

North Georgia News

2 Sections 24 Pages

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BOE talks safety; schools schedule safety review

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Sept. 17 regular meeting of the Union County Board of Education featured discussions about safety in the wake of the devastating Apalachee High School shooting and similar threats made across the state in recent weeks.

According to Assistant Superintendent Dr. David Murphy, the system's safety plans were revamped after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, and Superintendent John Hill said that even more measures have been taken since 2018 to enhance safety.

"(Safety) is in every facet of what we do daily, from internet safety, playground safety, food safety, trip and fall hazards, including the worst tragedy you can think of," Hill said. "We would like to (reassure) everyone that it's not just a 'check the box' thing."

And while there are safety plans in place, Hill did not feel comfortable sharing them with the public to keep such precious information from falling into the wrong hands.

"For years," the school system has partnered with local organizations such as the Union County Fire Department and worked closely with the Union County Sheriff's Office and its own School Police Department

to ensure students can learn in peace.

"I think sometimes, the general public – they see the news and they see the horrific events that happen across our country, and they think, 'Gosh, this is terrible. We need to really think about school safety.' And they're correct, but we think about school safety every day," Hill added.

That also involves checking and double checking those precautions outside of regular school hours, as a healthy dose of caution can prevent the most frightening scenarios. And part of that includes monitoring student mental health and providing

See School Safety, Page 2A



Union County School Board Members Janna Akins, Julia Barnett, Patrick White and Jason McCarter in their Sept. 17 regular meeting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Coosa Methodist Church celebrates turning 190

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

An intriguing thought exercise is to wonder how many of the early Coosa Church attendees of yesteryear would believe that, 190 years later, dozens of descendants and their friends would continue to "keep the Flame alive" – and add on to their beloved little chapel to make it a fully-fledged community church.

On Sept. 15, Coosa Methodist Church celebrated its 190th Homecoming, accomplishing just that. Congregants revisited history and welcomed faces new and old amid worship and fellowship, enjoying a grand

dinner after Sunday services held right beside artifacts of the past.

Coosa's story began all the way back in the 19th century when Charles Duncan, a North Carolina local, moved to Union County's Coosa District in 1833 "at the time the stars fell," referencing a historic meteor shower. A man of faith, devout Duncan sought to enlighten the North Georgia Mountains to Methodism.

Duncan and wife Mary Ford raised 12 children, five of whom married members of the Gillespie family; many Gillespies attend Coosa to this day, and even had a pew set aside for them during 2024's Homecoming.

No records exist to pinpoint Coosa Church's original location, but it's said that the first worship services were held on the Duncan property around 1834. What is known is that Coosa was recognized in official documents dating back to 1849 as part of a quarterly conference of Methodist churches in the Blairsville Circuit.

By 1865, the church was erected at its present location on what is now known as Mulky Gap Road. It was originally described as "simple, Spartan and utilitarian but nestled in a beautiful location (and) accessible to the members by foot or by horse and buggy."

See Coosa Homecoming, Page 6A



At 190 years old, the historic Coosa Methodist Church has been around nearly since the time of the county's founding and is showing no signs of slowing down. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

County discusses proposed property assessment cap

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

In the Sept. 19 regular meeting of Union County Commissioner Lamar Paris, County Clerk Jennifer Mahan presented information on the proposed "floating homestead exemption" that will appear on statewide ballots this year to potentially amend the Georgia Constitution.

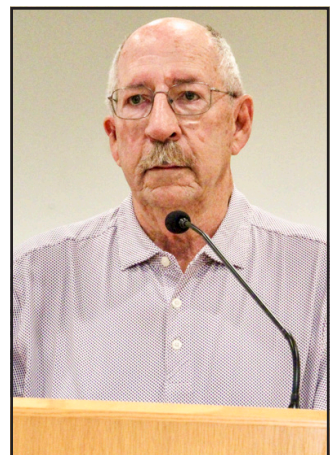
If passed, the proposed constitutional amendment would create a new homestead exemption to cap assessment increases on homesteaded properties at 3% annually

beginning on Jan. 1, 2025.

State lawmakers enabled the referendum this year by passing House Bill 581 and House Resolution 1022, and though there is an "opt-out" provision for governing authorities, Paris said he was in favor of the new exemption and urged local voters to support it.

