

North Georgia News

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Collins hits ground running in first week

By Shawn Jarrard
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Freshly minted Union County Sole Commissioner Harold Collins' first official day in his new office was Thursday, Jan. 2, following local government closure for the New Year's holiday.

He actually got to work earlier in the week, asking then-County Manager Larry Garrett to notify county employees of a new policy that is still being ironed out but aims to curtail the use of take-home vehicles.

Collins will be bringing multiple changes to county governance, and he reiterated Friday his goal will be to provide the public services

people expect from the Commissioner's Office, but with a commitment to cutting spending he considers wasteful and boosting revenues where possible.

But having just taken office, the new commissioner will need time to dig into the details before making many changes. He spent his first few days meeting with department heads and other elected officials and has been examining county records to start planning specific changes.

One big adjustment he has already made is the hiring of a new county manager.

Collins said there was a sentiment on the campaign trail that people desired a

new direction in county management, and personally, he wanted to begin his term in office with a clean slate in such an important position.

"A lot of the times, when you change administrations, you've got to change the guy under you," Collins said. "Basically, everybody does it when they switch offices. And politics don't come into that - you've just got to change. It's not that I didn't trust (Garrett) or anything like that."

Before advertising the position, Collins wished to approach people he thought would do well in the position. The first candidate he interviewed decided the job "wasn't for him," but the

second candidate turned out to be his choice.

Collins found his new county manager in lifelong friend Tony Hughes, a local builder who reached out to Collins last year to express interest upon learning the position would be available.

When the opportunity presented itself, Hughes said he had been on the lookout for a career change to give his body some relief after meeting the physical demands of the construction industry for over 40 years.

And as a 40-year Recreation Department volunteer, the county manager job seemed like the perfect way



GA 515 traffic pattern change coming this week



The Vertical Earth construction company is aiming to keep commuters happy as crews work to finish Phase II of GA 515 reconstruction as quickly as possible. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

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Heads up, cross-county commuters - on Thursday, Jan. 9, the traffic pattern on Georgia 515 will be changing between Trackrock Gap Road in Union County and

Old Union Church Road in Towns County to accommodate ongoing reconstruction of the highway.

That 1.3-mile stretch near the county line is currently three lanes: two lanes of travel and a center turn lane. By the end of the project, that area

will be expanded to four travel lanes, but starting this week, one of the three lanes will be closed to make it a strictly two-lane section of road.

Additionally, the speed limit there will likely be dropping from 55 mph to 45

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McTaggart grateful that no lives lost in house fire



Union County Firefighters working hard to extinguish their first structure fire of the year on Forest Circle in northern Union County. Photo/Submitted

By Shawn Jarrard
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Union County Firefighters fought their first structure fire of 2025 on Friday, Jan. 3, and thankfully, no one was injured in the blaze.

Unfortunately, more than half of the 40-year-old, single story home on Forest Circle was ablaze by the time the Fire Department arrived, so firefighters were unable to salvage the home before

extinguishing the flames.

Homeowner Louise McTaggart, 87, lost all her belongings, including two cars. But McTaggart is grateful that she, her husband of 58 years Abe Shahin, her nephew Michael Penland visiting from Gwinnett, and the couple's 15-year-old cat Boo Boo all got out OK.

Union County E-911 dispatched the emergency call at 11:19 a.m. on Friday, and due to new Fire Station No. 13

being little more than a mile north on Murphy Highway, firetrucks were on the scene within minutes, quickly augmented by firefighters from Stations 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Around 30 firemen responded, concentrating their multiple apparatus on knocking down the flames and simultaneously establishing a water perimeter to prevent spreading to adjacent properties.

Fire Chief David Dyer said nearly two dozen of the firefighters were volunteers, and he lauded their commitment to responding in the middle of a workday, a time that is typically difficult for volunteers.

"Everybody did a great job, got in here and worked really hard to stop it where it was," Dyer said. "Unfortunately, it did quite a bit of damage before we got here."

At press time, UCFD Capt. Damon Hood, a fire investigator with the department, said they were still trying to determine the cause of the fire but that no foul play was suspected.

The fire appears to have started in the garage, and Chief Dyer said it was likely burning for a while before being discovered by Shahin, which

See McTaggart Fire, Page 6A

Fireworks light up night sky on New Year's Eve

By Shelly Knight
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

HIAWASSEE - People from across the mountains and beyond celebrated the arrival of the New Year at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, with free music and beautiful fireworks helping hundreds of families to ring in 2025 with the best view around the night of Dec. 31.

