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75¢

# North Georgia News

3 Sections 28 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, November 27, 2024

## Collins celebrates win with party, supporters

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

On Friday, Nov. 22, Union County Sole Commissioner-elect Harold Collins welcomed over a hundred supporters to a drop-in celebration "in honor of this exciting new chapter for Union County."

He won election Nov. 5 and will be the first new person to hold the office in 24 years after Lamar Paris wraps up his sixth term in December. Collins is set to swear into a four-year term as the chief policymaker and steward of county resources after the first of the new year.

The party filled the upstairs ballroom of the Community Center, with a delicious array of food prepared by The View Grill's Chef Wolf and Steven Jarrard of Delish Food Truck Catering, who teamed up to donate the accommodations as a goodwill gesture to the incoming commissioner.

Throughout the evening, people lined up to personally greet and congratulate Collins, who accepted everyone warmly and with a positive outlook on the future.

Guests of the event were varied, with a mix of family and friends, voters, campaign

members, county employees, department heads and other elected officials. And Collins thanked them all while pledging to uphold his campaign promises of transparency and accountability in office.

"It's good to see this number out tonight," Collins said in addressing the crowd. "I've got to thank my Lord and Savior - He's the one who made this possible."

The farmer by trade, who has run Collins Farm for over 40 years, went on to express gratitude to those gathered, and to all his voters, for "trusting in me and having confidence in me."

"I'm going to do my best to treat every citizen right, listen to every citizen," Collins said. "I need your prayers - our country needs your prayers. I want to thank the ones that got me through the campaign, and I ain't going to mention no names, but I had a lot of help, a lot of prayers."

"I want to be everyone's commissioner. Whether you voted for me or not, I'll still listen to you. If we've got a problem, we'll sit down and work it out. If we can't work it out, we'll call somebody in, and we'll try to work the problem. I want to be a

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Harold Collins addressing attendees of his election victory celebration Friday night. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Rec Panthers earn rings in Super Bowl victory



Congratulations to the talented Union County sixth-graders who won their Super Bowl Saturday. Photo by Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Union County Recreation Department's sixth-grade football team took down longtime nemesis Chestatee in convincing fashion with a 38-0 victory in the Mountain Athletic

Conference Super Bowl at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium on Saturday, Nov. 23.

Prior to the big matchup, Union County's sixth-graders had never defeated Chestatee, a squad that took home three consecutive MAC titles as third, fourth and fifth-graders.

As sixth-graders, Chestatee defeated Union County 16-12 during the Nov. 2 regular-season meeting, marking the first points Union had ever scored against the War Eagles.

But scoring wasn't

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## Judge Brackett honored in retirement reception

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Dwain Brackett is hanging up his robes following nearly three decades of public service as Union County Probate Judge. Friends, family and colleagues wished him well at a Nov. 22 retirement reception organized by coworkers inside the courthouse.

"After 28 years, we figured he deserved this," said Associate Probate Judge Kristin Stanley, fighting back tears at the showing of support for her longtime boss in the reception. "Today is a celebration for Dwain."

Before he presided over local courtrooms, Brackett worked for the state as part of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, specifically the main office in Atlanta. A change in legislation saw his transfer to the Revenue Department.

"I wanted to get back home to the mountains," Brackett admitted, and he was transferred again to the Georgia



Dwain Brackett speaking with friends and family at his retirement party Nov. 22. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Public Service Commission. He was in Union County when he decided to run for Probate Judge at the time of the 1996 Olympics, never dreaming he would end up being re-elected for seven terms.

"I've always felt like I could call myself a people person - I only thought I was," Brackett said. "This job has

shown me compassion. It really has, because I see people a lot of times at their worst. It's hard to help everybody, but my philosophy has always been, 'Try to help everybody.'"

Talking to other judges was what drew him into the field. Brackett was inspired by not only their ability to

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## Inside Voices United enriches inmates musically

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The words "criminal" and "music" aren't often paired together, but where many may balk, local musician Greg Smith finds opportunity. Specifically, he is bringing dignity and humanity back to a part of the population that is usually forgotten - or worse, outright discarded.

