

North Georgia News

3 Sections 26 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County

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Downtown Christmas a merry sight to behold

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Magic was in the air on Saturday, Dec. 7, when Union County celebrated Christmas on the Square with the backing of an entire community.

The Union County Historical Society decorated the Old Courthouse as a winter wonderland for families to come get pictures with Santa. That afternoon, about 130 kids came through the upstairs courtroom to sit in the jolly old elf's lap and share their Christmas lists.

The doors locked at 4:30 p.m., but the fun didn't stop there. The Woody Gap Band of Steel brought some island flavor to the small-town Christmas celebrations with their 5 p.m. performance.

Directed by band teacher Doug Roberts, the students

performed under a lit-up display out front of the Historic Courthouse. They performed earlier in the day for the Kris Kringle event at the Union County Farmers Market.

Before traffic slowed and then stopped around the square, passersby showed their appreciation by honking, and more than a few folks chose to pitch their lawn chairs in front of the band for some fine entertainment.

Among traditional Caribbean songs, the group played a Christmas medley that included "Little Drummer Boy," "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," and other seasonal tunes.

One of the highlights of the night was the tree lighting, which took place seconds before the nighttime parade started. This year's Christmas tree was new, and Downtown

Development Authority Director Kristen Bentley called it a "labor of love" resulting from "community effort."

The idea was first posed by Blairsville City Councilwoman Rhonda Mahan, who "knew a sustainable, beautiful tree could be made locally and could bring smiles on our faces for years to come."

Donations from the Law Office of Daniel R. Duello, Jones Insurance, Brown Haven Homes and R.J.'s Fine Cigars helped make the dream a reality. So, Blairsville City Maintenance prepared a place on the courthouse lawn for its installation.

The 20-foot beauty's sturdy frame was made by Shook's Welding. Topped with a star and wrapped in industrial garland and multicolored lights that shift through the rainbow, See *Downtown Christmas, Page 4A*



Santa, Mrs. Claus and a couple of helper elves thrilled children throughout Downtown Blairsville with season's greetings and candy in the Nighttime Christmas Parade Dec. 7. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Paris presents final budget as sole commissioner



Lamar Paris
Sole Commissioner

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

On Thursday, Dec. 5, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris held a public hearing inside the courthouse to provide information and answer questions regarding the proposed 2025 County Budget.

Once approved in his Dec. 19 regular meeting, this will be the last budget adopted by Paris, who lost his re-election bid for a seventh term in November.

County Finance Director Laura Driskell led the Dec. 5 presentation, having made available to attendees a 25-page booklet explaining some of the budget particulars, like

the various funds used to carry out the wide range of county business, demographic data, an economic analysis, revenue and expenditure breakdowns, and more.

The 2025 budget for the General Fund – the county's main operating fund that accounts for services like public safety, certain recreation expenses, roadwork, administration, etc. – is 3.7% larger than the current-year budget, coming in about a million dollars higher at \$28,053,041.

Driskell said that the projected increase in next year's budget "is to account for the rising inflation rate, as well as to increase salaries to keep up with the population growth."

The budget must be balanced and takes about six months to craft with lots of input from county department heads. A line-item version of the proposed budget can be found at <https://www.unioncountygga.gov/>, and feedback may be directed to commissioner@uniongov.com between now and adoption on Dec. 19.

In addition to multiple county employees there to take department-specific questions, more than a dozen residents attended the hearing. A common theme among the residents who posed questions was a perceived lack of transparency regarding county government.

Public comments that evening largely centered on how opaque the budgeting

process appears to be to the average citizen, with commenters wondering why the Commissioner's Office hasn't addressed such concerns when people have been voicing some of them for several years now.

Among concerns expressed were the lack of clarity over whether county-owned facilities like the Butternut Creek Golf Course make money, lose money or break even; why certain funds like the General Fund get detailed public descriptions of how money is spent while other funds do not; why certain monetary transfers in county government are so hard to follow on paper;

See *Budget Hearing, Page 3A*

12 Years Later: A Look Back on the Sheriff's Office

By Mack Mason
Union County Sheriff

It has been a great honor to serve as Your Sheriff running Your Sheriff's Office.

