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Commissioner Paris bids farewell to public office

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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A room full of Union Countians witnessed the end of an era the evening of Thursday, Dec. 19, when Lamar Paris held his last regular meeting as sole commissioner, inside the Union County Courthouse.

It was a long meeting – counting 42 business items, the agenda was the largest Paris could remember after six terms in office – and he took some time at the end to thank residents, first responders and other county employees, including his staff in the Commissioner's Office.

"It's been my honor for the last 24 years to serve the people in this community," Paris said. "We've all worked hard, and it's going to continue

to take a lot of hard work and a lot of dedication."

Paris received thanks in return, including a salute from veterans associated with the Appalachian Veterans Memorial Park in recognition of all he has done for residents generally and the local veteran population specifically.

One reason for the lengthy agenda was because Paris canceled the November county meeting due to illness among his staff, so the business from that meeting carried over to December. Also, there was plenty of year-end business to attend to.

Among the many agenda items, the very first was the now traditional presentation of public safety service awards by the Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter of the Georgia

Society Sons of the American Revolution, featuring SAR members Stephen Weaver, Jared Ogden and Sid Turner.

Together, the patriots honored Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy John George for his tireless dedication to law enforcement under retiring Sheriff Mack Mason; and the life-saving skills of Union General EMS Paramedic Deborah Stancil for going above and beyond the call of duty.

Stancil also earned a special honor and scholarship awarded to a local EMS professional each year – the Murray S. King Award. Kendra King presented the memorial award named for her husband, a SAR member who passed away in 2014 but received

See *Paris Bids Farewell*, Page 4A



Lamar Paris delivered an emotional farewell in his final meeting as sole commissioner last month. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Portrait donation preserves legacy of local preacher



(L-R) Ben Hulsey, Bo Conley, Presley Rich, Ann Conley Miller, Robby Patterson, Jim Conley, Julius Hulsey, Sarah Hulsey Reeves, Joyce Hulsey Minor, Hadley Hulsey Duncan, Missy Minor Mitchell, Havilyn Hulsey Towns and Ashley Renee Pyke. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

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More than a dozen descendants of the Rev. Charles E. Rich gathered in the Old Courthouse last month to honor the legacy of a local circuit preacher who led multiple Baptist congregations during the formative years of Union County.

Several generations of family members from across North Georgia attended Dec. 13 to dedicate a portrait of Rich in recognition of his life and contributions as a prominent member of the Blairsville community with a tremendous passion for spreading the word of God.

His portrait and biographical information

now reside in the venerated Religious Room of the Old Courthouse, where other local religious leaders from the past are celebrated.

The Old Courthouse is dutifully maintained as a heritage museum by the Union County Historical Society. Accepting the donation was new Historical Society

See *Rich Dedication*, Page 10A

Firebaugh provides decades of experience at airport

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Dan Firebaugh is no stranger to the Blairsville Municipal Airport, having led the facility for four years as assistant manager. But Firebaugh is enjoying a new title after being promoted to manager in the September meeting of the Blairsville City Council.

He took up the mantle after former Manager Aaron Mannheim retired due to medical reasons, and he has had a few months now to settle into his upgraded role, which is a natural fit for the lifelong flight enthusiast.

Firebaugh's father had a cousin who was a pilot in World War II, and when he returned home, he resumed flying for an oil company in their Southern Illinois hometown. When Firebaugh was 11, this family member took him up in the air, and it was love at first flight.

"A few years later, he



Dan Firebaugh
Blairsville Airport Manager

became the manager at the local airport up there, and as a result of that, I kind of had a little bit of an in-roads to learning to fly," said Firebaugh, who would eventually go on to work for that airport, too, fueling planes.

When he was about 14 years old, Firebaugh had his flying epiphany. He and his parents were dining at the airport restaurant; while watching the airplanes take off and land, "it just kind of came to me – this is what I want to do." See *Airport Manager*, Page 10A.

Board of Education celebrates with end-of-semester awards

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County Board of Education members opened their December regular meeting with some great news and deserving awards.