Inside Voices United was started by a man with a vision, but he had a lengthy career beforehand. Born and raised in Maryland, Smith has worked all over the world, helping produce films for big titles such as "Star Wars" and "Indiana Jones"; he keeps old reels in the rafters of his studio.

That recording studio is a repurposed barn that has



Greg Smith is the force behind the unique nonprofit Inside Voices United. Photo by Bob Duncan

## Country Christmas to bring major holiday cheer



A scenic view from the past of the Mountain Country Christmas in Lights at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

HIWASSEE - The magical winter display known as the Mountain Country

Christmas in Lights returns this year to the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, bigger and better than ever, starting Thanksgiving Night.

Along with the

eponymous lights, guests can enjoy new features like train rides, a Coca-Cola-themed Christmas village and even a magic show.

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# Inside Voices United...from Page 1A

been used in a variety of ways over the years, including hay storage and beekeeping. Originally built in the 1920s, Smith dubbed the building "The Sawmill" to honor its rustic past.

About two years ago, Smith was advised by his realtor to check out the little town of Blairsville. It was here that he found a historic piece of property in the mountains that he would come to regard as home.

"We came here during a thunderstorm," Smith remembered. "I stood up on the porch and saw the mountains and said, 'What's wrong with this place? This is great.'"

Despite working on major motion pictures, training astronauts to film in space and even teaching at world-renowned institutions like American University and Savannah College of Art and Design, music has always been Smith's passion.

Self-taught with the help of a gifted ear, Smith practiced music as a hobby from a young age. He decided to revisit it in a different capacity following his departure from teaching.

"I'd sort of achieved what I wanted to achieve in film, and I did some good things at SCAD," Smith said of his thought process. "I decided it was time to give back and to do something with the next chapter of my life."

And so, the nonprofit Inside Voices United was conceived.

Inspired by Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues" and wanting to put to good use his unique talents, Smith decided to try and enrich the lives of those locked up. Living in Savannah at the time, the nearest facility available to him was Coastal State Prison.

Smith spoke to Coastal State's chaplain, Rev. Ted Valcourt, who was more than willing to entertain Smith's idea. In fact, Smith recalls Valcourt saying, "We are

starved for entertainment." Smith already had a band, and they were also on board with the idea.

In the weeks leading up to their visit, Smith held more conversations with Valcourt, who revealed that "everyone writes and plays (music)." What started as an idea to simply perform music began to turn into something more – Smith could teach the inmates how to nurture their own passion for song.

When the big day arrived, Smith and his band performed a concert for a couple hundred inmates, then held a workshop for 15 musical hopefuls. Available instruments were a guitar and a "beat-up old keyboard."

Utilizing positive reinforcement and teambuilding skills, Smith approached the task similar to how he used to teach college courses. One by one, each inmate shared a song and received feedback, learning just as much from each other as they did from Smith.

As they did so, Smith realized he could record their collection. Despite the abysmal acoustics in a prison classroom, Smith and his crew made do, and with the help of an engineer, accomplished their goal just a few months after their initial meeting.

"The inmates were incredibly cooperative; they took instruction well. I think they understood the opportunity that they were getting," Smith said. "They have a musical soul that is not being watered, if you will, and I am giving air to them, giving oxygen to them. I fed their souls, and that's what music is – you're feeding the soul."

Smith found he also felt fulfilled and wanted to do more,

so he spoke with the Georgia Department of Corrections in Forsyth County. Smith was put in touch with other state prisons and went on to record an a cappella album with inmates from the Whitworth Women's Facility in Hartwell.

As required by the state, Smith had to attend training in how to deal with prisoners, with one of the primary "rules" being to never talk to an inmate about why they're incarcerated. However, their pasts – at least in the case of Smith's musicians – often bleed into their songs.

Smith has heard all sorts of stories and met a multitude of different personalities. But make no mistake, he is not out to romanticize prison life; he doesn't glorify those he works with or make excuses for them.

"Some of them are great musicians. But they're all in there for a reason, and some of them are very, very bad people," Smith admits. "I mean, as human beings, that they did something very wrong, and that's why they're in prison."