"We've got more people than I thought we were going to have," Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason said early in the evening. "A lot of places canceled the celebrations they were going to have due to the high winds, so we've got a huge crowd, and they're still coming in."

"We'll be shooting fireworks off down at the ballfield. We have several sponsors who help, and we're asking for donations to help offset the cost of the fireworks, but we're holding our celebration as planned."



The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds welcomed New Year's revelers for free fireworks on Dec. 31. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

"We're looking for a great 2025! We've got a lot of shows already booked and a lot of special events planned. We plan to entertain even bigger (in the New Year). We've added some new events."

"We've got the Scottish

Festival that's been in Blairsville for the last 20 years coming to Hiawassee this year. We're starting a new event called the Mimosa Festival that will be here Labor Day Weekend.

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Ron Gibson honored for commitment to recycling

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Community recycling volunteer Ronald Gibson may be a humble man, but there's no denying that he's accomplished a lot for Union County's waste

disposal and environmental wellbeing over nearly 20 years.

In recognition of Gibson's long-running recycling efforts, now retired County Manager Larry Garrett paid a visit to Gum Log Fire Station No. 8 on Dec. 18, where Gibson and

a small yet determined group of friends have historically gathered to assist with local recycling.

The community recycling program is simple but takes a lot of work: people

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Ron Gibson, holding the appreciation plaque, was honored by Union County Government last month for his years of contributions toward local recycling. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



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New Year's Eve...from Page 1A

"We'll be doing the Acoustic Sunsets again, and of course, the Rhododendron Festival. We just keep adding things all the time."

Of the many people in attendance, Kirsten Teems and her family drove over from Blue Ridge to enjoy the fireworks display.

"Our friends invited us out and we decided to join them and do something different," Teems said. "Usually, we just stay in the house. This is really nice. We've really enjoyed it. Our hope for the new year is that everyone be happy and healthy."

As far as resolutions, attendee Jorge Gomez said he will be aiming for more "vacation time" in 2025: "Going places and seeing things like this. This is beautiful. It's our first time. We're from West Palm Beach."

Others shared similar sentiments, like guest Leo Gonzalez, who wants "great health and more family time" this year.

Likewise, Lisa Phillips hopes for a healthy grandbaby, and her husband Brian is looking for more time off as well. And donuts. The donuts on offer during the fairgrounds' festivities smelled delicious

and were a big hit.

Steven Newell from Jupiter, Florida, said he hoped to see a better version of himself this year, announcing his intention "to become a firefighter like my dad."

"My goal in 2025 is to finish high school and go to the plants and make money," Nate Kumfer shared. "Me and my family are on a family vacation to see mountains. I'm from Louisiana, and it's pretty

flat there."

"I live in Jasper, Georgia, but I used to live in Hayesville, and my goal is to get back here," Michael Mason said. "I'm a landscaper, and I love it up here."

Michael Rodriguez from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, said he was feeling very optimistic about 2025.

"We have a new man in office, and we will be seeing more positive things happening

around the country this year," he said. "I think people are really feeling up right now. I'm hoping for business to explode like it should and to have success in my growing family - make a good living for my family."

Every new year is a new beginning, a chance for a fresh start and an opportunity to add new pages to a life story. And that seemed to be exactly what the people celebrating at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds were thinking in the run-up to 2025.

Gibson Honored...from Page 1A

from all over the county and a handful from neighboring North Carolina communities drop off their trash at Station No. 8.

There, a volunteer crew meets every Wednesday from 9 a.m. to noon to sort recyclables from garbage before all the recycled materials ultimately wind up at the Union County Transfer Station, which has gone above and beyond to expand recycling offerings in the community.

"A lot of people don't understand recycling and what it means to the environment, but I'd like to say that Union County has done something that most counties - out of 159 - are not doing," said Garrett.

Gibson was "deeply honored" to receive his appreciation plaque from the county, and he shared some background on the recycling program, which began in July 2007. He volunteered to help organize the effort shortly after its inception, and by the next summer, he took over the reins.

For about 13 years, the effort on Gum Log ran as part of the county's Neighborhood Recycling Program before operating separately. Still, Gibson credits the

Commissioner Lamar Paris for buying the 12-foot by 20-foot shed that houses bags and helps volunteers stay out of the elements while sorting materials.

At its inception, Gibson said there was an average of six drop-offs weekly. Nowadays, that number is closer to 15, and considering that Gibson and his crew do all their own hauling and sorting, there's a lot to handle on the average Wednesday morning.