I am grateful to the Almighty God who has given us the desires and abilities to serve and protect this county and the dedication of all our staff members. We have some of the best, highly knowledgeable and skilled staff of any Sheriff's Office around.

And I truly thank our citizens for their support for the last 12 years. You are our greatest asset!

Upon taking office 12 years ago, the Union County Sheriff's Office was buying eight new patrol vehicles every three years. In other words, we had no new vehicles.

My first year, 2013, was the year we were allotted eight new cars. The total tax money was \$220,000 over the years of

2013, 2014 and 2015, as they were "lease to own." During those three years we seized approximately \$500,000 in property and money. I bought about 22 Ford Crown Vics over two or three years, and we bought some new cars with that same drug seizure money.

A few years later, the state incentives were really good, and we started trading some vehicles every year. We often swapped a vehicle that was one year old for a brand-new vehicle. A lot of the trucks we traded we received \$700 for the trade. The dealer could sell the used vehicle and make money due to the state incentive being so high for us.

When Covid-19 hit, the vehicle prices nearly doubled, and the state incentives went to near nothing. Through a lot of seizure money, some SPLOST, and sound management, we

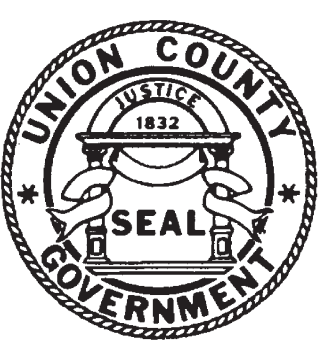
See *12 Years Later, Page 2A*



Sheriff Mack Mason has enjoyed the privilege of leading the fine staff of the Union County Sheriff's Office these last 12 years. Photo by Shawn Jarrard/2022

Commission Board Petition fails constitutional test

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com



The grassroots petition to change from a sole commissioner form of local government to a five-member board of commissioners has been dismissed after being deemed invalid, per a Nov. 25 court order by Union County Probate Judge Dwain Brackett.

Organized by residents, the apparent goal of petitioners was to create a local referendum in an upcoming election for voters to decide if they wanted to have greater representation in Union County Government with five commissioners.

A 60-day clock started ticking at the beginning of November when the Probate Office received the petition of more than 4,000 signatures, which was filed under the name "We the People."

Judge Brackett's staff immediately began the process of verifying signatures while simultaneously seeking legal guidance on the issue, as this was the first petition of its kind filed in the judge's 28 years in office.

In consultation with both a county attorney and outside

legal counsel, Brackett found that the Georgia Constitution "unambiguously states" that the General Assembly has "exclusive province" regarding actions affecting "any elective county office" and "the composition, form...of the county governing authority."

With this determination, Judge Brackett issued the court order stating that, "because the petition seeks to do what the Constitution directly forbids... the petition is not valid." The order ultimately dismissed the petition "with prejudice"; in

other words, it cannot be filed again.

Judge Brackett said he realizes the dismissal may be seen as controversial by some members of the community, but he noted that his office reached this conclusion strictly through a well-researched and straightforward interpretation of the law.

That's not to say petitions pertaining to other issues couldn't be successful, but that the petition process built into the Georgia Constitution was not meant to be used to

initiate a change in the form of local government.

District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch agrees. Prior to serving in the General Assembly, Gooch ran for sole commissioner of Lumpkin County, pledging that, if elected, he would seek the opportunity to give residents a right to vote on changing to a five-member commission board.

When Gooch made that pledge, his county was dealing with massive debt and law

See *Petition Invalid, Page 3A*

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Classic Christmas & Live Nativity Event Dec. 14 See Page 8A

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12 Years Later ...from Page 1A

now have approximately 35 new vehicles and 15 vehicles that are a year old. We seldom buy tires, batteries, etc., and all these vehicles are under warranty from the manufacturer. I am proud of this accomplishment and those enumerated below.