The proposed cap comes as welcome news to many homeowners, who have seen the values of their properties rise dramatically in recent years due largely to an inflated real estate market driven by COVID-19 pandemic-era

See County Meeting, Page 12A



Lamar Paris
Sole Commissioner

Leah Cox crowned 2024 Homecoming Queen



Congratulations to UCHS senior Leah Cox for making 2024 Homecoming Queen, pictured here with her proud father Gerald on the football field Friday. Photo by Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County High School senior Leah Cox dedicated her 2024-25 Homecoming Crown to her

UCHS bandmates following her coronation on Friday, Sept. 20, at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

"I was very surprised (when they announced my name as the queen) since I come

from the band," the drum major said following the homecoming festivities. "Some people look down on the band, but they don't realize how amazing the band people can be.

See Homecoming Queen, Page 2A

City Council prepares to set 2024 property tax rate



Blairsville City Council Members Kayla Hemphill and Tony Dyer voting on city business in their September regular meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Blairsville City Council and Mayor Jim Conley will hold a called meeting on Wednesday, Sept. 25, at 5:30 p.m. inside City Hall to conduct a first reading of the city's 2024 Millage Rate Ordinance.

Because the city adopts its property tax rate via ordinance, the council must

meet twice to do so, and the second reading and subsequent enactment of the ordinance setting the millage rate will be on Oct. 2 at 5:30 p.m.

Last week, the city advertised a 2024 rollback rate of 1.117, which matches the rate from 2023. Even with the same rate, the city will lose \$11,561 in tax revenues compared with 2023, as the net property digest dropped

slightly from last year.

The city raises a relatively small amount in property taxes, so the loss actually represents a 9.65% drop in property tax revenues versus last year, with a total levy of just \$119,843 in 2024.

Without the rollback from the permanent Local Option Sales Tax, which most counties and cities in Georgia enjoy. See City Council, Page 2A



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School Safety...from Page 1A

resources to help.

"(The community) says, 'What have you done? What are you doing?' I said, 'Well, a lot of it has already been done,'" remarked Board Member Jason McCarter, noting that risk management is a large part of the average game plan. "You can't prepare for everything, but we are working to be ready."

School Police Chief Scott Deyton revealed that recent local shooting threats were little more than rumors. What started as threats to systems in other counties was passed along to Union County students through social media, and through a sort of "telephone game," morphed into word of local schools being in danger.

Along with the involvement of adults in and out of the school system, Director of Teaching and Learning C.T. Hussion revealed that some schools have student support groups so that those suffering from issues like anxiety can find help among their peers.

"There's a lot more (in place) than people really even think about," Hussion said. "We definitely have to look at what we do and how we can get better, but we work very hard to recognize the issues and work with them."

Even with all of these resources in place, Hill suggested holding an additional online learning day to go over

safety drills and offer additional staff training on campus. The board was open to the idea, and the date was announced the very next day.

"Union County Schools will observe an online learning day on Friday, September 27th, 2024," a Facebook post reads. "This calendar change will give our staff the opportunity to engage in additional proactive training sessions and conduct a thorough review of our current safety practices and drills."

"Our goal is to ensure that everyone is fully prepared and that we continue to maintain the highest standards of safety for our students and staff. By taking this time to revisit our procedures in depth, we aim to keep our school community well-informed and ready for any situation."

"Thank you for your understanding and cooperation as we work together to keep our schools safe and well-prepared."

Also in the meeting last week, as expected, the School Board accepted the system's rollback millage rate for property taxes, setting a rate of 7.243 for a combined school/county property tax rate of 11.374 mills – a reduction of 0.435 mills compared to last year.

The news should be welcomed by property owners, especially considering how



John Hill
School Superintendent

2020's combined rate was 18.918 mills before the real estate market became inflated from pandemic-era move-ins to the area.

And despite dramatic, inflation-based increases to the property digest in recent years, 2024's rollback will result in just a 1.08% increase to school net tax revenues from an apparently cooling real estate market.

Hill advocates for "slow, steady growth," and says Union County Schools are doing the best they can in the face of rising costs of employee health care and salaries.

Now that the combined millage rate has been set, Tax Commissioner Lee Knight can start preparing property tax bills, which he anticipates will go out for mailing in the beginning of October with the same Dec. 20 due date as in years past.

City Council...from Page 1A

the city millage rate would be 16.422, so LOST considerably offsets the property tax levy to maintain and operate the City of Blairsville.

After the rate is set, property tax bills will be generated and printed for mailing to city property owners by Oct. 20. People who own property within city limits will also be receiving a separate bill for the county and school portion of the property taxes they owe.

Council members scheduled the called meeting dates to adopt the 2024 Millage Rate Ordinance in their Sept. 10 regular meeting, as City Hall did not receive this year's property digest figures in time to have the first reading that evening.