According to the Pioneer RESA – one of 16 regional education support agencies created by the Georgia legislature decades ago – Union County Schools reached Top 10 in the state for high academic scores.

As revealed by Director of Teaching & Learning C.T. Hussion, multiple educators and the courses they teach were congratulated for outstanding performance.

In particular, Union County Middle was commended

for numerous grade placements in Distinguished Learner categories and boasting some of the highest mean scale scores in subjects such as English language arts and math.

Students, too, were rewarded for their hard work in the Dec. 17 meeting when the Union County High School Cross Country teams were brought to the front of the room to receive certificates for a fantastic season.

The girls and boys were both honored, with Union County Ladies earning Third Overall at State and Lola Hunter achieving Third Overall for individuals. Union County Men, meanwhile, took home Sixth Overall, with Oliver Hillman finishing at Seventh Overall for individuals.

With the last meeting

of the year came some housekeeping issues, such as figuring out what the 2025-2026 School Calendar might look like and coming up with the FY2026 board meeting dates.

The board – and some teachers in the audience – expressed a desire to have a full week off for Thanksgiving, citing requests from both the community and staff.

And as far as regular board meeting dates go, there's no big plan to change, though Superintendent John Hill stated there was some brief consideration to move to holding board meetings on Thursdays due to scheduling conflicts, though the final draft was not available at press time.

Board members
See *School Board Awards*, Page 5A



U.S. News & World Report has named Union County Middle School one of the best public middle schools for 2025, as highlighted in the December School Board meeting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



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Paris Bids Farewell...from Page 1A

compassionate care from EMS. In other business, Paris accepted an affidavit re-appointing Libby Stevens to another four-year term on the Union County Board of Elections; appointed Courtney Waller to a four-year term on

the Union County Development Authority; and re-appointed Dr. Elizabeth Wiles and William Stone to six-year terms on the Union County Board of Health. He also approved a \$637,355 agreement with Mallory & Evans Service Co.

to remove and replace the existing rooftop units at the Community Center, with an estimated completion timeline of 180 days from the delivery of the units. Paris accepted a one-year agreement with the Blairsville-



Local Paramedic Deborah Stancil, center, receiving the memorial Murray S. King Award from Kendra King and several Sons of the American Revolution in December. Photo by Shawn Jarrard



UCSO Chief Deputy John George was honored Dec. 19 for his professionalism and dedication to local law enforcement, pictured here with Sheriff Mason and members of the local chapter Sons of the American Revolution. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Union County Chamber of Commerce for the distribution of 70% of hotel-motel tax receipts. The agreement is dated Jan. 1, 2025, to Dec. 31, 2025, and is the same arrangement as 2024.

Prior to 2024, the chamber received 90% of hotel-motel tax distributions throughout Paris' tenure, even though only 40% of revenues generated from the tax are legally required to be spent on efforts related to tourism, conventions and trade shows, like the chamber.

What remains of collections each year after tourism-related distributions – up to 60%, but in this case 30% – can go toward discretionary spending in the county General Fund, which is the main operating fund of Union County Government that provides for public services.

Paris has long justified the distribution arrangement by saying that the chamber undertakes many efforts that benefit Union County, both in a promotional sense to foster tourism and economic development, and in a civic sense by hosting and assisting with community events for residents.

It remains to be seen what future funding looks like for the chamber, as incoming Sole Commissioner Harold Collins made a campaign pledge to redirect hotel-motel tax distributions away from the chamber and to the Union County Development Authority.

As part of this pledge, Collins has said he wants to invest "only the required funds" from hotel-motel tax collections to go toward tourism "under the authority of Union County Economic Authority, with the balance of hotel-motel taxes going to reduce property taxes."

Also in the Dec. 19 meeting, Paris adopted the FY2025 Budget. As previously reported, the 2025 budget for the county's main operating account, the General Fund, is 3.7% larger than the 2024 budget, coming in about a million dollars higher at \$28,053,041.

The projected increase in the new budget "is to account for the rising inflation rate, as well as to increase salaries to keep up with the population growth," according to information provided in a recent budget public hearing.