And then there are those who have simply made bad choices. Prisoners who "got in with the wrong crowd" usually fall into this category, or are people who made mistakes in other ways and must now pay their debt to society.

One thing that's important

to clarify is that no matter who the musician is, Inside Voices United doesn't make money from the music they produce. The inmates own the songs they record and could sell them to an artist if they wanted, but Smith's organization is purely a nonprofit.

"They are creating this music," he said. "We are acting as a channel."

The mission of Inside Voices United is multifold: "To give voice to those on the inside so that their music can be heard beyond the walls. To foster a supportive and collaborative musical environment in which inmates can use their 'inside voices' to create and share their music. To provide songwriting instruction to inmates in prison. When needed, to provide musical instruments for inmates to use to compose and perform their songs. To record these songs and compile them into albums for release online. To post their 'origin stories' in a Podcast."

To check out "music from the inside" or to donate to effort, visit [www.insidevoicesunited.org](http://www.insidevoicesunited.org). Smith can also make use of old instruments, which can be repaired and given to prisons in need of musical enrichment. And be sure to search for the podcast by the same name.

# Super Bowl...from Page 1A

an issue for the Panthers during their rematch over the weekend.

Parker Dillinger accounted for all five Union County touchdowns, the first two coming on a pair of long touchdown runs that gave his team a 16-0 halftime lead.

During the third quarter,

Dillinger added a touchdown catch and an interception return, building a 32-0 lead. He tacked on a second pick-6 in the fourth quarter to conclude the scoring at 38-0.

Additional championship game coverage is available in this week's Sports Section. Go Panthers!

# Country Christmas...from Page 1A

There's a little bit of everything to enjoy at the holiday event, as, according to Fairgrounds Manager Hilda Thomason, there's no age limit on enjoying Christmas lights. Adults and children alike are encouraged to attend, and families especially will find opportunities to make plenty of cheerful memories for the holidays.

The outdoor craft market will be available to get some early Christmas shopping done, and folks can stop by one of the firepits for a hot dog or toasted marshmallow. Food vendors will offer the typical fair fare like funnel cakes, but be sure to head down to the Exhibit Hall for some cookies and punch.

Speaking of the Exhibit Hall, there'll be plenty to see there as well. Jerry Taylor of the Towns County Historical Society will be playing Christmas carols on the organ, setting the scene for the gorgeous new Coca-Cola Christmas Village donated by Greg and Lynette Jones of Gainesville.

"It's from people that have always enjoyed coming to the Fair, and they were no longer able to put it up and tear it down each year," Thomason said of the couple, who are getting older and wanted their village to continue to find purpose with others who will enjoy it for years to come.

Each one of the over 100 village pieces lights up, adding to the dazzling display available to walk through.

Also new this year is the Holiday Magic Show courtesy of Scott's World of Magic, an illusory magician act that will be on the books twice per evening on weekdays and three times per evening on weekends.

Shows will last 25 to 30 minutes and feature "grand illusions, comedy magic and cool special effects" at Eller Holler. There's a chance to be picked from the audience to participate in illusions such as floating in the air and being divided in half.

"We decided we'd change it up a bit and do a magic show ... It's something different; we're always coming up with new ideas," explained Thomason.

One more big thing coming this year is the new train, which will of course allow the kiddos to take the scenic route around the Fairgrounds. Rides will be \$5 per person, set to take off every Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

The locomotive will also feature heavily in the Towns County Sheriff's Office Christmas Parade this Saturday, with a high-profile passenger in the form of a Coca-Cola polar bear standing alongside Miss Georgia Mountain Fair and local students.

Another attraction at the lights includes carolers thanks to Cornerstone Baptist Church, Macedonia Baptist Church, Enotah Baptist Church and other churches and individuals who would like to participate.

Macedonia will be

performing a special Christmas cantata Dec. 14 at the Anderson Music Hall – free to visit with admission to see the lights.

Thomason wants to give a shoutout to the Georgia Mountain Fair staff and volunteers helping in the arduous task of putting up the thousands of lights. The process is still ongoing and has required the help of not just staff and volunteers, but Lions Club members and detainees.