Also in the regular meeting this month, regarding the Blairsville Police Department, the council approved a \$12,150 purchase of body armor and carriers for personal protection, and \$7,282 in body-worn cameras for officers.

Along with the purchases, the council approved grant applications totaling \$8,341 to help offset the cost of the new police equipment, and City Hall is confident it will receive the grants.

The council promoted Dan Firebaugh from Assistant Manager to Manager of the Blairsville Municipal Airport. Firebaugh has been with the airport for four years and is taking over from Aaron Mannheim, who retired recently to focus on his health.



Dan Firebaugh was officially promoted to Airport Manager in the Sept. 10 city meeting. Firebaugh is a decorated pilot who has been working at the Blairsville Airport for the past four years.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Firebaugh was recently awarded the prestigious Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award by the Federal Aviation Administration for 57 years of flawless flight experience.

Council members approved the 2024-2025 Airport Liability Insurance renewal, up about 5% from last year, as well as the Georgia Municipal Employees Benefit System Group Insurance renewal for 2025, which is up about 20% over current rates, though local health claims have been decreasing recently, so rates shouldn't go up as much next year.

The council authorized Mayor Conley to execute documents required by the Georgia Department of Transportation to decrease the

speed limit from 45 mph to 40 mph on Georgia 515 inside city limits. With this approval, the new speed signs should go up soon, as previously reported.

Mayor Conley also proclaimed Sept. 30, 2024, as Georgia Reads Day in Blairsville, to emphasize the educational, economic and quality of life aspects of literacy and encourage community partnerships in promoting the same.

Additionally, the council authorized the mayor to execute a \$4,000 agreement with the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission to map the Old Blairsville Cemetery. The mapping project will result in a publicly available list of who is buried there and who has reserved lots.

Homecoming Queen...from Page 1A

"It feels good that my classmates voted for me, and it's an incredible feeling."

Cox edged out senior Sloane Dyer, First Runner-Up; senior Giovanna Salazar, Second Runner-Up; Avery Frechette, Junior Runner-Up; Elli Harper, Sophomore

Runner-Up; and Gabriella Perez, Freshman Runner-Up.

Katie Byers, the 2023-24 UCHS Homecoming Queen, crowned Cox to culminate the ceremony, which featured a 15-member court.

Others vying for the crown included Mady Adams,

Ella Akins, Abby Barrett, Lily Brookshire, Peyton Grisham, Leighton Hunter, Ava Serrano, Lucy Vinez and Grace Wright.

For more details on Cox's Homecoming victory, see the Sports Section inside this week's North Georgia News.

FERST Concert supporting Childhood Literacy



The Sons of the Pioneers Western singing group

Make plans NOW for a one-of-a-kind musical event in Blairsville - October 27th at 2 PM at the UCS Fine Arts Center, the Sons of the Pioneers western singing group will be performing.

General Admission tickets are \$42 and are available online at Eventbrite.com/The Sons of the Pioneers, and they are also available locally at

Carter Williams Insurance and Investments, Union County Chamber of Commerce, Pat's Hallmark, L&M Furniture, Union County Historical Society, and Young Harris Pharmacy - pay with cash or check only.

The winner of the "Trigger" painting raffle, which can be seen and tickets purchased at the United Community

Bank, will be announced during the concert.

100% of all proceeds will go to FERST Readers of Union County Childhood Literacy Program which furnishes a free book every month to any registered child in Union County ages birth to five years and helps to promote literacy through early childhood reading.

Coosa Homecoming...from Page 1A



Congregants broke bread with one another while enjoying a stroll down memory lane for the 190th Homecoming of Coosa Methodist Church on Sunday, Sept. 15.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

According to Evelyn Payne, the church saw a drop-off in members in the years following 1934 due to people leaving and joining local Baptist churches. Her Great-Uncle Thomas Gillespie is credited with keeping the Spirit alive in Coosa's storied walls.

Through decades of love and frequent use, the building was in dire need of repair after more than a century of standing tall, and in 1990, it was "gutted and remodeled." In 1994, a fellowship hall was added via a process compared to a traditional barn raising, with church members and the community contributing to its construction.

The congregation had outgrown its minimal space in the confines of the old church by the end of the 20th century, so in 1997, a new church was built. In addition, a parking lot was paved, the kitchen was enlarged, and a new nursery, office and even basement classrooms were added.

One can still visit the original building, filled with pews and a floor crafted from local pines. Today, it stands as a beautiful testament to the power of faith through the generations.