SHERIFF'S OFFICE

- Increased employee benefits and salaries resulting in increased employee retention.
- Acquired report management software when previously there was none.
- Introduced a case filing system.
- Transitioned from paper reports to digital reports and automation.
- Procured up-to-date firearms for all deputies including pistols, rifles, and shotguns, largely paid for by drug seizure money.
- Provided in-date body armor for all deputies.
- Obtained basic tools for all vehicles, i.e., axes, jumper cables, fire extinguishers, and first-aid kits.
- Bought a transport van to transport many inmates at a time versus making several trips. Paid for without any tax dollars or SPLOST funds.
- Established a centralized purchasing system.
- Established a hiring background system.
- Embraced new technologies, such as new computer systems, less lethal equipment for deputies, and TASERS for every deputy.
- Developed excellent working

relations with surrounding law enforcement agencies and other government offices as well as legislative officials.

- Blairsville Police Officers have been deputized to give leeway to assist with emergency situations in the county, with Mack Mason being the ONLY Sheriff that has a close working relationship with the city police in their county that allows them to be deputized in order to go into the county to assist when needed. Also, deputies are allowed to work part-time for the Blairsville Police Department and the Union County Schools Police Department.
- All deputies work closely with the District Attorney's Office and Court Officials.
- Created a Traffic Unit that helps cut down speeding and reckless driving throughout the county.
- Our calls for service have increased almost every year, and we have met the needs of our citizens.
- A new state law was enacted by the Legislature and pioneered by Sheriff Mason to prohibit 18-wheeler trucks on Richard Russell Highway. This was due to all the wrecks we have had to work involving these trucks and the large amount of time it takes to clean up the wreckage and damage to the environment.
- Installed steel gates on Richard Russell Highway both in Union and White County so the highway can be closed in case of a wreck, snow, or ice. Pioneered by Sheriff Mason through the Department of Transportation.

UNIFORMED PATROL DIVISION

- Put laptops inside patrol vehicles for faster response and information.
- Ballistic shields in vehicles.
- New uniforms.
- New Radar equipment.
- Acquired bodycams for the entire division.
- Acquired in-car printers to print out traffic tickets.
- Up-to-date weaponry. Ran approximately 25 used Glocks through public auction over the course of two years and purchased 25 new Glocks for approximately \$2,500 due to state contract, and the balance was paid for by drug seizure money for a huge savings.
- Established a two-man and two part-time deputies to work a traffic unit resulting in over 3,000 citations per year. They focus on excessive speeds, reckless driving, DUIs, etc. Money from fines goes to the Superior and Probate Courts and then to the Commissioner's Office. None comes to the Sheriff's Office.

CIVIL

- Two full time deputies dedicated to serving court papers, warrants, Temporary Protective Orders, civil papers, evictions, and subpoenas.
- They handle a large number of transports when needed, in-state and out.

CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS DIVISION

- Added onto the Criminal Investigations Division building, creating a meeting/briefing room and two interview rooms, with audio and video recording for both interview rooms. Paid for by drug money.
- Acquired two portable crime scene kits.
- Obtained fingerprint kits.
- Created an Internal Affairs Unit.
- Purchased Computer Voice Stress Analyzer (CVSA) machines.
- Joined the Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force, assigning an investigator to the task force to work these cases. This investigator puts on educational classes for the schools to educate children to the dangers of online activities.
- Advanced the level of training for all investigators. Due to the level of training, investigators are able to handle more serious and violent cases such as child molestation, rape, and family violence that are not being worked by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation due to their lack of staffing.
- Implemented a full-time fraud investigator who also puts on classes for public education and periodic news articles and radio appearances to prevent fraud from occurring.
- Obtained a device to download the contents of mobile devices like cellphones, tablets, etc. Paid for by a grant.
- Ongoing maintenance of the state-mandated Sex Offender Registry to the highest professional standard. One of the few Sheriff's Offices that

has CID handle these duties, enabling investigators to keep a better watch on registered sex offenders. Instituted "Operation Watchful Eye" four times a year, including on Halloween and three random visits, to make sure sex offenders are following their court-ordered restrictions.

NARCOTICS/SPECIAL OPERATIONS

- Purchased new undercover electronic and surveillance equipment.
- Obtained up-to-date weaponry and tactical equipment for Sheriff's Emergency Response Team, or S.E.R.T.
- Purchased new cameras to assist in narcotic investigations.
- Seized countless illegal narcotics, which lead to countless arrests. Due to those arrests, we were able to seize drug money and various property in the form of vehicles, firearms, and houses. Due to seizing property, this helps save taxpayer money. Money is spent according to state law and is audited annually.
- No tax dollars used for undercover drug buys. All money used comes from our seizure fund.

