

Animal Control...from Page 1

vehicles were inadequate for the task at hand, and worked to replace them, even though the Animal Control budget, which is separate from the budget of the sheriff's office, contained no money with which to spend on new trucks.

"Shortly after being in office, we had enough drug money to buy, with trades, a 2013 Ford F-150," said Sheriff Mason, speaking of the drug seizure fund. "The next year, we traded in the 2013 and another vehicle on two 2014 F-150s, and all the difference was paid for with drug money. And recently, those vehicles had 31,000 miles on them each, and we traded those in on two 2015 Extended Cab Ford F-150s, and equipped them with drug money.

"So they are now driving two brand new vehicles at little to no cost to the taxpayer. The amount of money that has been in the Animal Control budget for the past three years is zero dollars for buying vehicles, so we feel like that's quite an accomplishment that they're

driving two new vehicles with little to no cost to the taxpayer."

Animal Control has come a long way since Sgt. Lerman – who has nearly 40 years of experience in law enforcement and almost a decade in Animal Control – took over in 2013.

"Additionally, we were able to expand our animal shelter intake area to provide more kennel space, with construction completed by use of detainees, which again was an expense not utilizing county taxes," said Sgt. Lerman. "We reestablished a connection with Union County-based services – veterinary facilities, local businesses – which provide services at the best rate possible, and also enable us to control budgetary expenses.

"We currently have local businesses and citizens that have donated to our shelter, which reinforces their obvious trust in our services."

Sgt. Lerman and Deputy McConnell alternate weeks of being on call 24/7, and when

they aren't busy handling an animal complaint they assist in regular calls through the sheriff's office.

In 2015 alone, Animal Control received 1,565 calls through dispatch, and there were 28 animal bite complaints.

"Our area of responsibility consists of response to any animal-related nuisance issue, animal neglect/abuse concerns, and injured animal situations," said Sgt. Lerman. "In addition, we also investigate stray pets and conduct welfare checks due to safety and/or health concerns. This includes only domestic animals, however, we do investigate incidents involving farm animals – horses, cows, etc. – and on occasion, incidents involving wildlife."

Stray or loose dogs and cats that are taken in by Sgt. Lerman and Deputy McConnell are cared for at Animal Control facilities, which are cleaned daily by inmates of the Union County Jail.

An important aspect of what Sgt. Lerman has done

with Animal Control is to build and bolster relationships within the community, directly with rescues like Castoff Pet Rescue, Tri State Pet Rescue and the Humane Society Mountain Shelter.

These relationships help Sgt. Lerman to place animals in permanent homes, or to reunite pets with owners over a wide geographic area.

"They've been really good to us in responding to calls where people dump animals (here at the shelter), where we get tag numbers," said Mountain Shelter Director Lisa McConnell. "They follow through on verifying rabies, and helping us locate through microchips.

"They've been really cooperative, and us with them, in helping to find homes for more animals and avoiding euthanasia. As an Animal Control, they do really well, posting animals on Facebook. A lot of Animal Control departments are forced to euthanize without adoption, but Mike and Jeff both – they're like another rescue. They're great, and they've

really helped us a lot."

Facebook is a tool that Sgt. Lerman has learned to rely on, in connecting with the public and spreading the word about animals and services in the area.

"If you ever check our site daily, you'll see that what we do is, we post what's going on – I keep people informed of the issues involving any type of animal related calls we're working," said Sgt. Lerman. "And we post the lost pets, found pets, things of that nature, and the general public gets involved.

"Lots of times, they'll share these with other counties, and we've been able to reunite many lost pets with their

owners. We've acquired a lot of information on investigations that we're working, just based on Facebook and putting out the word to the general public."

Deputy McConnell has also partnered up with K-9 Deputy Lacey, a Bloodhound, and the two have saved lives and caught criminals both in their Search and Rescue efforts.

The department's Facebook page is titled Union County Sheriff's Office Animal Control, and concerned residents can submit comments or questions for Animal Control there.

FFA...from Page 1

Primary School, but according to Union County High School agriculture teacher John Clark Pettit, this brand new, state-of-the-art facility will be a welcome relief over the current facilities.

"No doubt this is going to be an upgrade over the barn we've been using," Pettit said. "That building is probably in the neighborhood of 40 to 50 years old, but it's served its purpose and we've done the best we could with it. We're always dealing with busted water lines and other issues, so it's been a constant battle. We're happy with anything we can get, but the new building is going to be top-notch. It's a barn, but it's more than a barn."

According to Pettit, the new building will allow the Future Farmers of America (FFA) to host local and regional livestock shows. It will also include an area where students can house livestock projects.

"We're building a barn, but creating a living, working and breathing school farm that will give the students daily responsibilities of maintaining, taking care of and working this farm, and we're going to be looking for ways to make it profitable," Pettit said. "It will be a school-run business, in a sense. The Blue and Gold Auction that we host is a student-run business entity.

"It will be a work in progress because it's going to take a couple of years to see the farm fully developed.

The name of the farm, 'Blue and Gold Farms,' goes along with the colors of the FFA organization."

Pettit has been at Union County Schools since 2012, and when he interviewed for the job, he was told that a new ag center and school farm would be a possibility.

Construction began in late November of last year, and it has already drawn the eye of the ag programs in a pair of neighboring counties.

And if the new Fine Arts Center is any indication, county residents can expect nothing but the best for Union County's FFA and agriculture students.

"I recently spoke with the ag teacher in Fannin County, and they are talking about building a new ag center, and later, Gilmer County jumped on board with a new building, and they're all wanting to look at our plans," Pettit said. "We're just very excited about what we have in the works."

Just as the Fine Arts Center is available for community use, Pettit expects the new Ag Center will be utilized by the school and others in the agriculture business.

"We're hoping to make it available for use by those in the ag industry and other

ag-related groups," Pettit said. "We were hoping it would be finished by April so we could hold our FFA banquet there. We hope the Cattlemen's Association and maybe some other farm-related or ag-related groups or organizations will be able to use the Ag Center for different events.

"The school farm will provide a lot of opportunities that kids don't receive anymore unless they live on a farm. Everybody pictures a farmer as someone in overalls and a straw cap, but agriculture is highly advanced, and in a lot of areas, highly technical."

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