort reform - it's good to know we all are well represented at the State Capitol.

Have you heard? The 2025 Community Guides are here! If you would like a copy, please drop by the Chamber for yours today. If you would like a box for your business or vacation rental, call the Chamber and we will make arrangements to have them delivered. If you prefer, you can view a digital version online at the Chamber website at visitblairsvillega.com.

Mark your calendar! Next weekend is the North Georgia Hot Rod Reunion at Meeks Park, and June 13th will be the Downtown

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Blairsville - Union County Chamber President

Steve Rowe



Letters to the Editor

Re: "When Democracies Drift"

Dear Editor,
The writer of When Democracies Drift presents a clear and serious warning: American democracy is in danger and depends on something we may have lost - our collective will to preserve it. While I respect his concern, I take exception to the implications beneath the surface.

He argues that if we have the will, the way to save our democracy is through "clarity, courage, and a commitment to the rule of law..." It is hard to disagree with that statement since it is common sense and in keeping with the traditions of our founding citizens. But what does he really mean?

Where I am most skeptical of his intentions, even though Trump or MAGA is not mentioned, is in his attempt to point a finger at conservatives and Trump supporters. He suggests that judges, prosecutors, and our laws are

See *Ripma* page 5A

Slander and Libel

Dear Editor,
In the April 18 edition of the paper, I read a letter to the editor from a man opining on my letter about Gunter.

I'm sorry, sir, I must have missed seeing you sitting in Gunter's office at the capitol. I really don't remember you being there at all, so please, tell me how you can claim to know what Gunter said in that meeting.

How can you "doubt" that Gunter lied to me when you were not there?

So please, tell me what it's called when a person says one thing to your face then goes on the radio and in the newspaper and says the opposite of what he said he would do?

What is that?
This issue is about 4,200 people stating

See *Lausier*, page 5A

Dear Liberals

Dear Editor,
A couple of our Liberal Brethren wrote last week with varying concerns about what's going on in the country and with our government. One was concerned that we're losing our Democracy, and one was concerned with all those poor Government Employees who are losing their jobs.

To the person who is concerned about us losing our Democracy I say this. If you weren't afraid for our Democracy back in 2012 when Obama took away our right to choose by FORCING us to buy health insurance whether we wanted it or not or in fact needed it or not and

See *Rains*, page 5A

Letters to the Editor

Referendum for 5-Member Commission

Dear Editor,
According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a REFERENDUM is "a vote in which ALL the people in a country or an area are asked to give their opinion about or decide an important political or social question."

When meeting with Stan Gunter, he agreed to draft legislation to have a referendum put on a ballot to let the citizens of Union County have a VOICE and a CHOICE whether THEY want to stay with a Sole Commissioner form of government or move to a Board of Commissioners. "WE THE PEOPLE" of Union County are the ones who should make that decision, NOT our "ELECTED" officials. This is our First Amendment right - FREE SPEECH!

See *Vandereedt*, page 5A

Smarter Zoning is the Key

Dear Editor,
We're facing a housing crisis in our community. Young families are priced out. Teachers, EMTs, and service workers can't find places to live nearby. At the same time, many residents worry that growth will ruin the quiet, rural character they moved here for.

This tension is real - but it's also solvable. The answer isn't to stop change. It's to guide it. That's what zoning is supposed to do: help communities manage growth in a way that protects what matters most, while adapting to current needs.

The truth is, our current growth management tools aren't working. They are too rigid, too outdated, and too focused on preventing change rather than shaping it. In many areas, it's nearly impossible to build any kind of affordable housing - even modest homes that would fit right in.

See *Berkman*, page 5A

Board of Registrars

Dear Editor,
Things sure have a way of changing fast. Come July 1, we will have three new members of the Board of Registrars. January's Grand Jury put them forth, and they were approved on March 11th. Lucretia Collins, Patricia Collins and Barbara Anderson will be out, and Martha Davenport, Kristal Hemphill and Laura Winkler will be in.

Remember that these are bureaucrats appointed, not elected, just like our Board of Elections members are appointed, not elected. They

See *Lodes* page 5A

Home Cooking / Baseball

My Dad and his brother played baseball during the summer with a bunch of boys from Trapptown. In those days all the little communities had baseball teams which traveled all across Alabama and Tennessee playing baseball against anyone wishing to play. Magical sounding names like Pebble, Dime, Bear Creek, Hackleburgh, Leighton and Russellville all had traveling baseball teams. But, everybody's dream was to play the big boys down in Birmingham. One day, Roy Reeves, the manager of the Trapptown team, announced to his boys, "I have secured a home and home series with the boys in Birmingham."