EVIDENCE

- Full-time deputy assigned to evidence and property, but also assists Narcotics and Road Units when needed.
- Detailed and documented storage.
- Proper property and evidence barcoding with software.
- Proper property and evidence procedures.
- Built a storage building and garage within the impound lot that is used to process vehicles for evidence in criminal investigations. Paid for by drug seizure money.

COURTHOUSE SECURITY

- The state passed a new law tasking Sheriffs with courthouse security with no additional funding to support this new mandate.
- Purchased two X-ray machines for both courthouse entrances.
- Purchased two walk-through metal detectors.
- Had to hire additional staff to meet requirements under the new courthouse laws.
- Upgrades to the courthouse included new cameras, alarm systems, and detectors.

JAIL

- In conjunction with the Commissioner's Office, we created two jail inmate work details with two full-time jail officers assigned to these work details. These work details clean up the county venues, such as the Farmers Market, Meeks Park, Horse Arena, etc., by picking up trash, mowing grass, cutting trees, and more. During Covid-19, Colwell's Detention Center stopped their work crews that were rented by the county, but we continued.
- Established good working relations with the District Attorney's Office to maintain workable jail population numbers. No money spent to house out inmates since 2019.
- Improved technology in the Jail.
- Inmates can now use video visitation. This provides additional hours for visitation.
- Safer for Jail staff to have virtual visitation versus a lobby full of people tying up officers.
- In conjunction with the Magistrate Court, we added the capability to conduct virtual court hearings when needed. This cuts down a lot of transports, thus saving taxpayers money.
- Added a special feature to the phone line so attorneys can privately speak to their clients when needed, allowing conflict and out-of-town attorneys to speak to inmates at their convenience.
- Obtained a state certified Intoximeter, paid for by a grant valued at \$9,000.
- Improved Jail medical services with a full-time nurse and seven day a week tele-med service. They perform inhouse EKG's, labs, X-rays, and set up a mental health screening through the state.

- Obtained a kiosk in the Jail lobby to give families a better way to add money onto inmates' books and phone accounts. Also added a website feature to allow money to be added to these accounts as well.
- Obtained a fingerprint machine for civilian fingerprints. Civilians needing to get fingerprinted no longer have to go into the jail, near inmates, to be fingerprinted.

TRAINING

- Established a dedicated training unit with POST-certified instructors. They provide quality in-house training which saves money by not having to send deputies out of town for training.

ANIMAL CONTROL

- Two full-time POST-certified deputies, who also assist road deputies when needed.
- Maintaining and running the shelter.
- Handling all sorts of animal calls, i.e., dog bites, animal neglect, animal rescue, etc.
- Obtained two dog boxes to transport animals, paid for with seizure money.
- Obtained catch poles along with large and small animal traps.
- They maintain a close relationship with veterinary offices, rescue shelters, and adoption shelters.

COMMUNITY SERVICE

- Expanded the Give a Gift Program for kids aged 2-12 during Christmas for approximately 80 Union County families.
- Worked closely with Blairsville Police Department's Shop with a Cop Program for Christmas.
- Assisted with Shop with a Panther for Christmas.
- Assisted with Shop with a Cruiser for Christmas.
- Uniformed off-duty deputies available for hire for certain private events.

OTHER ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Founded, with the aid of Paul Clark and others, the Union County Gun Club, which led us to the building and opening of the Union County Gun Range. Working with Commissioner Lamar Paris and many others, we have a beautiful and state-of-the-art facility that firearms enthusiasts can go to exercise their Second Amendment rights. I found out we could and did get 90% of the money for this project through the "Federal Pittman-Robertson Act." Thus, Union County only had to pay for 10% of the project. It is run by the Union County Recreation Department. This range is also used for county, city, and state law enforcement for their mandated yearly qualifications. This is something Union County Government did not have before.

Something else I had the honor in starting during funeral processions is having deputies at intersections. When the funeral procession passes the deputy or city police officer stands at attention and renders a hand salute if the funeral involves a military veteran. They will place their hand over their heart if the funeral is not a veteran. It is a must that we honor the people we serve.

