

North Georgia News

75¢

2 Sections 26 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, May 7, 2025

Collins reiterates county vision in Town Hall

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

About 150 residents attended the town hall hosted by Union County Government inside the Gold Gym of the Sports Center on Tuesday, April 29.

Sole Commissioner Harold Collins explained the format for the evening's Q&A, which he had scheduled to promote transparency in local government and solicit feedback from the public.

Sitting at tables positioned on a platform facing the audience were various county and city officials as well as third parties with working knowledge of the county's governmental affairs.

Throughout the roughly two and a half hour meeting,

Collins introduced several topics of discussion regarding different areas of governance, outlining his vision for each, and the officials on stage helped answer questions posed by attendees from a podium at the front of the audience.

Collins asked all to be respectful in asking and answering questions, and he requested guests keep their remarks to three minutes apiece out of respect for everyone's time, though he did not enforce a time limit, so attendees who wanted to speak got to say their piece.

"Tonight's meeting is not about me – it's about y'all, the taxpayers of Union County," Collins said in driving home the reason behind the gathering. "We're here to listen to y'all, to

get input on several different things."

WORKFORCE HOUSING

The first topic Collins raised was affordable workforce housing, which has long been a need in the county and beyond. First responders, teachers, hospital workers and local industry personnel, to name a few professions, would be the primary targets of affordable housing initiatives.

Collins has established a multi-member volunteer committee to explore the issue and conduct surveys in the community, with early research indicating affordable as being in the range of \$250,000-\$350,000, though this is subject to change pending additional

See Town Hall Meeting, Page 11A



Commissioner Collins took all questions town hall attendees had to ask on April 29.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Farmers Market trail highlights local heritage



(L-R) Mickey Cummings, Frank Riley, Harold Collins and Dustin "Rog" Rogers are excited for the June 7 ribbon cutting at the new Butternut Creek Trail, on the opening day of the Union County Farmers Market.

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Local agricultural heritage is being honored with a new landmark at the Union County Farmers Market, made possible thanks to a multi-partner collaboration that has been years in the making.

Union County Government, Blue Ridge Mountain Soil & Water Conservation District, Chestatee-Chattahoochee Resource, Conservation & Development Council and the Natural Resources Conservation Service have teamed up to create the Butternut Creek

Trail.

Most of the project has been completed, with a few finishing touches remaining to be applied ahead of the 11 a.m. ribbon cutting for the trail that coincides with the season opening day of the Farmers Market on June 7. It'll also

See Farmers Market Trail, Page 3A

Blairsville couple arrested for back-to-back burglaries

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

A Union County couple was arrested last month in connection with two burglaries in the south end of the county.

The burglaries on Chestnut Cove Road occurred within 12 hours of each other between April 23 and April 24, and the Union County Sheriff's Office had the couple in custody about 30 hours after the first event.

Bobby Chad Evans, 42, of Valley Lane in Blairsville, has been charged with theft by taking, two counts of first-degree burglary, possession of tools for the commission of a crime and second-degree damage to property – all felonies.

Brittnee Leigh Barber, 33, also of Valley Lane in Blairsville, has been charged with probation violation, theft by taking, first-degree burglary, possession of tools for the commission of a crime and two counts of being party to a crime – all felonies as well.

Evans and Barber were arrested on April 24, and they

remained in custody at the Union County Jail at press time. Both have been arrested in the past for property-related crimes, according to the Sheriff's Office.

A Chestnut Cove homeowner called 911 around 1 p.m. on April 23 to report that the glass on his front door had been broken, his house had been entered, and multiple items were missing from the property, said UCSO Lt. Doug Brackett, who leads the Criminal Investigations

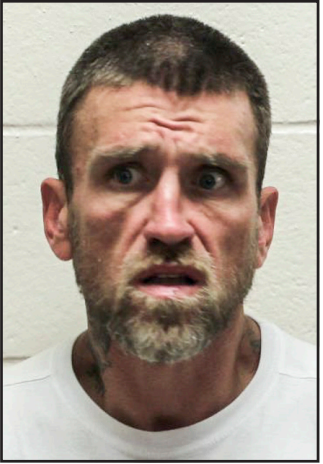
Division.

Apparently, the homeowner just missed the burglar, having only been gone from the property for about an hour before returning to find his house damaged and pilfered.

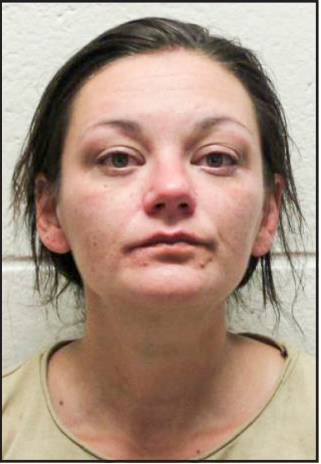
CID Sgt. Marc Pilote responded to the scene and interviewed the resident. While there, he spotted four-wheeler tracks in the driveway, kicking off a search for the rogue vehicle.