The extensive décor will be on display between Thanksgiving and Dec. 23, to run 6-9 p.m. every Thursday, Friday and Saturday from Nov. 28 to Dec. 7. The display will continue every night Dec. 12-23, closing for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Six-passenger golf carts are available to provide rides for folks in need of mobility assistance, and there are some special deals to keep an eye out for in the coming days.

Towns County residents can get in free on Dec. 5, and Dec. 10 is reserved as a drive-through night for buses and shuttles carrying passengers from local nursing homes and other handicapped folks, who will likewise pay no admission for the night.

General admission tickets are \$9 per person each night, though children 12 and under get in free. For more information on the annual Mountain Country Christmas in Lights, visit <http://georgiamountainfairgrounds.com/localevnts/christmas>.

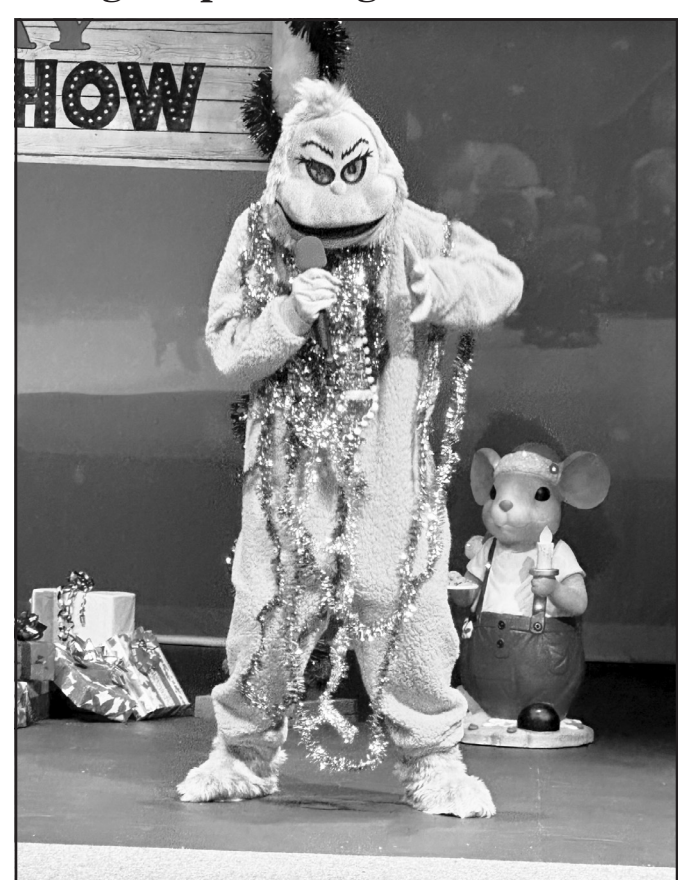
# 35 Young Performers Light Up the Stage at The Peacock

'Tis the season... or almost!! The holidays are almost here, and what better way to get into the festive spirit than with a family-friendly showcase? On Sunday, December 8th, at 4:00 PM, the stage at the Peacock Performing Arts Center will come alive as 35 talented children, ages 5 to 16, dazzle the audience with an enchanting holiday performance.

Under the direction of Ms. Robbie Dernehl, the Children's Program Director, the show will feature comedic skits, heartwarming songs, and holiday-themed monologues guaranteed to spread cheer. Expect to meet beloved characters like Santa, Mrs. Claus, and Frosty the Snowman—and rumor has it, the Grinch might even make a surprise appearance!

Adding to the excitement, the show will spotlight Averie Morgan, the recent winner of the Smoky Mountain Theater's talent contest and a proud member of the Peacock family. Alongside her, other young performers will showcase their stunning vocals with a mix of holiday classics, country tunes, and Broadway favorites.

If your child dreams of the spotlight, this is the perfect opportunity to see the magic of



Lincoln Carpenter, a youth actor who was cast in this year's performance of Okalahoma!, takes the stage as the Grinch.

the Peacock's children's program in action.

For more information, visit [ThePeacockNC.org](http://ThePeacockNC.org) or call our Box Office at 828-

389-ARTS(2787).