Garrett's reason for recognizing Gibson's accomplishments was the latter's retirement. Gibson is leaving his post, and while he acknowledged how grateful he is for the acknowledgment - and, more importantly, its meaning - he insisted he doesn't hold sole responsibility for ensuring that recycling picked up practice in Union County.

"All of you have contributed, and other people who are not here have contributed. So, (I give) my deepest appreciation to every one of you, and I'm grateful to you for what you're doing," Gibson said to a rapt audience.

Advancing age and health problems drove Gibson's decision to retire, but he said he

may still pick up trash along the roadside, helping to at least keep the community clean even if he's not running the operation at the Gum Log Fire Station.

And Gibson feels confident he is leaving everything in capable hands with his trusted friend and fellow volunteer Vernon Barnes.

Barnes laughs when he calls himself "the mouth," or social representative of the group, and his gregariousness helps him recruit other volunteers to a cause that he describes as both fun and important.

But he's serious about keeping things running smoothly following Gibson's departure, saying he has no intention of changing anything up. He will continue to operate the Gum Log recycling station, maintaining his roles as greeter and leader to hold everything together.

"Recycling is the second most important thing. The most important thing here is the (community) that we're having," noted Barnes, with several of the other volunteers agreeing to keep that community going and make Gibson proud.

River City Bank Announces Promotions of Katie Mashburn and Austin Pattee

River City Bank is proud to announce the promotions of two outstanding team members: Katie Mashburn to Vice President, Director of Human Resources, and Austin Pattee to Assistant Branch Manager.

Katie Mashburn joined River City Bank in April of 2022 as Assistant Vice President and Senior Personal Banker, playing a pivotal role in the successful opening of the Bank's Blairsville Office. With 18 years in the financial services industry, she is dedicated to fostering relationships and community engagement ensuring the Bank is deeply ingrained in the Blairsville community. In her new role as Director of Human Resources, Mashburn will ensure the effective introduction, implementation, and operation of HR practices and policies across the Bank. She will be instrumental in fostering a workplace culture aligned with the Bank's core values.

Austin Pattee joined River City Bank May of 2022 as a Universal Banker. He has been an integral part of the Blairsville team since the branch's opening, providing exceptional service to our customers, meeting their needs and fostering strong relationships. In his new role, Pattee will oversee the



Katie Mashburn

daily branch operations of the Bank's Blairsville Office. He will also assist in team development, ensuring compliance with bank policies, procedures, and regulations.

"Our team in Blairsville is thrilled to celebrate Katie and Austin's well-deserved promotions. Their hard work, dedication to our customers, and commitment to excellent customer service make them invaluable to our team. These promotions are a testament to their growth and the bright future they have with our Bank," stated Scott Nanney, Blairsville Market President.


Matt Robbins, President & CEO of River City Bank, shared his enthusiasm for the promotions, saying, "Katie and Austin have consistently



Austin Pattee

showcased exceptional dedication and leadership. These well-earned promotions are attributed to their hard work and the significant contributions they make to our organization. We are excited to see them thrive in their new roles as they continue to deliver outstanding service to our customers and communities."

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.



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

Commissioner Collins...from Page 1A

to combine his professional experience with his passion for improving the county.

As the full-time right hand of the commissioner, Hughes will be ensuring that Collins' policies are enacted across county government and overseeing the day-to-day operations of the county by coordinating with the various departments.

Clearly, county manager is a big job, and Collins said he feels confident that Hughes is qualified to do it.

Hughes has decades of experience managing construction projects – overseeing, bidding, budgeting, scheduling, etc. – and he spent 13 years in manufacturing with heavy focuses in engineering and distribution.

And Collins looks forward to working with Hughes, who has pledged to give "110%" in everything he does for the county.

"In each department, if we see we can bring in some revenue here or cut a little expense there, he'll bring that to me, and I'll have the final decision," Collins said, adding that he will be relying on Hughes and others to augment

his vision for the county.

According to Collins, a particular area of interest for Hughes will be Parks & Recreation, where, again, he has been involved as a volunteer and coach for years.

"He has some plans for the Rec Department, to broaden it or maybe make a little more money," Collins said. "He knows rec well."

In addition to other ideas, Hughes said he wants to fully promote youth sports, as "our future is our children," while gauging the community's interest in the return of adult sports leagues, like Men's Softball and Basketball, and maybe women's and/or co-ed leagues, too.

Hughes believes that re-establishing adult-oriented rec programs would allow the county to better utilize its facilities at Meeks Park and multiple gyms with the benefit of attracting more community involvement plus revenue to supplement the Rec Department budget, both in terms of league registrations and encouraging visitors to spend money locally when hosting area teams.