Another thing that I have stressed since the beginning is liability. It seems like everything we do nowadays involves some form of liability. I am proud to report that the UCSO has not been involved in any lawsuits during the past 12 years.

In cooperation with city officials, I urged the DOT to lower the 45-mph speed limit on the four-lane through town in order to save lives because speed kills and injures. DOT is in the process of dropping the limit to 40 mph.

In summation, it has been the honor of my life serving Union County and its wonderful citizens. Thank you for supporting me and your Sheriff's Office.

Sincerely,
Mack Mason

Budget Hearing...from Page 1A

and why obscure accounting terminology is not translated for the public into easily digestible verbiage.

The commissioner took over from Driskell to explain that he understood people's frustration with the budgeting process, but that his office follows strict state accounting procedures in allocating county funds.

Paris said even he doesn't understand how all the numbers work, and that he relies on professional auditors to make sure the Commissioner's Office is doing everything by the book each year.

As to whether certain county services make or lose money, Paris challenged the assumption that public services – even recreational

ones – ought to necessarily pay for themselves.

"Whether it be the (horse arena) or the library – whatever it happens to be in government – the vast majority of services that we provide to the citizens does not make money," Paris said. "And if that's your goal to only make money, that's fine."

Resident Vince Peterson responded that "nobody is saying that all these things have to make money or not make money." "The thing is, we don't know what they do," Peterson continued. "And if we have

proper accounting to see what the income and the expenses are for The View Grill (for example), we can then make a decision as the citizens of the county whether or not we should maintain that."

Paris said he believed the condition of the county – with its multitude of public services, good roads, debt-free government, healthy reserve funds, relatively low property tax rate and a budget he is proud of – served as evidence that "our county is properly maintaining (its) finances."

"If we need to fix the (budget) terminology, and the state will allow us to do that ... we will be more than happy to do that," Paris said regarding transparency claims. "It's just going to take some time."

By the end of the nearly

hour-long meeting, it seemed a mutual understanding of sorts had arisen between skeptical attendees and the Commissioner's Office.

The few members of the public concerned enough to show up for a review of the county's forward-looking finances had gotten the chance to say they didn't feel local government was doing all it could to be transparent and let people know what was going on in straightforward terms, and Paris was able to communicate that the Commissioner's Office was trying its best – and would continue to try – to accommodate concerns about a complex process that is inherently difficult to grasp.

Paris asked the public to understand that not all questions could be answered

during that informational hearing, and he and Driskell invited people to make additional queries at the Commissioner's Office.

Generally, open records

requests may be made at <https://www.unioncountygga.gov/open-records-request/>. The county asks that as much specificity as possible be used when requesting documents.

Petition Invalid...from Page 1A

enforcement investigations brought about by decisions of the then-sole commissioner, so the circumstances around the desire to change the form of government there were markedly different.

He won that election in 2000 and kept his word, working with the General Assembly and voters to enact the governmental change. Gooch served as the last sole commissioner of Lumpkin County and went on to win election as the first part-time chair of the newly formed five-member commission.

Gooch said that, to his knowledge, there are three ways to get such a referendum up for a vote: the local government can request it, which is not something the current administration is interested in pursuing; a presentation can be made to a local grand jury, which could recommend a referendum; or enough residents could band together to convince their state legislators that there is significant local will to potentially enact the change.

Regardless, getting a local referendum to a vote requires what is known as a "local Act," meaning the state legislators for Union County, in this case Sen. Gooch and Rep. Stan Gunter, would have to draw up and pass legislation calling a referendum for Union

County voters.

Speaking from experience, Gooch said it's a long and tedious process that would require plenty of caution and due diligence "to make sure we get it right the first time."

He said the soonest a referendum could be called would be 2026, as there would need to be multiple hearings for public debate and "input from everybody," plus considerable deliberations, including with professional consultants, to enumerate the many specifics of the replacement government before a single vote is cast.

If a 2026 referendum were to pass to change to a multimember commission board, the earliest election to fill the new board would be in 2028, as Sole Commissioner-elect Harold Collins, who won election this year, is guaranteed the completion of his four-year term.

That is a best-case scenario; it could take longer to flesh out all the particulars of a new form of government, which would have to be undertaken by the offices of Sen. Gooch and Rep. Gunter, with plenty of input from other entities, if the local government is not the requesting party.