Resident Vince Peterson appeared as a guest speaker in

the meeting to tell attendees that the 2025 budget contains a \$2.8 million deficit that requires the use of reserve spending to fill, which, if not corrected in future budgets, will ultimately necessitate a property tax increase.

Among other business, Paris accepted a federal "Assistance to Firefighters Grant" in the amount of \$68,050.65, which requires a 10% match by the county of \$6,805.07. The grant will be used to purchase supplies and attack lines for firetrucks of the Union County Fire Department.

In his Commissioner's Comments, Paris related some key accomplishments of his administration – the longest of any sole commissioner in Union County history.

He highlighted the fact that the county has: a healthy \$9 million in General Fund reserves; been debt-free since May 2021; enjoyed "clean" independent audits his entire time in office; currently \$8 million in usable SPLOST revenues with \$7 million in 2025 collection projections; new and exciting SPLOST projects coming up, like the E-911 Center and hospital roundabout; numerous cost-effective public services carried out by hardworking, dedicated staff members; one of the state's lowest property tax rates every year; a thriving Recreation Department reflecting growth in local youth involvement;

tremendous public safety personnel and operations; and more.

Paris expressed gratitude for his wife Dinah, who was in attendance, and joked to incoming Commissioner Collins, also present at the meeting, that Mrs. Collins "was going to have a tough time."

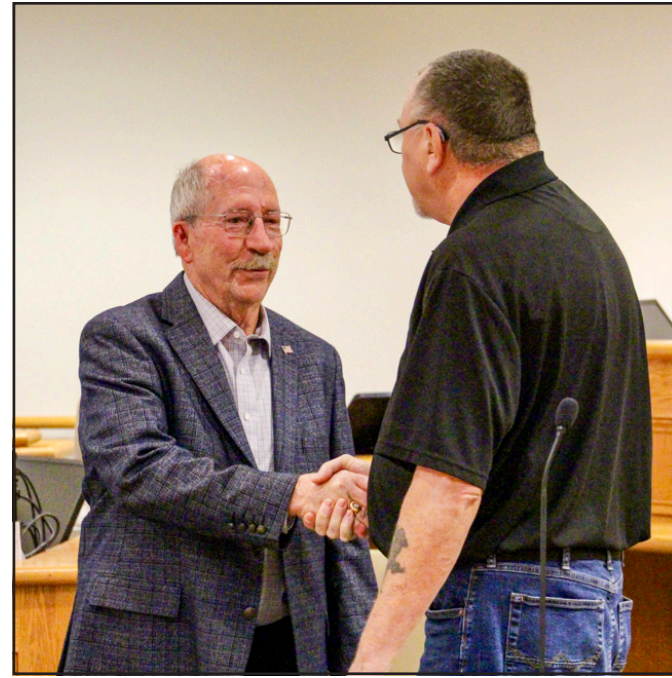
"You think your job's going to be hard," Paris said, "her job's going to be hard, because she's got to put up with you getting chewed out by people when you get home in the afternoon, and somebody didn't like what you did."

"It's so frustrating when you work so hard to try to do the right thing, but there's people that are going to dislike whatever it is you do. So, you just have to be ready for that; it's just part of the job."

"But I love what I've done, I've loved this community. I will still be here. I'll still want to help the community when and where I can – but politics is not one of those. But thank y'all for being here, coming to the meeting, participating and finding out what's going on in this county."

Outgoing Commissioner Paris received a standing ovation at the end of the meeting and several personal "thank-you's" from attendees.

The first regular county meeting of 2025 led by new Sole Commissioner Collins will take place on Thursday, Jan. 16, at 6 p.m. inside Courtroom A of the Union County Courthouse.



Appalachian Veterans Memorial Park volunteers thanked Paris for his dedication to veterans in his last county meeting. Paris signed a 10-year lease at \$1/year for the group to operate the park and its monuments inside Meeks Park. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Cheryl Hamby Williams retires after 50 years of nursing

Cheryl Hamby Williams, a local girl, with 50 years of nursing experience, is retiring December 31, 2024. Longstreet Clinic Administrative Department honored her and her many years of service with a reception December 2, 2024.