And he said adult league sports and tournaments would

"give our grown-ups something else to do" while enabling Union to be competitive with other counties that sponsor similar programs.

"I've always looked for a challenge and wanted to help people," Hughes said of his new responsibilities. "I love doing stuff for the community ... and I'm going to hit it wide open and as hard as I can go to make things happen to the best of my ability."

Added Hughes, "I'm looking forward to going around and meeting everybody and showing them that I appreciate what they're doing for the county. Just want to get on board and everyone work together as one big happy family to make the county a much better place to call home."

As for Garrett, Collins said he had told him he would be hiring a different manager and asked him to stay on for 90 days to allow for the new one to be in place by March, with about 30 days in overlap to let Garrett spend some time training his replacement.

But after 31 years working for the county in various roles under multiple

commissioners, Garrett decided that Dec. 31 would be his last day. So, Hughes will be starting his new job this week.

Aside from the county manager, Collins said the jobs of the rest of former commissioner Lamar Paris' office staff "are secure right now." Many of these employees have been in their roles for years and will undoubtedly prove invaluable to Collins as he crafts his administrative agenda.

"The office staff have been excellent to work with," Collins said, noting the same of the other officials he has met with in the courthouse.

Mentioned above, one of the policy changes Collins is already implementing is to limit county-owned vehicles being driven home by employees. To begin his term, there were at least 26 take-home vehicles in a fleet of which he is still determining the size, Collins said.

In the previous administration, certain employees across multiple departments were granted permission to take work vehicles home after shifts, including at the Road Department, Transfer Station, Parks & Rec, Building Inspections, Maintenance, and even the Commissioner's Office.

For Collins, this is an obvious place to save a little public money by reducing fuel costs while avoiding wear and tear on county vehicles and cutting down on liability.

At root, Collins said he wants a vehicle policy that incorporates common sense. For example, if bad weather is forecast, Road Department employees can take their work vehicles home to be able to respond at a moment's notice directly to the scene of a downed tree or other hazard.

"Unless you're in maintenance or something, where you're on call 24/7, drive your personal vehicle here, and then you can drive the county



Tony Hughes
New County Manager

vehicle around to do your job here in the county," Collins said.

The new commissioner will be parking his own county vehicle each night before heading home in his personal car, and he said he will be looking closely at the entire fleet to potentially liquidate vehicles that are not in regular use to keep insurance costs down.

Importantly, the new policy will not impact local first responder agencies like the Fire Department and Sheriff's Office, the leaders of which use their own judgment regarding which of their employees should have vehicles to respond from home when emergencies occur.

Collins has other irons in the fire that he will be revealing in short order, and he invites the public to attend his first regular county meeting on Thursday, Jan. 16, inside the Union County Courthouse at 65 Courthouse Street.

Additionally, Collins

said he is open to hearing ideas from anyone in the community; if someone wants to talk with him, he or she can call his office at 706-439-6000 and schedule an appointment or simply walk into his courthouse office to see if he's available.

"And I plan on having three or four townhall meetings this year to invite the public out and get their input," Collins said. "It's just an honor to be the commissioner of Union County; it's a humbling experience, and I'm excited."

"Some people have said, 'Are you worried, or is it overwhelming?' And I've said, no, not yet. I like a challenge and finding something we can save taxpayers money on, because it's just as much my money as it is yours or whoever lives in the county."

Collins added that even if it's just a few dollars, he wants to try to save that money, but never at the expense of public services: "We don't want to cut service to save money ... we can't cut safety."

McTaggart Fire...from Page 1A



The view from across the street as Louise McTaggart's house turned into a raging inferno Jan. 3. Photo by Shelia Crawford

would explain how it moved through so much of the home despite a swift emergency response.

Everyone had just finished breakfast when Shahin went to work in the garage, where he found the fire and unsuccessfully attempted to smother it with a blanket.

McTaggart was sitting in the living room taking her medications when her visiting nephew rushed in to say they needed to leave the home because it was on fire; by that point, flames had made their way into the kitchen.

It was about that time that neighbor Shelia Crawford looked outside her front door after receiving a phone call about a fire in the neighborhood, and she saw McTaggart across the street walking away from her burning home.

Crawford invited her neighbor inside her house, where it was safe and warm, and McTaggart waited there

while firefighters did their jobs.

Clearly a close-knit community, another neighbor brought over a jacket for McTaggart – still in her pajamas with not a stitch of clothing to change into – and she was in the process of getting replacement items mere hours after the fire.

