

Steppe...from Page 1A

of Union County Schools conducted themselves.

"It's just been wonderful to work with this system," said Steppe. "I knew it was a good school system because I'd been at Stephens, and we're in the same RESA, so I'd always seen its test scores. And usually, when I was at Stephens County, in one area Union County would be highest, and in the other area, Stephens County.

"It would be back and forth just about every subject, every area – one of the two of us would usually be in the Top 2 or 3 every year. I just thought it would be a great place to work."

Another reason Steppe took the superintendent position in Union County back in 2011

was that he liked the people of the county, their traditional values.

"I grew up in the mountains of North Carolina, and there's just something about mountain people," said Steppe. "There's a lot to be said for the kind of integrity that most people in this area really have. It's kind of a unique set of values, and I like to work with mountain people, because they're up front."

Union County Schools have enjoyed an era of continued success under Superintendent Steppe, including strong financial health, as well as new programs such as the theater classes at Union County High School and Middle School, and the brand new, SPLOST-funded

Union County Schools Fine Arts Center.

Steppe's leadership has paved the way for the upcoming state-of-the-art agriculture facility, not to mention the future programs INCubatorEDU and Mobile Maker Training, which will teach students practical skills such as planning and running a business, and how to make apps for Apple's operating system.

From the PAES Lab at the high school to Portuguese language classes at the primary school and the Woody Gap Band of Steel, Steppe and his faculty have done everything they can to ensure student success.

"The culture we've tried to establish is to always keep the students' best interests at heart, No. 1, and with all decisions we make, is it best for the student?" said Steppe. "That's what we want. Everybody asks themselves – if we do this, is this the best outcome for students?"

Steppe informed the board of his intention to retire

in the October board meeting so as to give the board plenty of time to conduct a search and find a replacement before the end of the school year.

Present in the Nov. 3 called board meeting was Dr. Sandy Addis, a superintendent search specialist who works with King-Cooper and Associates.

Addis has been hired to help the Union County Board of Education search for another superintendent, and the position has already been made available on the school system's website, ucschools.org.

The search process will take at least a couple of months, with a deadline of Dec. 22 for completed application packages, and the board will certainly vet the best possible person to replace Steppe as superintendent – though that person will have some big shoes to fill, as some of his closest associates have testified.

"He's been the best mentor anybody could have asked for," said Union County Schools Associate Superintendent Dr. Jeremy Williams. "To have

somebody who's been a successful superintendent in three different places, and has done some great and amazing things at each of those places – just to be able to work under him, and serve with him and learn from him, is the best thing I could have asked for."

Union County Primary School Principal Millie Owenby echoed Williams' sentiments, saying that Steppe will be missed.

"He has been a great asset to our system," said Owenby. "He's brought in a lot of technology, and has been very strategic in getting the Fine Arts Center complete. The primary school is getting 10 new classrooms, and he's been a part of that as well. With the new agricultural center coming along, that is also a part of what he has worked toward.

"So, I think he's brought quite a bit of new and different ideas, along with our STEM programs, and different things at the middle school and the high school going on as well. Mr. Steppe is in our building

pretty much on a daily basis, and is truly, genuinely interested in student success."

By all accounts, Steppe will be leaving the school system better than he found it, which is saying something considering that Union County Schools have historically been run with a mind toward excellence.

"He had a difficult job coming in because the Union County School System has always been a very well-run, very good school system by prior administration," said High School Principal John Hill, who also called Steppe a mentor. "The difficulty is, you take something that's already good and try to improve it, that can be quite a daunting task, but he was able to come in and successfully continue to improve the schools."

Following his retirement, Steppe said he may pursue helping other school systems search to fill vacant positions, such as coaches, principals and maybe even superintendents.

Food City...from Page 1A

in Abingdon, VA, comes to Blairsville following the recent acquisition of 29 BI-LO grocery stores near the area – all of the Tennessee stores and eight in North Georgia.

Fortunately, all employees who formerly worked for BI-LO were able to keep their jobs as Food City took over as the new owner.

"When we first did this transition, I speak for all of my associates when I say we were kind of nervous and really didn't know what we were going to do," said Blairsville Store Manager Kenny Brown in the opening ceremony Wednesday. "But the Food City folks came in, took us all in, treated us like family, made us part of their team, and I really want to thank Food City for keeping all these people that are employed here in Union County.

"I know I appreciate it, and I know they all do, too, so thank you Food City," continued Brown. "I would also like to thank all of my associates. I know this last month we've gone through a hard transition, and you all have put in more hours than you can imagine, spent time away from your families, but I really appreciate everything you all have done to get us transitioned to where we are

today."

Chamber President Cindy Williams welcomed everyone to the event, including Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley, Union County Development Authority Director Mitch Griggs, Darren Harper of the Blairsville Downtown Development Authority, several chamber employees, as well as representatives of Food City's corporate offices.