Celebrate the season with us—it's a holiday experience the whole family will cherish!

# Collins Celebrates...from Page 1A



Collins and his daughter Nora having a good time speaking with local firefighters Nov. 22  
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

'people's commissioner.'  
"I'm no politician. I didn't have a speech planned tonight. I just want to thank y'all and (ask that you) continue to pray for us. There's a lot of stuff that'll be coming up when I take office that will concern all citizens of the county. And I need y'all's input on that; you'll be welcome at any meeting."

"If we have to rent the Fine Arts Center to hold a meeting, that'll be fine with me. If it takes until midnight, that'll be fine with me. But we need to come together to survive. And I don't really know what else to say except thank y'all - I'm glad you could come here tonight."

Closing out his public comments, Collins said he hoped that Union County will "continue to prosper" in the coming year, "because it's just a great place to live."

Since Nov. 5, Collins has kept busy preparing for Day 1 in office, meeting with other officials and looking forward to enacting his promise to examine the county budget in search of potential spending cuts and lowering property taxes.

"I've met with the Commissioner's Office and several departments so far - I've still got some to meet with - but learning how they function and all that," Collins said. "The transition is going good; everyone I've talked to has been real cooperative."

One of those departments will be headed by another new elected official: Shawn Dyer, who won the 2024 race for Union County Sheriff. Dyer and Collins met the week of the election, and the sheriff-elect gave the commissioner-elect a tour of Sheriff's Office facilities, including the jail.

"I've come here tonight to congratulate Harold," Dyer said. "I'm going to do everything I can to make it a good relationship for the betterment of Union County."

"Just like any other public office or any other person here in Union County, it's my job to get along with these people and

work with them and do what's best to keep Union County moving forward."

Also attending the celebration was resident Doug Brown, a vocal supporter of Collins throughout his campaign. Brown feels that "we needed a change in the county," and Collins is just the ticket.

In terms of what he hopes the new commissioner accomplishes, Brown would like to see him "slow down the growth, cut wasteful spending, and not get the sheriff to take us out of a meeting when he don't like what we have to say."

Like other family there that night, Toby Collins was happy to celebrate his older brother's win. Toby got Harold into drag racing a couple years ago, and shortly after the election, Toby said his brother won another race: 6.0 No Prep Points Champion at Paradise Drag Strip in Calhoun.

It was actually a joint victory, as Toby won the finale at Paradise, but regardless, the younger Collins looks for Harold to pick up the commissioner's job just as quickly as he did racing to bring positive results to the community.

Campaign Manager Wesley Hopgood was among the many supporters taking a victory lap at Friday's celebration.

The Hopgoods have been in Union County since the 1960s and have gotten to know members of the Collins family over the decades. Wesley, who has extensive experience in politics, jumped at the chance to assist Harold after learning last year the farmer was serious about running.

"Harold brings change to this county that should have happened, and Commissioner Paris should have realized that - that this is a county of the people and for the people," Hopgood said, adding that, while he's not looking for a job, he will remain "very close to Harold" as the latter operates the county.

Qualities that Hopgood

appreciates about his friend are that he is "really an honest person and is very sincere about this county," and Hopgood is excited to see Collins enact his campaign platform over the next four years.

"There's going to be bumps in the road, there's going to be deviations, but his objective is to move this county according to his platform," Hopgood said.

The Collins platform includes "a close review of the county's performance," such as analyzing budgetary trends and producing "detailed, zero-based, line-item budgets for Offices/Departments," with an eye toward transparency and spending cuts.

He also plans to redirect county funding for the Chamber of Commerce to the Union County Economic Development Authority and "invest only the required funds from the Hotel/Motel Tax towards tourism," using the considerable balance to reduce property taxes.

Collins will also be looking at profit/loss statements for all county-owned properties, like the Butternut Creek Golf Course, Community Center and Byron Herbert Reece Farm & Heritage Center, to see if facilities are paying for themselves or losing the county money.

If certain assets are losing money, Collins said he will try to sort out how to make them profitable, perhaps by leasing them into private management.