Cheryl's first experience in nursing came when at the age of 14 she served 3 years as a Candy Striper at Union General Hospital. After graduating from Union County High School she attended Young Harris College for a year and two quarters acquiring the core college classes needed to transfer to nursing school. She worked spring and summer quarters in Towns County Hospital as a nursing assistant. Fall quarter of 1974 she attended Hall County School of Nursing, graduating in 1977 with a Registered Nurse degree.

Cheryl began working at the Hall County Medical Center from 1977-78, then went to Lanier Park Hospital. In 1990, she started the Diabetes Program at Lanier Park. In May 1998, Philip Marler, MD, hired Cheryl as the first Diabetes Educator in a clinical setting in Gainesville, GA and the surrounding area. Her job title was Certified Diabetes Care and Education Special-



Cheryl Hamby Williams

ist. Cheryl worked 35 years in Diabetes Education and Management, where she educated the patients about diabetes and managed their care. Cheryl helped start the first insulin pump program at Longstreet Clinic in 1993.

Cheryl truly enjoyed

her career as a nurse. She said, "Heard a career as a nurse was worthwhile helping patients prolong their life and their quality of life." During her time as a diabetes education she would meet her husband, Richard and they were married for 24 happy years! N(dani126)

School Board...from Page 1A

received updates on the under-construction Elementary School building via a slideshow. Specific areas, like the cafeteria, gym, restrooms and some classrooms, are beginning to take shape and were featured as part of a video exploring the site.

The ribbon-cutting for the new school building was revealed to be sometime this April, with the opening date still slated for Fall 2025.

Despite initial concerns raised just before the November election, the board voted to opt in to House Bill 581, which establishes a "floating" homestead tax exemption defined by the Department of

Revenue.

Hill admitted at the start of the discussion that there were pros and cons, and while the board agreed with that assessment, a unanimous vote ultimately followed suit after heavy discussion. This will come as welcome news to the majority of local voters, who supported the measure.

"Our property values have gone up higher than the rate of inflation; this bill addressed that," said Board Member Jason McCarter. "For the counties that stay in, it will give homeowners protection from this constant influx of people coming in that have done nothing but just want to

live in their house for the next 15 years or so."

Board Member Janna Akins said that, ultimately, "there's some loss of control over what we can do," but she added, "This could also potentially be some sort of assistance or relief to ... a single mom or a grandmother who's raising their grandkids living on a fixed income."

4-H student Lauren Pace signed up for public comment to voice her appreciation for the program and how it has helped her blossom into a better person. Pace admitted she initially hated public speaking but has found that she loves 4-H and has learned to embrace what it has to offer.

"Even though I still

have my struggles with public speaking, I know without 4-H, I wouldn't be where I am today - much less speaking in front of you all," Pace said. "I am in a club that I love and stand for."

The North Georgia News congratulates UCMS Seventh-Grader Sadie Cochran on being chosen as the featured artist on the School System's 2024 holiday card. She painted a lovely mountain snow scene of a deer with a cardinal to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.


School Board members will meet next on Thursday, Jan. 23, starting with a work session at 6 p.m. inside the Board Office at 124 Hughes Street in Blairsville.



UCHS Girls Cross Country runners represented their district well in the state tournament this school year with a Third Place team finish. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



The UCHS Boys Cross Country Team performed honorably at state, finishing in Sixth Place overall. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



SCAM ALERT

SCAM AWARENESS CLASS

Presented by the Union County Sheriff's Office

Tuesday - January 14 2:00pm - FREE Event

at the Union County Public Library

In partnership with the Union County Sheriff's Office, the Union County Public Library is hosting a Scam Awareness Class on Tuesday, January 14th at 2 PM in the library's Community Room. The class is completely FREE and open to the public.

The class will provide a thorough introduction to different types of fraud, how to

spot them, and what to do if you find yourself caught up in one. This program provides a great opportunity to learn how to protect yourself and prevent yourself from falling prey to devious scams.