The Fire Department coordinated with the American Red Cross, which offered to put McTaggart and Shahin up in a motel room, and McTaggart said other neighbors told her they could stay with them for the time being.

In the meantime, McTaggart said she had another family member on her way to town to help them sort through their near-term options.

And later on Friday, McTaggart learned that her insurance company was already working on getting them a new car, clothes and a place to stay for a few days while lining up a rental house, so people came

together in a hurry to make sure she and Shahin were taken care of.

McTaggart recently retired from a 36-year career in real estate, and with her extensive knowledge of the local market, she said it will take at least a year to get into a new home of their own. But again, she is full of gratitude to have avoided a fatal tragedy.

"Everybody's safe – that's the main thing," McTaggart said.

Chief Dyer is grateful as well, and while he does not yet know what caused the blaze on Forest Circle, he advises people generally to remain vigilant against fire during the cold winter months.

"We're in the season where there's all kinds of heat sources and other ways that people can have their house catch on fire," Dyer said. "It can happen any time of the year, but this is usually the season because there's more heating."



Unfortunately, McTaggart's home is being considered a total loss after the Jan. 3 accidental fire. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

New Traffic Pattern...from Page 1A



Construction of the new bridge over Brasstown Creek at the county line continues apace as part of the GA 515 project.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

mph. These changes will impact driving times, but hopefully not by much since the affected area is a relatively short distance of the highway.

Two of the three phases for the Georgia 515/US 76 widening and relocation project in Union and Towns counties are well underway, with a total project completion estimate of 2028, according to the Georgia Department of Transportation.

The project has been on the books since 1999, initially consisting of a single construction phase to straighten and widen to four lanes roughly 8.5 miles of the highway between Blairsville and Young Harris city limits.

After bids came back too high in 2023, GDOT divided the project into three phases to bid out separately, with the same ultimate goal for the roadway, that is, to future-proof the corridor by reducing both traffic congestion and crash frequency.

Phase I consists of a two-lane rural bypass that is 1.25 miles in length running around the west side of Downtown Young Harris, beginning with a roundabout at Brasstown Creek Road and ending with a second roundabout at Timberline Drive.

This phase received its construction notice to proceed on Oct. 26, 2023, and while the bypass remains under construction at 46.35% complete, a trout stream restoration project attached to this phase has been finished.

GDOT has estimated

the bypass should be done by September 2026, however, the project was put on hold last summer due to Native American petroglyphs being disturbed during construction after an apparent miscommunication about the presence of the ancient stone carvings.

The state has been waiting to hear back from the appropriate tribal authorities on how to resolve the issue of the disturbed petroglyphs before bypass construction can resume.

Also in this phase last summer, the state's subcontractor, C.W. Matthews Contracting Co., damaged two water lines belonging to Young Harris, Mayor Andrea Gibby said, and the city is still waiting for GDOT to pay \$2,493 in costs associated with repairs and water loss.

Gibby said the state has claimed that "the insured is not the proximate cause of this accident or loss" – a contention disputed by the city.

Listed by GDOT as 6.16% complete, the separate Phase II of the project encompasses the 3.2 miles of Georgia 515 between Earl Shelton Road in Union County and Sampson Road in Young Harris.

Phase II received a green light for construction by Vertical Earth Inc. last May but had to wait until the fall to begin roadside clearing because of federal regulations around protected bat species that could possibly be roosting in the trees.

This phase contains

the traffic pattern change that is scheduled to occur this week.

Estimated to be done by August 2027, Phase II will feature straightening and widening of 515 to a four-lane divided highway with a 32-foot depressed median and 10-foot shoulder, to include a 6-foot paved shoulder to accommodate bikes from both directions.

A new bridge is being built across Brasstown Creek at the county line, parallel to the existing bridge. Traffic will eventually be diverted onto the new bridge, at which point the old bridge will be demolished and replaced with another new bridge to form twin bridges over the creek.

As Phase II gets further along, GDOT will implement eight detours to tie sideroads back into the highway.

Phase III has been deferred until early this year, to ultimately consist of widening along 4 miles of Georgia 515 from just inside Blairsville city limits to Earl Shelton Road, all in Union County. This leg of construction is expected to take three years to complete.

The three phases of the project add up to quite the price tag: the original bid for Phase I was \$26,916,958, awarded to C.W. Matthews; the Phase II original bid was \$64,085,296, awarded to Vertical Earth Inc.; and Phase III is expected to be over \$100 million, according to GDOT.

As stated by GDOT in the past, the overall project timeline remains "very fluid."