"This is so exciting," said Williams. "We've all been waiting for the day that we could walk through – I've come in a couple of times and done my shopping – so, congratulations to everyone that's been involved in this process.

"As Kenny said, I can only imagine the hard work that's been put into this, and we also too are very excited that we'll see familiar faces, ones that we've gotten to know. BI-LO had a great reputation in the community because of its people, and so I know Food City is going to be awesome and carry that forward."

Just prior to the cutting of the ribbon, Griggs and Mayor Conley said words of thanks to Food City for bringing their business to town, and as it came time to cut the ribbon, Food City Executive Vice President of Marketing and Merchandising Dan Gleis called on Blairsville's Food City department heads to stand with him.

Refreshments were made available to patrons of the store that day, and Terry Smith, a Food City associate, and Pat List, two members of the Gnarly Fingers band, entertained guests with live music.

Following the Grand Opening, Gleis stuck around to tell people more about why they should be excited to have Food City in their community.

"What we're going to provide is, No. 1, we're going to be a great community citizen," said Gleis. "Everybody says that, and I think you'll experience that through our associates. But what's in it for me from a shopper's standpoint? We have low everyday prices – our prices are very low and competitive every day, and we have great sales.

"In addition to that, we've got a rewards program, where you can save up to 5 percent if you shop with us a little bit. And the quality of our meat is unprecedented in the way we make it, because we grind beef several times a day. Not only do we have certified Angus beef, we've got Prime beef if you want it, deli, produce, organics."

And the transition between BI-LO customer cards and the Food City program is as easy as scanning the old card at the register to get a new one, just one of the many things appreciated by Food City customers.

"It's clean and very friendly," said Blairsville resident Judith Norris. "Everyone has been very helpful. I've had a lot of conversations with the meat guy when I was questioning him about meat, and he was very helpful."

When it comes down to it, Brown and his team would like to extend an invitation to the community to stop on by the new and improved Food City.

"We just look forward to working with the community, and learning their needs so that we can give to them," said Blairsville Food City Assistant Manager Jeff Hall. "It's a community-oriented company."

Panthers...from Page 1A

quarterback Joseph Mancuso returning as the Panthers' field general, Head Coach Brian Allison and his tight-knit squad wrapped up their 2015 campaign with another 9-1 record.

"There's just something about this group and last year's group," Allison said. "They're a great group of guys. They have a great heart and are great competitors."

One of the rewards for a nine-win season is the opportunity to host the first round of the Class AA State Tournament this Friday night.

The Panthers will welcome a 5-5 Bowdon team to Blairsville as Union gets another shot at that elusive State Tournament victory.

By finishing second in 8-AA (Rabun County is first), Coach Allison's Panthers are allowed to seek the program's first 10-win season and its first win at State within the friendly confines of Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

Union County concluded its regular season last Friday night as they went into one of the toughest venues in 8-AA and pulled away from a physical and athletic Washington Wilkes team by a score of 43-21.

Coach Allison chalks up much of his team's success this year to a productive rushing attack – something Union has been lacking for several years.

"I think this year is the first year in a long time that we've been able to run the football and control the ball a little bit better on the ground," Allison said.

The Panthers would only complete two passes (both going for touchdowns) as the running game was able to impose its will upon a stingy Washington Wilkes defense to the tune of

344 yards rushing on 47 carries – an average of 7.3 yards-per-carry.

The playoff-bound Tigers, who finished as the No. 3 seed in the Region, drew first blood on Friday night but it was all Union from that point on.

Trailing 6-0, Mancuso, who rushed for a team-high 170 yards, scored on a read-option keeper from 10-yards out. He then converted a two-point conversion that caught the Tigers napping.

The Panthers stretched their advantage to 15-6 on a screen pass to Sam Gilbert that the senior receiver took to the house from 43 yards out.

Following a Wilkes touchdown that cut the lead to 15-13 late in the second quarter, Union responded by going 63 yards on two plays, capped off by a 56-yard touchdown strike that saw Mancuso dump off a pass to senior Knox Kiernan, who slipped out of the backfield and outran the Tigers' defense down their own sideline for a 22-13 lead at the half.

Midway through the third quarter, Mancuso went 26 yards, right up the gut, to extend the lead to 29-13.

The Tigers trimmed the deficit to 8 points with a touchdown and 2-point conversion but junior running back Bo Lynch punched it in from a yard out, making it 36-21 with 11:30 left in the game.

A interception by Gilbert at the 9-minute mark led to another Lynch score, this time from 5-yards as the Panthers took control, 43-21. Lynch finished the game with 144 yards on 16 carries.

The victory was the 30th career win for this year's senior class – making the Class of 2015-16 the first class in the history of the Union County football program to reach 30 wins.