The Trapptown Team made the trip to Birmingham to play baseball in front of a crowd of 1,000 spectators, which was more people than most of them had ever saw. Yes, they were nervous, but, they were good players. Dad was playing shortstop. Uncle Bud was playing first base. Harold Cohen was in center field while the Trapp brothers were playing third and catcher. The boys were really good, and the game was a tight one. The score was 1 to 0 in the top of the 5th inning. Dad was at bat and hit a ball over the head of the center fielder. There was no fence and the ball was hit so well that it rolled 150 yards after it hit the ground. As Dad rounded the bases the home plate umpire told him to go back to second base. It seems the hit was ruled a ground rule double because there was no fence and the runner on first was sent back to third. The next batter struck out for the third out and the score remained 1 to 0.

In the bottom of the 6th inning Uncle Bud was batting and hit a line drive that went under third base. While the third baseman from Birmingham was looking for the ball, Uncle Bud ran all the way to third base. Finally, the third baseman found the ball under the base and the umpire ruled the hit as a foul ball. The boys from Trapptown lost that game 1 to 0.

The next game was played in Trapptown. Skeeter Trapp was an old man of 38, but was still able to get a single and make it to first base. He was leading off a little when the pitcher tried to pick him off, and as he tried to get back to first base the young first baseman of Birmingham tried to block the bag. He told the young man not to block the bag because he would get knocked down. The young boy tried to block the bag again after the next pitch. As the elder base runner came back to the bag he lowered his shoulder and knocked the boy off the bag and down into the dirt.

See *Cummings*, page 5A

Around The Farm

Mickey Cummings



Volunteer Appreciation Week

This week is Volunteer Appreciation Week. Volunteerism is an important part of our society, as many organizations would not be able to operate without volunteers. Extension is no exception to that. Between Towns and Union Extension we have over 90 volunteers who give their time to serve their community. Our volunteers are either Master Gardeners or 4-H volunteers. Each year these volunteers contribute over 13,000 hours of time to make their community a better place in a variety of ways. I don't have the space here to go through all the names of our fantastic volunteers and the ways that they make our community better, but I will highlight a few of the ways that they have served over the past year.

Master Gardeners work on over 30 projects between Union and Towns counties. Their projects have a focus on educating the public about gardening and making our community a more beautiful place. A project that you may be familiar with the Ask a Master Gardener Booth at the Union County Farmers Market. Every Saturday during the season the public can stop by and ask gardening questions of trained Master Gardeners. They also support and host events for the public like educational seminars, Arbor Day, and United Community Bank Customer Appreciation Day (Tomato Day). Master Gardeners support a number of demonstration gardens like the libraries in Blairsville, Young Harris, and Hiawassee, Market Garden, Ethnobotanical Garden at GMREC, Cupid Falls Park, Vogel State Park, the Hiawassee Square, Beasley Knob, Lloyd's Landing, USFS Pollinator Garden, and more.

4-H volunteers support the youth of Towns and Union in a number of ways. Some volunteers spend a week at camp during the summer making sure that youth have a blast and stay safe. Others are coaches for our shooting sports teams, hosting practices and taking kids to competitions. Last year one of the Union county shotgun teams won State, and the Union county BB team went to Nationals. Some volunteers help with summer events where 4-Hers get outside and learn about the natural resources around them. We also have a have a number of volunteers who assist with public speaking and 4-H dances that are beloved by many current and former 4-Hers.

I want to say a big THANK YOU to all of our volunteers. They make the community in a great place to live by making it more beautiful, educating the public on gardening, and invest-

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Watching and Working

Jacob Williams



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Immediately, the boy's father rushed from the stands and pulled a knife to cut Skeeter. The local deputy sheriff happened to be next door at the country store next to the ball field. He jumped into his car and drove right up to first base. Deputy Looney was not a big man but he meant business. When he got excited and under stress his face would turn red and the pitch of his voice went up an octave or two.

As the police car came to a stop he jumped from the car and with a high-pitched, shrill, and feminine sounding voice asked, "What's the problem here?" The man from Birmingham paid no attention

Hambourger ... continued from Page 4A

some plants will fail, some seasons will disappoint. We can create optimal conditions, but ultimately, growth remains a divine mystery. This tension – between our power to affect change and our inability to control outcomes – defines our role as beings created in G-d's image.