Canvassing deputies

See Burglary Arrests, Page 2A



Bobby Chad Evans



Brittnee Leigh Barber

Locals appeal to God on National Day of Prayer

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Christians of all denominations gathered at First Baptist Blairsville on May 1 to observe the 74th Annual National Day of Prayer. Ultimately, the local event lived up to the national theme of "(Pouring) Out to the God of Hope," with multiple prayers over different facets of life and country.

Returning for introductions this year was organizer Pam Schroeder, who will be stepping down from her position. At her side was Jim Yohe, who will be taking the reins when it comes to general management, and he organized the presence of the program's ushers, Joshua's Warriors.

"If you were here last year, you may remember that Jack, my husband, was not feeling well, and he found a seat with some friends out in the congregation. This year, on April 22, he found a seat with our Heavenly Father," said Schroeder, revealing her reason



Pam Schroeder and Jim Yohe opened the local observance for the 2025 National Day of Prayer on May 1.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

for passing the mantle to Yohe.

Next, Dr. Al Haywood of Pathway Christian Counseling performed a truly powerful rendition of the Lord's Prayer in song, and First Baptist's Minister of Music, Ed Lawrie,

YHC announces FREE, reduced tuition for Towns, Union students

News Special

YOUNG HARRIS – Graduation is an exciting time for a high school senior, and Young Harris College wants to reward the hard work and extra effort for those students who participated in dual enrollment while in high school.

The College is offering students graduating from our partner dual enrollment high schools in Union and Towns counties the opportunity to attend YHC with reduced tuition and a seamless transition.

"As these students wrap up their dual enrollment experience at Young Harris College, we want to first say thank you for trusting us to be a part of their academic journey," said Clint Hobbs, Special Assistant to the President. "We have seen firsthand their potential and the drive they bring to our community, and we would be honored to continue supporting their growth as a full-time student here at YHC."

For qualifying students, there will be automatic admission, meaning no additional application required. There will be reduced tuition




Young Harris College is making its historic campus more inviting than ever for high school students from Towns and Union counties.

– starting at FREE with the maximum tuition being \$7,000. And, the enrollment deposit will also be waived – all the student needs to do is email us.

Textbooks are also included. "We understand that pursuing a full-time college decision can be challenging –

See YHC, Page 2A



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Sheriff’s Deputy at fault in Murphy Highway wreck

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Union County Sheriff’s Office is grateful no one was badly hurt in a wreck caused by a deputy last week, and Sheriff Shawn Dyer wants the motoring public to know he takes their safety seriously.

That’s why the deputy who caused the accident is being reprimanded; however, as this is the only blemish on an otherwise clean record, the reprimand will be limited.

Disciplinary action will be decided soon, Sheriff Dyer said, but to create accountability, the deputy is potentially facing a few days of unpaid leave and a brief removal of his take-home car privilege.

The accident occurred the evening of Monday, April 28, when the deputy was driving his patrol car north on Murphy Highway with a vehicle behind him.

An officer-assist call came out over the radio, prompting the deputy to turn on his lights and siren and attempt

to turn back toward town to help a fellow law enforcement officer, Sheriff Dyer said.

He turned right onto Akins Road and tried to make a U-turn to travel back south on Murphy Highway, but while making the U-turn, the deputy did not see the vehicle that had been traveling behind him, and he drove directly into its path.

A collision occurred between the right-side front of the civilian’s car and the driver’s side front of the patrol car in the northbound lane of Murphy Highway, according to the Georgia State Patrol.

The motorist reported she had observed the patrol car turn like it was turning onto Akins Road and that she briefly saw the vehicle’s blue lights, and GSP ultimately determined that the deputy was at fault for the accident, though no citations were issued.

Both the civilian driver and a passenger in her vehicle received minor injuries and were transported by ambulance to Union General Hospital for medical treatment and evaluation. They are expected



to make full recoveries.

Thankfully, the deputy was not injured, and the county’s insurance will be covering the costs associated with the accident.

“It’s unfortunate that it happened,” said Sheriff Dyer, who believes the deputy has learned a valuable lesson in his law enforcement career. “We take accidents seriously, and I’m just glad nobody received life-threatening injuries or was killed.

“We drive 800,000-900,000 miles a year, and with as much traffic as we have on the road, we’re going to get into accidents.”

Burglary Arrests...from Page 1A

spoke with multiple neighbors and even passing motorists, and several people reported having recently seen a male and a female riding up and down the road on a red four-wheeler with a very loud exhaust, Brackett said.

This information was incredibly helpful, giving investigators a better description of not only the vehicle they were looking for but also the people they were looking for, Brackett said.

UCSO searched all the nearby side roads but was unable to locate the red four-wheeler. Determined to catch the suspects, law enforcement maintained an elevated night-shift presence in the area, but an overnight rainstorm complicated search efforts.

Concentrated patrols continued into April 24, resulting in a road patrol sergeant spotting something off about a residence located just down the road from the initial burglary.

The day before, the sergeant had noticed this second residence had two posts holding up a chain blocking the driveway. That morning, however, he saw that one of the posts had been sawed off, opening a clear path from the camper atop the property to the roadway.

UCSO discovered that someone had broken into the unoccupied camper – similarly smashing the front door glass as well as cutting through a screen door – and tore off the latches of an adjacent enclosed trailer overnight.

Pilote and fellow CID investigator Lt. Dustin Walker immediately started working the second burglary, and they learned that the burglars had stolen a 2023 Harley-Davidson Street Glide motorcycle valued at \$26,000 that was stored inside the trailer.

The investigation determined that the male suspect had arrived at the property around midnight, entering the camper and trailer before leaving to retrieve his partner in crime and another vehicle.

They returned at about 3 a.m., and the female who was eventually taken in custody helped her accomplice get the motorcycle out of the enclosed trailer that was backed up against a hill, necessitating some cooperative towing and angling to pull the bike free, Walker said.

At that point, the male suspect cranked the motorcycle and made out like a bandit.

Fortunately, a break in the case came faster than the Harley could drive off into the figurative sunset. A resident hiking near Helton Creek that afternoon found the Street Glide – not exactly an offroad bike – parked and apparently abandoned on a rough Forst Service Road.

Sensing something suspicious, the resident called law enforcement, and the Sheriff’s Office picked up the Harley. Investigators believed the thieves would be back to retrieve the motorcycle “for some kind of profit gain,” so they staked out the area and waited for their return.

Sure enough, around 6 p.m., a silver F-150 truck containing a man and a woman pulled into the area and was promptly pulled over by patrol deputies, Walker said.

“The driver was

identified as Brittnee Barber, and the passenger was Bobby Evans,” Walker said. “At that point, (the patrol deputies) spoke with them. Some of their statements were inconsistent about where they’d been.

“Our deputies ended up getting consent from them to search the vehicle, and they found a Harley-Davidson helmet and a black Harley-Davidson drawstring-style bag that was described by the victim.

“They also found a drone in a gray zipper case. At that point, we didn’t know anything about the drone. I contacted the victim, and he said, yeah, actually, there was a drone. He described the make, model and what it was enclosed in before I gave him any information.

“He said it was in one of the cabinets that had been opened inside the camper. So, he described it to me to a T, and it matched what they had in their vehicle.”

The truck also contained tools that could have been used, for example, to pry off the latches on the damaged trailer, and deputies found battery-powered saws that could have easily felled the chain post, Walker said.

At that point, deputies placed the couple in an investigatory detention to bring them back to the Sheriff’s Office for questioning, Walker said.

Barber was hesitant to talk at first, but after having some of the evidence explained to her, “she ended up breaking down and confessing to not only her involvement but his involvement as well,” Walker said.

For his part, Evans declined to speak with investigators and requested the presence of an attorney.

While the interviews were being conducted, other deputies went out to the couple’s residence on Valley Lane – about a 10-minute drive from the Chestnut Cove burglaries – where they found a red four-wheeler sitting in the driveway, Brackett said.

“We think they were using this four-wheeler to case out houses, riding through and looking for houses that aren’t full-time residences,

YHC...from Page 1A

and we’re here to help guide your family every step of the way,” Hobbs said. “At YHC we prepare students to tackle their future through innovative programs, dedicated faculty, research experiences, and more.”

Students can email admissions@yhc.edu to notify YHC that they would like to continue as a full-time student. By submitting their official transcript to us, they will automatically be admitted and reviewed for scholarships. For more information, reach out to Hobbs at cghobbs@yhc.edu.

Young Harris College is a private baccalaureate and master’s degree-granting institution located in the beautiful mountains of North Georgia.

Founded in 1886 and historically affiliated with The United Methodist Church, Young Harris College educates, inspires, and empowers students through an education that purposefully integrates the liberal arts and professional

because they rode through that subdivision more than that one day according to the neighbors that we talked to,” Brackett said.

Also at the residence were multiple pieces of property reported stolen in the first burglary, sitting in plain view inside an open carport of the home, Brackett said.

The Sheriff’s Office has recovered all the items taken from the second residence, and some from the first, with ongoing attempts being made to retrieve any still-missing property.

Brackett said investigators went back to the subdivision the day after the arrest, on April 25, to let residents there know what had happened with the individuals who had put everyone on edge.

“They were vigilant – they were helping us and wanted them caught, too,” Brackett said of the neighbors. “They were certainly appreciative when Lt. Walker and Sgt. Pilote went out and told them that they had gotten both of them in custody.”

Given the rapid succession of these crimes, Sgt. Pilote believes the Sheriff’s Office – with help from an eagle-eyed hiker and residents keeping an eye on their neighborhood – potentially stopped a burglary spree before it could really get going.

“We rely on the citizens just as much as they do us to help us solve a lot of this stuff, because we can’t be everywhere all the time,” Pilote said. “And who knows – a small tip may be a major break, like in this case.”

Added Brackett, “We were aggressively working the case. Sheriff (Shawn) Dyer is not going to put up with burglaries and thefts. We’re not going to leave any stone unturned. We’re going to work and follow every lead we possibly can between Road Patrol, Narcotics and Investigation.

“If you’re committing thefts and burglaries, our job is to put you in jail. That’s what Sheriff Dyer wants us to do, and that’s what we’re going to do.”

The above individuals are presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

studies.

The College has four academic divisions: Fine Arts; Humanities; Mathematics, Science, and Technology; and Professional Studies.

Approximately 1,400 students are enrolled in its residential and Early College programs.

The College is an active member of the NCAA Division II and remains a fierce competitor in the Conference Carolinas.

For more information, visit yhc.edu.

Farmers Market Trail...from Page 1A

be Beef Day at the market, so people should come hungry.

But the initiative needs help from the public.

Blue Ridge Mountain SWCD Chairman Mickey Cummings is asking folks to submit old photos showcasing work by local farmers of yesteryear. Particularly, he is seeking pictures of sweet sorghum production but will be grateful for any old photos of local agriculture being practiced.

Photos can be submitted to Sole Commissioner Harold Collins' office inside the Union County Courthouse, where they will be scanned and promptly returned. Cummings hopes people can share biographical information about the individuals pictured so they can be honored by name.

These photos will be used as part of a trail marker program, to feature four signs along the trail highlighting local historical information. A QR code will be available on each sign for trail guests to scan and be directed to a website for more information, including access to the photos.

"I would like to have a photograph of everybody that grew sweet sorghum back in the day so that we can put it behind this QR code," Cummings said. "Any production practices – if you've got pictures of cooking the sorghum, taking the seed heads off, planting sorghum, we want that."

"But also, we'd like to have some pictures of some of our vegetable production, like the folks that grew early collards. If you've got a picture of somebody processing hogs

back in the day or stacking hay – that was something that was really important, and we want all those things."

Located on the east side of the market, everything about the roughly half-mile walking trail pays homage to the agricultural roots of Union County and the North Georgia Mountains.

Visitors will find plenty to ponder about the past, such as historically significant crops grown on plots adjoining the trail – pears, apples, peaches, figs, Indian tobacco, Cherokee Trail of Tears beans, field corn – plus many varieties of native plants that wind their way along the path.

Then there are the four historical signposts that will be installed soon for people to read all about the history of mountain agriculture and the story of Union County.

Sign topics range from the days of subsistence farming to market development; facts about the 1832 Georgia Land Lottery; info on Native American Place Names; and even details about medicinal plants and naturally growing foods available in "Butternut Creek's Wild Pantry."

As people make their way down the gravel trail before or after a visit to the market, they can sit for a spell on any of several benches overlooking the trail and take the time to imagine the many peoples who once populated Union County.

The trail ends at the Hunter-England Cabin and Farmstead, where visitors will find even more history on display, including one of the

oldest houses in the county, a heritage garden, a Blacksmith Shop, a shed with antique equipment, a tobacco-drying barn and a smokehouse.

Of course, this heritage project would not have been possible without extensive collaboration, which started with a conversation between friends.

A few years ago, Cummings – a retired local ag agent and former manager of the Farmers Market – got in touch with Frank Riley, who leads the Chestatee-Chattahoochee RC&D and owns Mountain Scene Farms in Towns County that has been in his family since 1857.

"Frank and I love mountain agriculture, but the times are changing so quickly, people are going to forget our heritage of growing things," Cummings said. "I'm just afraid, with everything that's going on with all the development, that people are going to forget about farming."

To further preserve the community's legacy, both in terms of farming and all the people who came before – the Cherokee, early settlers, those who rushed here in the Land Lottery and later – the men planned to do something special at the Farmers Market.

"We want to honor those individuals, and we want people to know the story of the land development here in Union and Towns counties," Cummings said.

With their goal cemented, the idea sprouted into a heritage trail tying into the farmstead, to serve as a perfect chance to provide

more for visitors to do at the Farmers Market while keeping the history of the area alive for future generations.