For more of the Union County Public Library's upcoming free events, visit the calendar on their website: www.mountainlibrary.com

Military Time

Space Force Military Branch

Part 9 of 14

By: Whitey White



The Newest Military Branch: The Space Force

The contrast between the Space Force and the other five branches is stark: It is likely to be the oldest service by median age, the most civilian-heavy, the most contractor-dependent, the most collaborative, the least gender-unbalanced, the most rank-unbalanced, and the leanest.

Perhaps the most striking contrast is that it doesn't plan to ask for more money from Congress beyond its initial \$15.4 billion budget. Its operational costs could actually reduce, with the cost of satellites and space launches decreasing. It features col-

lapsed command layers, while outsourcing most of its medical, legal, and bureaucratic needs to the Air Force.

Another difference is its stated intention to use a "clean sheet" on hiring and workplace policies to benefit women, including flexible career provisions and an emphasis on lateral entry from private industry. At a meeting of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, Maj. Gen. Clinton Crosier, director of planning for the USSF, said that "there are tremendous opportunities for women in the U.S. Space Force."

Airport Manager...from Page 1A

do," he said.

By 1967, when he was a senior in high school, Firebaugh started taking his first flight lessons. A self-described natural, he took to the skies with ease and mastered the skill quickly. It was a long road – Firebaugh had to sell his motorcycle to afford to earn his license – but by the end of it, he had earned multiple certifications through extensive testing.

From there, Firebaugh lent his skills professionally to charter companies and private planes. While the jets he piloted were large, they weren't capable of crossing the ocean, so he flew all across North America, Central America and the Caribbean.

Firebaugh has led a storied career, including a personal favorite story about the time he flew Hollywood royalty Kurt Russell and Goldie Hawn, and he piloted for a company that contracted with the renowned Mayo Clinic to fly organ transplant teams to procure life-saving organs.

And the aviation industry has taken note of his impressive accomplishments.

In 2024, the Federal Aviation Administration presented Firebaugh with a prestigious award in recognition of his more than 50 years as a pilot: The Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award.

"You just have to prove that you've been a good

pilot, that you haven't had any violations or anything," Firebaugh explained. "And you have to get three people to write a letter of recommendation – people who you've flown with and say, 'Yeah, he's a great pilot.'"

Notably, Firebaugh has a safety claim to fame after flying his way through a frightening situation in which a faulty aircraft part could have spelled disaster, ultimately resulting in him being partially responsible for a recall that made planes safer.

In short, on a mammoth flight from Miami to Winnipeg, Firebaugh started losing hydraulic fluid due to a leak.

"It turns out that the manufacturer of that hydraulic actuator discovered there was a design defect in one of the O-rings, that somehow they didn't test it well enough," Firebaugh said. "They had to change everything; it's surprising it never happened before, but it happened to me."

The situation of the world in 2020 after the onset of COVID-19 is what prompted Firebaugh to retire from flying. Some cities were mostly closed, and it was hard to stock up on supplies; Firebaugh can remember a point where he was unable to even purchase a bottle of water.

"It was just miserable out there," Firebaugh recalled. "I thought, 'That's no fun anymore,' so I quit."

Firebaugh was familiar with the Blairsville Airport by the time he gave up his job. He had flown out of Macon before and visited the mountains a few times. He quickly developed a friendship with Mannheim, and when the last assistant manager left, Firebaugh was offered the position.

"Aaron called me and said, 'Hey, I know you're retired; would you be willing to come in and kind of fill in while we find a permanent assistant manager?' So, I did," said Firebaugh, adding with a smile, "And I'm still here."

But Firebaugh admitted that he doesn't plan to stay in the position long. Even before he first came to the Blairsville Airport, he considered himself retired, and he'd like to return to that life sooner rather than later.

"I'm not going to be here that long. I'm an old guy; I'm just trying to make this the best airport it can be for North Georgia, and it is the airport of North Georgia," Firebaugh said. "In this area, we're it."

For now, Firebaugh said he wants to focus on improving the facility for the next year

or two.