The garden also teaches us about time and patience. No gardener plants a seed expecting immediate results. They understand that growth happens in stages, that fruit comes in its season, that some of their most important work won't be visible for years. When we partner with G-d in tending His world, we must embrace this same perspective – seeing our role not just in the immediate moment, but as part of an unfolding divine plan.

This understanding transforms how we view our place in creation. We are neither powerless observers nor independent actors, but something far more profound: designated caretakers of G-d's garden. Every choice we make – how we treat our bodies, how we use our resources, how we interact with others – becomes

to the high-pitched voice of the deputy as he took another swing at the ball player from Trapptown with the knife, all while cursing the deputy at the same time. The Deputy did not like being cursed, so, he pulled his revolver, cocked the hammer and spun the man around. Looney placed the barrel on the end of the man's nose and told him to put the knife down. The man looked at the business end of a .38 revolver and the strength in his knees left him. He just passed out right there on first base.

The boys from Trapptown won that game 7 to 0 without any home cooking from the bunch out of Birmingham.

an expression of this sacred partnership.

The next time you pass a well-tended garden, observe how it embodies this divine-human collaboration. Notice how human intention works with natural growth, how boundaries guide but don't constrain, how each plant contributes to a greater whole. This is the model for our role in creation: partners with G-d, empowered to act but humbled by mystery, capable of shaping but not controlling, responsible for nurturing what we've been given.

In this garden of existence, we serve as G-d's designated gardeners, entrusted with tending not just our own plot but contributing to the flourishing of all creation. This is what it truly means to be created in G-d's image – to accept the profound responsibility and privilege of partnership with the Divine, while remembering whose garden this ultimately is.

Yonatan Hambourger is a rabbi and writer dedicated to serving spiritual seekers of all backgrounds on behalf of Chabad of Rural Georgia. You can contact him at y@tasteoftrah.org.

Clyde.. continued from Page 4A

eliminating waste, fraud, and abuse in federal programs must be a top priority.

Thankfully, President Trump revoked parole status from these dangerous illegal aliens and stripped them of taxpayer-funded benefits. For example, the Trump Administration placed the names of these illegals on the Social Security Administration's "death master file," which has since been renamed the "ineligible master file."

The White House confirmed the move aims to encourage these illegal aliens to self-deport. After all, the Biden-Harris Administration weaponized parole to flood our country with unvetted illegals, who then had a monetary incentive to stay here after receiving Social Security numbers to work.

It's simple: removing government benefits that Joe Biden provided to illegal aliens

is key to forcing self-deportations. Yet if illegals refuse, there's always another option.

President Trump continues to deport illegal aliens from our communities, proving America is no longer a safe haven for anyone who unlawfully enters our country and harms U.S. citizens.

On Monday, President Trump hosted El Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele at the White House to showcase their incredible partnership to make our nations safe. Thanks to their leadership, violent criminal illegal aliens, including murderers, rapists, and gang members, have been taken off our streets and deported to El Salvador.

From incentivizing self-deportations to carrying out mass deportations, President Trump is successfully using his executive authority to protect you and your family – delivering on his promise to make America safe again.

Rains...continued from Page 4A

NOW you're worried about our Democracy, you're a Hypocrite. If you weren't concerned when Joe Biden quarantined us, forced us to wear masks, get vaccinated or lose our jobs if we didn't get the jab, cut people from the military and persecuted religious organizations who didn't get vaccinated and who criticized his policies, in my humble opinion, you're a Hypocrite and you have no right to speak.

To the person who wrote about all those poor government employees, I say this. If you weren't concerned about the almost 400,000 government workers laid off by Bill Clinton back when he was

President or weren't concerned when Joe Biden hired 87,000 new IRS Agents to go after us for our hard-earned money, in my humble opinion, you're also a hypocrite and have no right to speak.

Liberals love Big Government and want it to take care of everyone from the cradle to the grave, we understand that. That being said, I'd like to remind Liberals of one thing. The government that's big enough to give you everything you want is also big enough to take everything you have, and sooner or later, if left alone with no correction, it will.

Claude Rains Jr.

Vandereedt...continued from Page 4A

I choose not to do social media but have been told that there are people that are being nasty and vile about this issue. My question is, "What is everyone so afraid of?" Doesn't everyone believe in free speech and agree that everyone should be able to vote on what they would like? Let's keep in mind that this is a "REFERENDUM." It asks a question of the voters. It is not changing the form of government unless the vote turns out to be "yes."

Let's look at the FACTS in Union County:

School Board – 5 members who are over approximately 3,100 children.

City Council – 5 members who are over approximately 1,000 people.

Election Board – 5 members who are over approximately 22,000 people.