But the trail wasn't going to make itself; enter the partnerships. Riley put in for an NRCS grant, and State Conservationist Terrance Rudolph handled the proposal himself. After a brief back and forth with Washington, the project was totally funded via a grant award of \$128,000.

Conservation nonprofit MountainTrue came out to help clear plots and identify native plants, and the Commissioner's Office got involved in a big way, providing design work courtesy of County Project Manager Mike Thomason as well as layout and grading by the Road Department.

Commissioner Collins, a farmer himself who grew sorghum for years and watched his dad make syrup for decades, put his signature on the trail by coming up with the idea to grow a patch of cane for live cooking to promote the new Sorghum in the Mountains Festival each October.

This prompted Riley to get to work acquiring both a mill to grind the harvested sorghum cane and a copper pan to cook the syrup, the latter of which has been expertly restored by resident Paul Reeves, whom Cummings described as a genius able to build anything.

Building modifications and final assembly of the syrup-making facility are still needed, but everything should be ready in time for cooking demonstrations ahead of the festival this fall.

Last week, Cummings and Riley thanked all the partners involved in the collaboration, including the county, and Collins offered his appreciation right back for the men's efforts to bring the trail to fruition – and their procurement of funding, requiring no local tax dollars to be spent.

"It's good to partner up with them," Collins said. "They're great guys, they know a lot, and they want to share a lot with the community and the visitors that come out there to see the heritage of Union County and learn a little about farming, sorghum and native plants."

Farmers Market Manager Dustin "Rog" Rogers said the trail has already attracted plenty of walkers, and he looks forward to the orchard growing up over time to produce fruit grown right there at the market and trail.

"People come to the Farmers Market on Saturdays, and we're hoping they'll make a day of it and venture on up to the trail, to the Blacksmith Shop, the old England Cabin, and just check all that out on Saturdays also," Rogers said.

Rep. Clyde's CRA to overturn costly Biden-Era Energy Standards passes Senate

Congressman Andrew Clyde (GA-09) released the following statement after his Congressional Review Act (CRA) joint resolution of disapproval, H.J.Res. 42, passed the Senate by a vote of 52-46.

The resolution, which passed the House of Representatives with bipartisan support last month, rescinds the Biden-Harris Administration's final rule that put additional

costs and red tape on appliance manufacturers, with consumers bearing the ultimate cost.

"I applaud the Senate for passing my commonsense resolution to reverse Biden's DOE energy efficiency standards that place needless red tape on manufacturers, limit consumer choice, and increase prices for hardworking Americans," said Clyde. "Both consumers and manu-

facturers are sick and tired of Washington bureaucrats raising costs and stifling innovation through unnecessary mandates. Thankfully, Congress is taking critical steps to repeal harmful regulations that the Biden-Harris Administration forced on our country. I look forward to H.J.Res. 42 arriving on President Trump's desk for his signature so we can overturn yet another burdensome Biden-era rule for the American people."

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Day of Prayer Service...from Page 1A

focusing on the things in life that are not promised and are outside of simple human control – living to see another day, for one, or the subtle ways in which God blesses people every day who may be overlooked.

A moment of silence followed for the service itself so that attendees could send their wishes for a truly helpful and hopeful program to the Lord.

Coosa Methodist Pastor Bill Burch handled the Prayer for Church, which lifted up the very worship of Jesus Christ through the ages and honored not just the ones who currently teach the Gospel, but also those who came before.

Coming from the First Baptist Church of Andrews, North Carolina, was Pastor Calvin Bobo, a former missionary to Ukraine who ministered the Prayer for World Missions. Calling on the Bible's instructions to love thy neighbor on local and international levels, Bobo's hope was for Christians to stand up and share the Gospel freely to reach those who truly need it.

The pastor of Blairsville's own First Baptist, Ricky Powell, presided over the Prayer for Israel and the Middle East. Powell prayed for security over the holy city of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel at large. That desire for peace extended to the entirety of the Middle East, or "wherever war may rage," including over innocent Palestinians not involved with Hamas in Gaza.

Haywood returned to the podium for the Prayer for Family. Citing his work in counseling, Haywood asked God to bring peace to struggling families, allowing fathers to act as spiritual guides to their families, mothers to stand strong while acting with tenderness, and children to grow up in households that provide positive influence to bring them closer to God.

Similarly, Youth and Young Adults Pastor Andrew Rogers of Hiawassee's McConnell Memorial Baptist Church offered up the Prayer for Youth.

Although he recognized



Given his role on the Appalachian Christian Leadership Council, District Attorney Jeff Langley led the Prayer for Education.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

that the younger generations may seem difficult to reach, he has seen firsthand that they have great potential and a willingness to follow God's path for their lives. Further, Rogers prayed for the Lord's support of people who care for and shape the world's young minds.

