

Commissioner Paris amends FY17 budget to reflect overages

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Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris approved a resolution to amend the FY 2017 county budget in his regular commission meeting on Thursday, June 21.

As previously reported, the county was expecting to have to amend the 2017 budget to reflect significant underbudgeting.

The FY17 budget was amended from \$15.2 million to \$17.5 million, indicating an overage of about \$2.3 million due to increased costs in health insurance, advantageous property acquisitions, decreased tax collections, sheriff's office inmate housing overages and other increases.

Paris said that, in next month's county meeting, "auditors will present their auditors report, and they'll have a more detailed report."

The overages were paid for largely out of the county reserves last year, reflected in the FY17 beginning fund balance of \$5.33 million – the largest ever county fund balance – and FY17 ending fund balance of \$3.34 million.

Paris said the county expects to replenish that balance this coming year unless



Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris in his June 21 regular county meeting at the county courthouse.

Photo by Mark Novak

healthcare costs continue to rise.

In other business, Paris granted a sewer line easement to the City of Blairsville to make way for two upcoming construction projects.

"I hereby accept the sanitary sewer line easement given to the City of Blairsville for Union County for a permanent 20-foot easement for the right to construct, operate and maintain underground sanitation sewer lines across property owned

by Union County," said Paris. "The easement area to the City of Blairsville is 0.134 acres located along the edge of Butternut Creek Golf Course.

"This is for the purpose of the city to provide sewer access to the new apartment complex, and somebody is building a church out that way... so, we're excited about that."

Paris accepted a \$2,997 Fireworks Tax Grant from the

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Hands-Free...from Page 1A

through the vehicle's radio is allowed, just keep in mind that activating or programming music streaming apps must be done before hitting the road.

There are several important exceptions built into the law, though drivers must remain free of distractions while employing an exception.

These exceptions include:

1. The reporting of a traffic crash, medical emergency, fire, criminal activity or hazardous road condition.

2. Employees or contractors of utility service providers acting within the scope of their employment while responding to a utility emergency.

3. First responders, i.e. law enforcement officers, firefighters and paramedics during the performance of their official duties.

4. When in a lawfully parked vehicle, which does not include vehicles stopped for traffic signals and stop signs on the public roadway.

According to GOHS, the Georgia Department of

Public Safety and local law enforcement have the option of issuing warnings for violations as part of the effort to educate and to help motorists adapt to the new law.

"However, citations can and will be issued starting July 1 for any violation of the Hands-Free Law, including those where the violation involves a traffic crash," according to Heads UP Georgia. "There is not a 90-day grace period provision in the Hands-Free Law."

In Union County, residents should fully expect to be held accountable for obeying all laws, including the new Hands-Free Law.

"We will have the option to enforce it, to write a ticket or not write a ticket," said Union County Sheriff Mack Mason. "If someone is involved in an accident, they can bet their bottom dollar that they'll be scrutinized to the fullest extent."

"And if there's any evidence that they were on the phone and were violating the law, then they will be cited for

such."

The Blairsville Police Department will be implementing a 30-day grace period before officers begin to write tickets under the new law.

"We may stop and give warnings, and just kind of educate folks on it, but after 30 days, we're going to enforce it," said Blairsville Assistant Police Chief Michael Baxter.

Everyone who is convicted under the new law will be guilty of a misdemeanor.

A person's first conviction in a 24-month period, as measured between offenses, will result in a \$50 fine and one point on their license.

A second conviction in a 24-month period will be a \$100 fine and two points on a license.

Third and subsequent convictions in a 24-month period will result in \$150 fines and three points on a license.

If someone gets a ticket for violating the law and it's their first time, they may appear in court with a hands-free device or proof of purchase for such a device, at which point they will be found not guilty.

Storms...from Page 1A

weather-related outages on a near-daily basis.

But thanks to the hardworking men and women of the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, power is always restored in a timely manner.