Additionally, Collins campaigned on putting to vote two county referendums: a one-time Impact Fee for all residential and commercial building permits "to relieve current taxpayers of the additional costs to expand county services (Law Enforcement, Fire/EMS, Parks, Public Facilities, and Roads) required as a result of the new development"; and another providing a "reasonable property tax exemption for property owners at the age of 70."



Steven Jarrard slicing Collins' congratulatory cake at the Community Center.  
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Union County Farmers Market's 14th Annual Kris Kringle Market

### December 7, 2024

Over 100 Local Vendors

10am - 2pm

## Kris Kringle event at Farmers Market

Kris Kringle event at the Farmers Market Saturday, December 7, 2024. Union/Towns Volunteers for the Handicapped will be selling Pecans,

& Cashews \$8 a bag at Booth #42. We're accepting cash, & local checks only.

All proceeds go to the Union/Towns County Vol-

unteers for the Handicapped to provide activities for the Developmentally Disabled in the community. Thank you for your support.

# Brackett Retiring...from Page 1A



**Commissioner Paris and Probate Judge-elect Stanley presenting The Honorable Judge C. Dwain Brackett with a plaque of recognition Friday.**

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

work with the public but their conviction that they were making a real difference in people's lives.

Brackett himself sought to make that difference, and reflecting on his years in office, he hopes he's done so in a positive way. He can recall people coming back to thank him, which "means a lot," and he feels satisfied overall with the trajectory of his career.

Probate Court duties look different from state to state and county to county, but for Union County, that involves settling estates, organizing guardianship of minors and adults, and issuing firearm permits and marriage licenses.

But that's not all. Because Union County is so small, Probate also handles death certificates, fireworks permits and even cattle branding.

"If you brand your cattle, we have to record that brand, and that's done in my office," Brackett said with a laugh. "There's still a couple (who do it)."

Ranching practices aside, it's safe to say that Brackett has seen people at their best and, as acknowledged, their worst. And many in attendance testified that he accomplished his goals and more in terms of helping people in meaningful ways.

"Dwain has been amazing for Union County and all he's done for the people," said Commissioner Lamar Paris, who "couldn't have a better relationship" with Brackett.

In fact, Paris presented a plaque commemorating the latter's career in the courtroom, highlighting a legacy replete with "wisdom, compassion and leadership."

Stanley, who is set to inherit the role of Probate Judge on Jan. 1 after winning election to the office this year, has worked with Brackett for 21 years and has no intention of bringing about any change to the office.

She refers to her time working with Brackett as "a pleasure," and credits him with teaching her "the ins and outs of the job" and how to readily practice compassion with others.

"He's always been very kind and made sure that the staff was very well taken care of and always put us first," Stanley said, describing Brackett and her coworkers as family. "He was always willing to let us do things with our family, with our kids, and things like that, to take off work."

District Attorney Jeff Langley has worked out of the courthouse for multiple terms himself, and he said the outgoing Probate Judge, whom he has gotten to know well over the years, "has qualities that are hard to replace."

"Union County's been impacted by the fact that they had a public servant that has been wise and been honest. He worked hard for this county," Langley said.

Moreover, Langley is

grateful for Brackett's capacity for advice and counsel as a friend, echoing the words of local family lawyer Kenya Patton.

"I feel like I could contact him about (anything), like if I needed help in another area," said Patton, who was particularly moved by Brackett's tendency toward mercy in the courtroom. Seeing him in such a warm light has only deepened her trust in him.

When it comes to retirement, Brackett hopes to spend lots of time with his family and accomplish more around the house. Some may not be aware of it, but he's also nourished a hobby in music ever since he was in school.

Generally, Brackett is open to other possibilities, but he's certain he will continue his extensive work in charity. After all, he is a former President of the Appalachian Shriners and has stood with the organization for decades.

"I've never retired before, so I don't exactly know what I'm supposed to do," Brackett joked, but he was serious when he voiced his appreciation for seeing so many people come out to bid him farewell in his profession.

"I hope that everybody knows what you mean to me," he said with emotion, later adding that it has truly been a blessing to serve. "I want for the public to know that I realize what they've done for me to make this possible."