Before continuing in prayer, Ben Goza and Ryleigh and Katelyn Elver took to the stage to perform Passion's "Fall Like Rain." Goza's piano-playing and the Elvers' singing drew measured, appreciative nods at their talent and the peace-affirming message their song shared.

While Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce President Steve Rowe gently teased that it was a bit intimidating to follow the messages of ministers that evening, he nonetheless inspired hope with his Prayer for Business.

Focusing on the community and those who support it, Rowe prayed for the Lord's guidance for business owners and a hope that He would resolve the issues that prevent people who want to work from pursuing stable careers.

A newcomer to First Baptist's National Day of Prayer, Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw was invited to share the Prayer for Government.

Before praying,

Bradshaw read aloud what the Bible said good leadership looked like, choosing passages that say authorities should practice an abundance of godliness and dignity, as "wicked government can lead to societal decay." The prayer itself called for wise council and God's presence among government leaders not just on a local level, but across the country and around the world.

For the Prayer for Military, Air Force veteran and retired Master Sgt. Ingrid Engle bid those who serve the country to hand their souls to God and trust in the Lord's unconditional love. On a more personal level, she was thankful that the community is so accommodating to veterans, calling herself "blessed."

As the Chair of the Appalachian Christian Leadership Council, Jeff Langley delivered the Prayer for Education over public school teachers, homeschooling parents and guardians, and anyone helping children grow through scripture.

Speaking of scripture, Langley noted that the Bible urges older generations to take the initiative to mentor and nurture the young; he hopes to see more people adopt that approach today.

Dave Wesche, retired pastor of All Saints Lutheran Church, shaped the Prayer for Media into a stirring cry for truth. Jesus, too, stands for truth and instructs His followers to spread the truth of the world as well as the truth of the Gospel.

To close the service, Lawrie once again led the congregation in song, encouraging them to display their love for Christ through "My Jesus, I Love Thee," a poem penned by William Ralph Featherston and put to song. It was a powerful moment, with people lifting their palms toward Heaven to testify.

After the service concluded, Schroeder divulged that she was confident Jack would have been proud of this year's National Day of Prayer service, but more importantly, she agreed that the Lord was present and worked through His followers that night.

The Union County Historical Society Celebrates Success



First Annual Blairsville Music & Seafood Festival

With several thousand visitors participating in the First Annual Blairsville Music & Seafood Festival on April 25, 26, and 27, the Union County Historical Society is celebrating a very successful venture. President Mike Cook estimates that there were approximately 4,000 people during the beautiful three-day festival.

Director of the Mountain Life Museum (also called the Mock House) Kathleen Cook welcomed everyone to the 1906 Grapelle Butt Mock House, 1861 Payne Cabin, and the mid-1800's barns. Visitors not only enjoyed delicious seafood dishes, but they listened to various musicians on the front porch and shopped at local vendor tents. The children enjoyed the bouncy house and panning for gold and gemstones. There were old-time activities for visitors to enjoy such as butter-churning, quilt-making, demonstration of old tools, and a talk about the 1840s Collins cabin being reconstructed.

Mike Cook is very grateful to all the sponsors, participants, and volunteers that made this Spring event a delight to people in the North Georgia mountains. The Union County Historical Society has been preserving local history since 1976, and they are dedicated to maintaining both the 1899 historic courthouse on the Blairsville square and the Mountain Life Museum. They present various events and activities to promote area history and raise money to maintain the buildings. The latest project is rebuilding the Collins cabin from the Choestoe district. This cabin will be used for educational purposes and concerts on



its porch.

Some other events include concerts, lectures, presentations, and the Heritage Festival during Labor Day Weekend. With the great success of the First Annual Blairsville Music & Seafood Festival, the Historical Society will be able to fund several of its building and maintenance projects.

President Mike Cook thanks everyone who worked so hard to make this festival a successful occasion.

Correction:

In a recent article detailing a joint celebration of the 1971 and 2025 State Runner-Up Panther Men's Basketball Teams, a member of the 1971 team, Ray Sneed, was listed as deceased.

Mr. Sneed called the North Georgia News last week to say that he was very much alive and currently living in Bowersville, Georgia. Apologies to Mr. Sneed.

Town Hall Meeting...from Page 1A

research.

He will continue the efforts started last year when Union County Government and the City of Blairsville went through the process of joining the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing program to better enable the county to study and plan for affordable housing.

The commissioner was asked about his campaign idea to impose impact fees on new development, and he said he would be studying the issue over potentially two years to determine if offsetting the effects of new development on county services would best be served by impact fees.

There will be no action on impact fees until his office has finished studying their use, and his early thinking is that impact fees, if imposed, might only be levied against the development of very large homes of more than 5,000 square feet.