Another assistant manager is already in place – Air Force veteran and aviation technician Brady Thompson. Firebaugh is also looking in the direction of Middle Georgia State University's School of Aviation, which may produce more future leaders for the Blairsville Airport.

"This airport has grown in traffic and size over the last few years," Firebaugh observed, mentioning that it may also prove fruitful to one day create positions for individual jobs, such as fueling or other maintenance experts.

Another long-term goal that Firebaugh wants to see accomplished is a parallel taxiway to cut down on the risk of runway impacts. Such a large project is defined as a multimillion-dollar expense, but he holds out hope that it could happen one day.

Firebaugh has come up with other improvement ideas, and he looks forward to working on them with the Blairsville City Council, which is generally open to new suggestions for bettering the airport.

For more information on the local airport, visit <https://www.blairsville-ga.gov/airport>.



Firebaugh during a May 3, 2024, celebration in his honor at the local airport for having earned the prestigious Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award.

Rich Dedication

...from Page 1A



Rev. Charles E. Rich was born Oct. 25, 1868, and died on April 25, 1919, likely from throat cancer per family history. Rich is buried in Choestoe.

President Mike Cook, with the society's own Presley Rich in attendance as a familial descendant.

Among the direct descendants present, representing the oldest living generation – Rich's grandchildren – were siblings Joyce Minor, Sarah Reeves, Ben Hulsey and Julius Hulsey, and their first cousin Jim Conley, the longtime current mayor of Blairsville.

None of them ever personally knew Rich, who died at the age of 50 over 100 years ago. But that made the dedication all the more special, showcasing the deep respect Rich earned in his day and that he continues to command so many years following his death.

"I can't tell you folks how glad I am you're here," Conley said to his surrounding family members. "And I'm just grateful to the Historical Society for wanting this portrait to be a part of their religious inventory."

The portrait is actually a slightly smaller reproduction of the original that Conley inherited from his beloved mother Estelle. His cousin Julius asked to borrow the portrait several years ago, from which he had a copy made and placed in an antique frame similar to the original.

It's a beautifully reproduced photograph, colorized and set in an oval wooden frame with bubble glass. Stamped below the picture is a small metal plate inscribed with Rev. Rich's dates of birth and death: Oct. 25, 1868 – April 25, 1919.

According to a biography compiled for the occasion by Rich's great-granddaughter Missy Mitchell, the preacher accomplished much in his 50 years, entering the ministry after earning his ordination at Harmony Church, known today as New Harmony Baptist Church.

Rich preached at about a dozen churches over time. He even began churches, like Union Baptist on Georgia 180 – originally Hood's Chapel – and

as a circuit preacher, he shared the Gospel from the pulpits of First Baptist, Philadelphia Baptist, Choestoe Baptist and elsewhere.

The preacher also helped to start the Blairsville Collegiate Institute, which at the time was the only advanced education available to local students beyond grade school. Rich served as a founding member, a teacher and eventually a principal there.

"He was passionate about his missionary work, and he was passionate about education," Mitchell said. "You will find him involved in all of the schools in their early stages (because) he was an educator to supplement his income as a preacher."

On top of being a preacher and schoolteacher, Rich was a dedicated family man, and though his income was meager – sometimes as low as 50 cents from each church – he managed to take care of his wife and two children while maintaining a happy home amid hardship.

The portrait dedication celebrated these things and more, taking on the air of a joyous family reunion. People swapped old stories, caught up after years of absence, and generally enjoyed one another's company amid the backdrop of a courthouse museum gloriously decorated for Christmas.

"We just all wanted to come here today and present the picture to the Historical Society, and also this wonderful history of Charlie Rich," Julius Hulsey said. "Even though none of us knew him, we are extremely proud that he was our ancestor and meant a lot to the community in his day."

Family members attending the dedication were Ben Hulsey, Bo Conley, Presley Rich, Ann Conley Miller, Robby Patterson, Jim Conley, Julius Hulsey, Sarah Hulsey Reeves, Joyce Hulsey Minor, Hadley Hulsey Duncan, Missy Minor Mitchell, Havilyn Hulsey Towns and Ashley Renee Pyke.