In the shadow of the old church sits the cemetery, marking the final resting place for those who laid Coosa's foundation. Their memories were alive and well

at Homecoming this month, when current members of the congregation sat down for dinner on the grounds.

At the corner of the fellowship hall, some of the paintings from the original church sanctuary were propped up, and mannequins donning preserved historical dresses displayed some of the finery that Coosa's founding members wore as their "Sunday best."

Austin Adams may be a new member to Coosa, but he's known about the church for quite some time. Before Adams moved to Blairsville full-time, he visited the mountains from Cobb County. He first heard about Coosa in 2004, when he was learning about the surroundings of the property he was looking into purchasing one day.

"I had passed by it, seems like a thousand times," Adams said. "So, I came once in May of '22 and fell in love with it."

His favorite part about Coosa is the people who welcomed him with open arms because they follow their faith so closely. It's given him a chance to meet like-minded people who remind him of the Christian way and keep him focused on the values that ground him.

Likewise, longtime member Pat Higgs observed, "Coosa has a special place in the hearts of most anybody that's ever been connected

to it, whether you're a 10th-generation of one of the original families or, like me, you've just been here for 11 years."

Patti Cook, known throughout the community, is another member of the church and has been attending for 18 years.

"My dream (was attending) the little white church," Cook revealed in similar fashion to Adams, speaking of her desire for a traditional home that favored old-school values and practiced strong faith. "I found it."

As part of the 190th Homecoming celebration, the well-known hymn "The Lighthouse" was featured in a special performance by Roger Stork, Randy Cook, Mike Bryant and David Steed.

Sue Upchurch, another prominent member and Coosa historian, took a moment to introduce past and present preachers before former pastor Rev. Jon Herrin delivered a message on the importance of looking forward.

"God is future focused," Herrin stated. "While God calls his people to remember the past, they are always walking forward into the future."

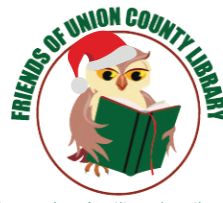
"We are a forward-looking people, always walking forward," he added, urging Coosa's family to always follow the Lord's path ahead as they forge their own stories in faith.



Local families gathered this month to celebrate Coosa Church's historic past and bright future.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Union County Library Everything Christmas Sale coming soon



Advocating for libraries, literacy and lifelong learning

Friends of Union County Library (FOUCL) members are getting ready to receive donations of your Christmas-related gently used items during the month of October. A drop-off bin will be located outside the Friend's Room door at Union County Public Library (303 Hunt Martin Street, Blairsville) beginning on Tuesday, October 1. You may drop off any time during the library's normal business hours. FOUCL members will be there to assist or answer any questions you may have on Mondays from 10 AM until Noon and Wednesdays from 1 PM to 3 PM beginning on October 2.

We are not accepting artificial trees over 3 feet tall, stuffed toys, or stained or broken items. So, what would we like: stockings and linens; holiday glasses, mugs, and plates; creches, Christmas crafts and fabrics; Christmas tree ornaments; Christmas wrapping



paper and gift bags; holiday cards and décor; Christmas candles and lanterns; Christmas books, CDs, puzzles, and magazines; Christmas wreaths, garlands, green, and floral centerpieces. Does it have a snowman, an angel, a nutcracker, or a poinsettia on it? We'll take it.

The sale will take place on Friday, November 1, from 10 AM until 4 PM and Saturday, November 2, from 10 AM

until Noon in the Community Room at Union County Public Library.

FOUCL's next membership meeting, open to all members and those who might be interested in joining, is Wednesday, October 16, beginning at 1 PM in the Community Room at Union County Public Library. We invite you to join us in advocating for libraries, literacy, and lifelong learning.

County Meeting...from Page 1A

relocations to the area.

For homes receiving the exemption starting next year, 2024 would stand as the base-year assessed value. Moving forward, the home would then reflect two values: the homesteaded value that is capped for taxing purposes, and the actual fair market value as it changes over time.

"The base year value may increase each year up to the inflationary rate determined by the State Revenue Commissioner, which may utilize the Consumer Price Index," according to information made available from the Association County Commissioners of Georgia.

So, annual values could increase from north of 0% to the 3% cap for homesteaded properties, though assessed values would still be subject to accounting for "substantial property changes," which could result in increases or decreases in value depending on what has changed.

If a homestead exempted property is subsequently sold, then the base-year assessed value for the new homesteader would be set at the assessed value for the year immediately preceding the sale.