He clarified that affordable housing should not be confused with Section 8 low-income housing, and he said the county would be looking into both homes and rentals that fall under affordable housing criteria as well as examining the balance of short-term versus long-term rentals.

Asked if he would consider touring “affordable housing” in other communities, which the questioner said usually trended toward decline, he said his volunteer affordable housing committee would be doing just that.

GROWTH

Addressing growth, Collins said he was not planning to stop it but was very much interested in managing growth and perhaps slowing it down.

“The growth is coming, and the best we can do as leadership and citizens is to plan for any coming growth,” Collins said. “Planning should include everyone in the community, or at least people from all different walks of life.

“Planning for this growth and what we see in our community as the future should not just be unmanaged building, development and businesses that don’t fit what everyone wants in Blairsville to be.”

Collins called for a “common ground” between people who don’t want any growth and those who desire “off the charts, unhinged growth” that becomes burdensome on local resources.

“While I am and have been looking for ways to decrease the budget, I am not looking at doing anything that will adversely impact local businesses,” Collins said.

One attendee said she appreciates Collins’ approach to growth, commenting that the county has seen an influx in traffic and many changes in the last few decades that have made her concerned about the potential for increased crime in a county this size.

DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

Broaching the subject of the Union County Development Authority, which he dissolved in February, Collins said a new authority should be formed this month, to be comprised of an expanded board that is “more diverse” – and without an executive director, at least to start.

“My goals currently for this board are to focus mainly on manufacturing industries that will bring potential skill-based careers to Union County, along with higher wage jobs,” Collins said. “I have no plans at all to anything that will negatively impact tourism.

“I realize that tourism is basically the bread and butter of our community. Sales tax is the fairest form of tax, and if we can do something to increase sales and sales tax, I am all for that.”

Responding to questions, Collins said the new board will have to report its business to him, with member recusal from decisions involving conflicts of interest, and he will be considering term limits for the volunteer board members whom he will be hand-picking.

SPLOST

Turning to the voter-approved sales tax, Collins said there were several SPLOST-funded projects currently in progress: the new 911 Center on Shoe Factory Road, the hospital roundabout, road paving, Canada Creek Bridge replacement in Suches and the Byers Road emergency exit.

The \$3.8 million 911 Center was set to begin construction May 5, to take about a year to complete, said SPLOST Project Manager Kevin Hamby, who sat on the panel. The county will use \$1.3 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds to outfit the building with new equipment.

A question arose about the construction of a new jail, and County Purchasing Agent Pam Hawkins said a new jail would likely require an entire SPLOST of its own, which has not yet been proposed or voted on, and there are no plans to build one at this time, though the county does own property for a future jail site.

It came out in the meeting that SPLOST will be up for renewal by voters in May of 2026.

BUSINESS LICENSES

The commissioner floated an idea of expanding business licenses in the county, which Union County Government currently only requires for short-term rentals. He said a business owner had complained he was losing out on deals because he could not provide a county business license.

Collins said revenue from implementing business licenses countywide could, for example, go toward assisting the struggling Union County Senior Center or reducing property taxes, and that the license fee would not have to be high to benefit the county financially.

Tax Commissioner Lee Knight, a panel member, said a license requirement could enable the county to hold businesses accountable to their intended land use as well as take a more accurate inventory of taxable equipment used by businesses to potentially lower property taxes.

Kurt Tangel of Georgia Mass Appraisal Solutions & Services, who works with the Tax Assessor’s Office, said business licenses would help new businesses conduct market research into the history of what businesses have been here and whether they failed or succeeded.

Several attendees spoke out against such a requirement, which they felt would be a financial burden on local business owners who already must register with the state. Collins said nothing was set in stone and he was just seeking feedback at this time.

SENIOR CENTER

Transitioning to a hot topic, Collins highlighted the turmoil experienced this year by the Senior Center, which has had to take austerity measures after expanding its meal program in recent years following an influx of COVID stimulus funds that have now been exhausted.

Donations have decreased as well, so the funding challenges have caused the Senior Center, under the management of nonprofit Legacy Link, to have to scale back some of its meal services to manage costs.

“Currently, Union County Government provides Legacy Link with a building known as the Union County Senior Center,” Collins said. “It provides maintenance at all the buildings at approximately \$60,000 annually.

“It provides \$109,000 towards salaries. And it has recently obtained additional property from North Georgia Technical College for expanding the center’s parking lot. This parking expansion was a direct request of center attendees.”

Collins said it takes about \$545,000 to run the Senior Center “above and beyond” the facility costs, with federal and state contributions coming in at roughly \$192,000.

“When you subtract the federal and state contributions, it takes approximately \$353,000 to run the center based on 2024 numbers,” Collins said. “In 2024, the center raised \$28,493 in attendee donations and \$22,000 in outside donations.