EMC members can now access the live outage map found under the "Useful Links" area on the BRMEMC.com homepage.

According to the latest weather patterns and forecasts, area residents could be in for stormy weather for a while longer.

Appropriately enough, last week served as National Lightning Safety Awareness

Week, June 24 through June 30, sponsored by the Lightning Safety Council.

According to Weather.gov, thunderstorms typically develop in the early afternoon, and people should make plans according to the most up-to-date forecasts.

It is never safe to be outside during a thunderstorm, and those who find themselves in dangerous outdoor weather conditions would do well to adhere to the following advice from the National Weather Service.

Avoid open fields, the top of a hill or a ridge top.

Stay away from tall,

isolated trees or other tall objects. If in a forest, stay near a lower stand of trees.

If in a group, spread out to avoid the current traveling between group members.

If camping in an open area, set up camp in a valley, ravine or other low area. A tent offers no protection from lightning.

Stay away from water, wet items, such as ropes, and metal objects, such as fences and poles. Water and metal do not attract lightning, but they are excellent conductors of electricity. The current from a lightning flash will easily travel for long distances.

Gunter...from Page 1A

appointments to committees, and budgetary oversight of different funds and the annual budget, stuff like that.

"It's more administrative work as a chief judge added on to what you already do as a regular judge."

The Habersham County native's ascendance to superior court chief judge is fitting, given that his father was Chief Judge Jack Norman Gunter of the Mountain Judicial Circuit.

At the time, the Mountain Circuit was made up of Union, Towns, Rabun, Stephens and Habersham counties. The Enotah Judicial Circuit came into existence not long after Gunter's father retired in 1992, and Towns and Union joined Lumpkin and White to form the new four-county circuit.

Like his fellow judges Miller and George, Gunter attended the Woodrow Wilson College of Law, and when he became a member of the State Bar of Georgia in 1986, his dad swore him in to the practice of law.

He got his first job as an attorney in the spring of '87, working for Gov. Joe Frank Harris as his assistant executive council, and later, his executive council. And when Gov. Harris left office in 1991, Gunter

moved to Blairsville to practice law with local attorney Charles Cory.

After working with Cory for a few months, Gunter struck out on his own and ran a private legal practice for several years until he decided to answer a calling for public service.

He ran for election as district attorney in 1998 and won in a multi-candidate field, becoming DA of the Enotah Judicial Circuit in 1999. Gunter served in that capacity for three terms before leaving office in December 2010.

Following an unsuccessful bid for election to the Georgia Court of Appeals, he accepted a job with the Prosecuting Attorneys' Council of Georgia, and he soon found himself leading the organization as executive director.

He remained there for about a year and a half before applying for a vacant judgeship on the Enotah Judicial Circuit in 2012, and Gov. Nathan Deal selected Gunter for the position.

Two years later, in 2014, Gunter ran for and won re-election to his seat, and he ran again and won re-election this year, so he will be sworn in for another term come January 2019.

Many of his most rewarding experiences as a judge have come from overseeing the functions of the Enotah Drug Court, and Gunter believes that accountability programs like Drug Court and Mental Health Court are crucial aspects of criminal justice reform.

"This could be the way we deal with criminal cases and other types of cases where you have these repeat offenders and people that continue to have problems," said Gunter. "These courts can identify the issues that cause that in a lot of instances, and hopefully give these people the tools so that they can change their lives and not have to keep coming back into court."

"It won't replace the criminal justice system that we have, but it'll be a big tool that we can use for the future."

Off the bench, Gunter is an avid golfer, and he will be celebrating 36 years of marriage to his wife Rita this July. He and Rita have two grown sons, Chase and Trey, and four grandchildren.

Gov. Deal is currently in the process of selecting a replacement to fill the remaining two and a half years of Judge Miller's term, and Chief Judge Gunter looks forward to welcoming the new judge to the Enotah Judicial Circuit.