A homestead exemption reduces the amount of property taxes a homeowner owes on this or her legal residence, and according to ACCG, "this new floating homestead exemption is in addition to and not in lieu of all non-floating homestead exemptions."

Addressing part of what the new exemption would mean for homeowners, Paris said that, "if you have a second home here, over a three or four or five-year period, your value would continue to go up while your local people who live here full time, theirs would not go up."

HB 581 also creates a new 1% local option sales tax that could be imposed for property tax relief, but Paris said he would not be in favor of utilizing such a tax. In order for the new tax to be put in place, it would have to be supported by voters in a local referendum.

The bill does several other things related to property and sales tax reform, such as improving the sales ratio study methodology by the Department of Audits and Accounts, removing confusing tax estimates from annual assessment notices and more.

Also in the meeting, Paris proclaimed Sept. 1 as Micajah Clark Dyer Day in honor of the famous local aviator and inventor.

And he proclaimed Sept. 17 as Constitution Day and Sept. 17-23 as Constitution Week in Union County to recognize the anniversary of one of the nation's founding documents, with copies of the proclamations presented to local chapters of the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution.

Among other business, Paris accepted multiple agreements, including for E-911 maintenance and communications, and he accepted three roads into the county road system: the first 2,500 feet of Loftis Mountain Road, and the entirety of Loftis Mountain Way and Loftis Lane.



Humane Society Mountain Shelter Director Adam Payne in the Sept. 19 county meeting.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Payne spoke in the meeting about the efforts of the Humane Society Mountain Shelter, urging attendees to help the shelter by reporting pet abandonment activity, which is on the rise, and supporting the mission of the local animal nonprofit.

Resident Rob Mawyer also addressed meeting attendees to describe how local first responders saved his life in a medical emergency last year, and he thanked both the public safety community and Union County leadership for providing such commendable services to residents.

Immediately prior to the regular meeting, Paris hosted a called meeting inside the Union County Courthouse to set the county millage rate to the rollback of 4.131 mills to levy property taxes for the provision of county services, making for a combined school/county rate of 11.374 mills.

With Union County Schools having set its millage rate last week also, Tax Commissioner Lee Knight can now prepare property tax bills, which he anticipates will go out for mailing in the beginning of October with the same Dec. 20 due date as in years past.

Paris received some pushback from resident Wesley Hopgood, who believes that the tax rate is still too high.

Hopgood pointed out the tax rate doesn't necessarily equate to low taxes and noted that Fannin County has a lower mill rate with a comparable budget, which Paris attributed to the neighboring county's considerably higher count of short-term rentals that shore up Fannin's tax revenues.

The commissioner said the tax rate today is, as usual, one of the lowest in the state and is lower than it has ever been during his administration, and perhaps in county history, thanks partly to being offset by the permanent Local Option Sales Tax that benefits nearly every Georgia county.

Jennifer Dyer Kerr from the Tax Commissioner's Office attended with statistics showing that the current combined millage rate is the lowest in at least 52 years – which is as far back as computer records go.

Harold Collins, Paris' opposition in the upcoming Sole Commissioner election, expressed his opinion that the Tax Assessors Office ought to be doing the county assessments as opposed to most assessments being conducted by an outside third party, as is

done now.

Paris said hiring Georgia Mass Appraisal Solutions & Services is more cost effective, in that the county does not have to pay for multiple new employees, to include equipment, vehicles, salaries and benefits, and a third party also cuts down on accusations of bias in the appraisal process.

River City Bank supports UCFD and Relay for Life



Austin Pattee and Alexis Moody, Universal Bankers at River City Bank in Blairsville, present the Relay for Life Sponsorship check to Patrick Schimidt with the Union County Fire Department.

River City Bank is honored to support Union County Fire Department's Relay for Life team for 2024. Relay for Life-Union County has already raised just under half of the goal amount for this year's upcoming event. Many of our beloved community members will be there as survivors and fighters. River City Bank is grateful to have a small part in helping bring awareness to those whose lives have been impacted by cancer.

River City Bank would like to thank the Union County Fire Department who reached out to Market President, Scott Nanney, about a donation to

their Relay Team. "Our bank is honored to support our hometown heroes, whether they are fighting fires or fighting cancer. This is a meaningful way for our bank to give back to the community," said Nanney.

River City Bank, founded in 2006, is a full-service community bank, offering financial solutions for personal and business clients including deposits, loans, treasury management, and brokerage services. We are headquartered at 228 North Second Avenue SW, Rome, Georgia. For more information, visit www.rivercity.bank. Member FDIC. Equal Housing Lender.