“Normally, the center maintains a reserve to cover unexpected costs, but the Union County facility does not have the normal reserve due to the purchase of an additional van for the Meals on Wheels program.”

As noted above, the lack of funds this year has resulted in the meal program being trimmed, with a need-based scoring system being implemented to direct funding to those who need it most and fewer meals being offered each week.

“There has been some discussion of the county making up the difference, and there has been some discussion of leaving things as they are for the time being,” Collins said, asking for feedback. “I do know that a new manager was hired, and her first day on the job was yesterday.”

Several residents expressed their belief that the county could and should do more to provide for the many local seniors who rely on the center for food, socialization, exercise and more, with a general sentiment being that coming up with assistance options was a county responsibility.

Collins said he wants to be careful doling out taxpayer dollars, especially to an outside organization, and he suggested his office could help with community-based fundraisers to fill some of the funding gap while encouraging residents to make donations.

SORGHUM FESTIVAL

The commissioner once more discussed plans to host a sorghum-centric festival after the longstanding Blairsville Sorghum Festival was “permanently shut down” by organizers earlier this year.

Collins announced a new nonprofit run by volunteers who will be coordinating with other groups to host the Sorghum in the Mountains Festival at Meeks Park the usual second and third weekends in October, with proceeds to go “back into the community” where need is determined.

He said the new festival’s first year would require the county to pitch in “startup costs” from hotel-motel tax revenues, but that this money would eventually be reimbursed by the festival.

Chamber President Steve Rowe clarified that the re-branded tradition will be staying essentially the same to honor the agricultural heritage of both the festival and the area, noting that vendor fees and admission pricing will remain unchanged.

COUNTY BUDGET

County Finance Director Kay Wilcox announced Collins’ plan to implement “zero-based” budgeting starting with the 2026 Budget, to require each department to budget from zero each fiscal year to ensure that all costs are justified and not just carried over from the last budget.

Wilcox also detailed plans for what she referred to as a transparency-minded “priority-based budget,” saying that public feedback on this new style of budgeting would be solicited via multiple future surveys.

“We are going to get input from the citizens to determine what your priorities are, whether it be public safety, housing, (recreation) – any of the services that are provided,” Wilcox said. “And then our job in finance and the department heads and elected officials is to align our budget with your priorities.

“This is going to be a two or three-year process to be able to perfect the overall priority-based budget and to get where we need to be, but we are going to do that beginning now as we prepare for the 2026 Budget.”

A resident asked if the county would give a line-item account of each department to better inform the public about what they might want to prioritize, and while Wilcox said the county could do that, she emphasized that the Commissioner’s Office was not wanting “to sell the community on particular priorities” but get honest feedback without influencing folks in the process.

FINAL COMMENTS

The Union County School Board did not have a participant in the town hall, but Board Member Jason McCarter attended as a member of the public and ended up addressing those gathered as “a concerned citizen that happens to serve on the School Board.”

McCarter responded to a few attendee comments, explaining first that the board did not join the panel because no single member speaks for the group and that three or more members in the same room legally constitutes a quorum, which they only make for School Board meetings.

He wanted to clarify three

things he had heard about the schools that evening, starting with the fact that the only reason school taxes make up two-thirds of property tax bills is because the county benefits from a Local Option Sales Tax that provides a rollback to lower property taxes.

Regarding the roughly \$38 million in school reserves, he said that money had built up in recent years from federal COVID funds, plus the 2023 partial rollback property tax increase to offset a mandatory health care hike, but those reserves should be spent down some in the coming years.

Responding to an attendee mentioning a \$1 million lawsuit against the schools, McCarter said the board “can’t comment on lawsuits.”

“Attorneys tell us not to,” McCarter continued. “That’s not what you do, that’s not a professional way of handling something ... we’re going to go through the process. It’s public record, just like any complaint.”

The last public commenter thanked the commissioner and people on the panel for hosting the meeting, adding that, with all the change he has seen as a lifelong resident, “we still have a wonderful community that everyone, seemingly, wants to come to and live in,” and he encouraged all present to “continue to find ways to live and work together.”

Before closing the meeting, Collins called on Sheriff Shawn Dyer and Fire Chief/EMA/911 Director David Dyer to offer reports on their respective agencies. They indicated that the county is as busy as ever but that first responders remain hard at work protecting lives and properties.

Overall, the event appeared to be a big success. Plenty of passion was on display, with many opinions being offered and questions being asked and answered, but no exchanges got heated, and a grateful Collins said he plans to host additional town halls in the future.

Sons of Confederate Veterans Meeting

David W. Payne Camp 1633, Sons of Confederate Veterans meets the second Thursday of every month at 7 PM, at the Davenport Veterans Building, across the 4-lane from Longhorn Steakhouse in Blairsville. The public is welcome to attend.