County Commissioner – "1" person overseeing the entire county of approximately 27,000 to 28,000 residents.

???????

Regardless of how you feel about a referendum to allow the citizens of Union County to vote how they want, we all need to let our voice be heard. That is at the ballot box. We should not allow our "elected" officials to tell us what type of government "WE THE PEOPLE" will have.

Stan Gunter voiced his opinion in the newspaper when he said he was not for a Board of Commissioners but was going to hold town hall meetings to see what the people are saying they want. He agreed to have a referendum put on a ballot to let the citizens decide, and that is the only way we will know what the citizens want.

I am asking you to keep your word, Stan, and put it on the ballot in November of 2026 and let the citizens and your constituents decide what they want.

Cindy Vandereedt

Berkman... continued from Page 4A

But there are better tools available. One of them is floating zoning. Unlike traditional fixed zones that lock land use to a map forever, floating zones create a flexible legal structure for specific types of development – like workforce housing – that can be applied to appropriate parcels as opportunities arise. They allow for affordable housing projects to move forward only if they meet carefully defined standards: location, scale, design, infrastructure. This gives the community control without slamming the door on new solutions.

Floating zones are especially useful in rural areas like ours, where cookie-cutter zoning maps often don't reflect how land is actually used or where growth could responsibly go. They create

Williams...

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ing in the next generation to be leaders in our community. The volunteer hours that they provide across both counties is valued at nearly \$400,000 a year. The work that Extension does is taxpayer funded, therefore, our volunteers also make Extension a great return on investment for everyone by acting as a force multiplier for the work that we do.

If you are interested in becoming a volunteer contact your County Extension office or email me at Jacob.Williams@uga.edu. You can also contact the 4-H program leaders for Union and Towns by emailing Katherine.Hayes@uga.edu (Union) and Kerri.Bradshaw@uga.edu (Towns). Our volunteers work with youth, which is a responsibility that we take very seriously. All volunteers must sign a code of conduct, go through background screening, and a reference check before they are cleared to volunteer.

Fowler...

continued from Page 4A

Brokenness leads to clarity – you see God in His sovereignty and your own need for mercy. It does not make the pain less real. It does bring Jesus' death and resurrection into sharper focus, because with that victory He declares there is more to life and reality than the bitter suffering you endure today.

You have a choice. To ignore your pain or find fault only delays healing. Rather, seek the God who loves you and gives you strength to walk on high places. The view is clearer from there.

Lausier...

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they wanted to VOTE on the question of multi-commissioner. They want a referendum on multi-commissioner or to stay with a sole commissioner. So let the people vote.

Eva Lausier

Ripma...

continued from Page 4A

not respected, as if our society has recently crossed a line that might lead to violence. I suspect the line he refers to is the election of Donald Trump and the writer's fear that Trump represents a political dictatorship.

In truth, our will to survive and prosper is alive and well. We are now beginning to enforce our laws, support our police, build up our military, respect our public officials, value our children, defend our borders, and save our democracy. If these efforts are suddenly portrayed as dangerous or extreme, then perhaps the real crisis is cultural – a growing intolerance for common sense and the Christian principles upon which this nation was founded.

John Ripma

Lodes...

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do get some training and help along the way, so we should wish them well, as they are volunteers and are willing to do the job. The Board of Elections are appointed by both major parties and the Commissioner (2, 2 and 1 members).

The Board of Elections and the Board of Registrars have finally decided to go back to the old way of doing things and combine the Boards back into one again. Unfortunately, it requires going back to state legislation to get that done so it won't happen this year, but both Boards are working together to make the transition smooth.

Marsha Lodes

space for local builders to propose good projects – and for towns to approve them case by case, without having to overhaul the entire zoning code.

This kind of smart zoning helps protect property values, too. It ensures new development fits its surroundings, so homeowners don't wake up one day to find an incompatible use next door. It also protects our way of life – by making sure essential workers can live in the community they serve, not 45 minutes away.

The alternative is decline: shrinking school enrollment, overburdened services, and a growing gap between the people who live here and the people who work here. That's not preserving community – that's watching it slowly disappear.

The good news? We don't have to choose between growth and preservation. With zoning tools like floating zones, we can do both. We can preserve the look and feel of our town and keep it open to the people who make it work.

It's time to stop treating zoning like a line in the sand – and start using it as a tool to build a future that works for all of us.

Michael Berkman

Chamber...

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Movie Night. Bring your chair or blanket and the kids for a night of fun. Stay tuned for more details!

Come and join us for a fun family event that makes Life fun in Blairsville.