Of course, the volunteers who spent countless hours collecting thousands of signatures at multiple public

locations across the county for the last two and a half years are disappointed with the court order finding that "it is apparent on the face of the petition that it is not valid."

Resident Cindy Vandereedt, who spearheaded the long petition effort before turning it in last month, said she can't help but feel that her First Amendment right to petition the government has been cast aside by local officials.

And though it was not clear at press time whether the Probate Court's decision could be appealed, Vandereedt said she and others remain committed to the endeavor and will be examining this result in greater detail before deciding next steps in the weeks and months ahead.

Not all hope is lost for the would-be petitioners. They can follow up with one of the above-prescribed routes to potentially get their referendum request introduced during an upcoming legislative session.

Citing his experience in Lumpkin, Sen. Gooch warned that changing to a five-member commission would drive up the costs of local government, despite arguments by some petitioners that it would be cheaper to operate a part-time commission board versus the current form.

"Government comes at

a price tag," Gooch said. "(A multimember commission) slows down the decision making – it'll cost more money and time. Whatever the number of commissioners you end up with ... they'll all have their priorities and their wants and needs for their districts."

"And then you end up having to appropriate money for that. So, (Lumpkin County) has seen an increase in spending as a direct correlation because of the number of commissioners that we've had."

Importantly, Gooch noted that he was "not pushing one direction or the other," but that such a decision "would have to be made by the majority of the votes of Union County."

The question of whether the form of government should be changed actually has been put to local voters in recent years, albeit via a nonbinding question that appeared on Republican Party ballots in the 2020 General Primary Election.

Then, 51% of Republican voters said "NO," expressing their opinion that the form of government should remain unchanged, despite the duly elected sole commissioner at the time being a five-term Democrat up for re-election unopposed.

Such nonbinding ballot questions are designed to help steer party priorities.

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Downtown Christmas...from Page 1A



In the Christmas Parade on Saturday, the Union County Relay For Life float carried a special tribute to volunteers Allyson McGraw and Barbara Richardson, who passed away this year. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Blairsville's new Christmas tree is truly a sight to behold.

It lit up the night as the Christmas Parade began, joined by the flashing lights and sirens of local first responders like the Blairsville Police and Union County Fire. At over 40 minutes long, the 2024 parade included local organizations, churches, businesses and even individuals with a knack for decorating.

Several floats featured snow machines, and though it wasn't real, the square received a temporary blizzard that only added to the festivities that night as kiddos scrambled for candy, a glimpse of Jack Skellington on stilts, or a quick greeting from Mrs. Claus.

Of particular note, too, was local country music artist Tommy Townsend performing atop the Granddaddy Mimm's float, themed around the

longtime Friday night concerts at the Courthouse on the Square.

A cutout of none other than Mr. Sam Ensley's smiling face made it a moving tribute to a Blairsville legend who helped make those performances possible.

Even the four-legged residents of Union County got in on the festivities, as a group of happy hounds bounded first through the parade as part of the Safe Pet Project's contribution. Then, courtesy of the Union County Mounted Search and Rescue Team, riders on decorated horseback strolled on trusty steeds through Downtown Blairsville.

Then, of course, bringing a fantastic end to the show, Santa Claus himself returned to wave and wish excited little elves and their parents a very Merry Christmas.

Tara Guffey was one of many moms out that night. She called the display "pure magic" and a memory she and her family will "cherish forever." It was the first Christmas parade in their hometown they had been able to attend in a few years, and they weren't disappointed.

"We will continue the Christmas magic by donning our pajamas and driving around to enjoy some of the local homes who have fantastic light displays," Guffey added, also looking forward to continuing the family tradition of completing Christmas crafts.

"This has been a tradition for many years," resident Kathryn Litton later wrote on Facebook about watching the town come together to decorate in anticipation for the night's activities. "Such a wonderful place to live."



Young's Wrecker Service depicted a live Nativity aboard its parade float entry Dec. 7. Photo by Shawn Jarrard



As usual, the Blairsville Dance Project featured both a float and lively walking elements in the parade. Photo by Shawn Jarrard



A pair of Santa's reindeer showed up larger than life in the Downtown Blairsville Christmas Parade. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks