

North Georgia News

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Wednesday, March 5, 2025

Sorghum Festival tradition ends after 55 years

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

It appears that the Blairsville Sorghum Festival is over.

No more syrup makin', cane growin', biskit eatin', square dancin', town parades, old-ways demos. No more live bluegrass, sorghum popcorn balls, generational attendance, thousands of visitors boosting the local economy. No more nonprofit fundraising opportunities going to countless community causes.

A beloved 55-year tradition that grew

tremendously from its humble beginnings in 1969 as a small celebratory fundraiser honoring the agricultural heritage of Union County dating back to the pioneer days – gone.

Online speculation as to why the festival has ended kicked into high gear Saturday afternoon when someone shared on Facebook an email from the Sorghum Festival Club notifying last year's vendors about the former community mainstay coming to a close.

"The 55th annual Sorghum Festival in October of 2024 was our final year."

Organizer Angie Dills wrote. "The Blairsville Sorghum Festival has been permanently shut down.

"We have been fortunate over the years to receive support from our local Commissioner's Office. Unfortunately, we no longer have the support that is needed to be able to continue. We are hopeful you still have time to apply to other Fall shows.

"Thank you for your support of our festival. We have appreciated those of you who have made our volunteer work an enjoyable experience. See *Sorghum Festival*, Page 2A



UCHS Men's Basketball headed to championship



L-R: Maddox Young (11), Houston Henry (2), Ethan Hogsed (1) during a postgame celebration from the Panthers' Final Four win over Tattall County. Photo by Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Sports Editor

The Union County High School Men's Basketball Team is one win away from making history.

The No. 6 Panthers will

attempt to win the program's first State Title when they face No. 4 Butler (Augusta) on Thursday, March 6, at 3 p.m. inside the Macon Coliseum.

Union earned a trip to Macon with a pair of wins last week, knocking off KIPP

Atlanta at home on Wednesday, Feb. 26, followed by a semifinal victory vs. Tattall County on Friday, Feb. 28, at Georgia Southwestern State University in Americus.

Wednesday's 66-59

See *Championship Bound*, Page 7A

Collins responds to canceled Sorghum Fest

By Harold Collins
Sole Commissioner
Union County

I am saddened by the decision of the Sorghum Festival organizers to cancel the Blairsville Sorghum Festival on what would have been its 56th year.

On Feb. 11, I met with one of the organizers of the festival, Lisa Kane who has volunteered with the festival for many years. Apparently, her takeaway from the conversation was very different than mine.

I listened to her concerns about the lack of support from the previous administration, the lack of advertising commitments from the Downtown Development Authority and the Chamber of Commerce as well as her statements that the Historical Society would not assist with organizing the parade last year.

While I did not corroborate any of her assertions, I let Mrs. Kane know that she and the Sorghum



Harold Collins
Sole Commissioner

Banks Co. man arrested in cross-county chase

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

A chase from Helen to Blairsville came to a crashing end last Wednesday night as a Georgia State Patrol Trooper maneuvered his vehicle into a fleeing red Dodge Charger, causing it to flip upside down onto a grassy stretch between Burger King and Circle K on Murphy Highway.

Law enforcement officers from multiple agencies were on the scene immediately

to take the driver, Alfredo Cailao Ginaga, into custody at gunpoint without further incident shortly before 8 p.m. on Feb. 26.

Ginaga, 31, of Homer in the North Georgia county of Banks, is facing a slew of charges brought by GSP, including a felony for fleeing or attempting to elude police officers across two counties.

He has also been charged with misdemeanor DUI (drugs, less safe), speeding in excess

See *Cross-County Chase*, Page 8A



Alfredo Cailao Ginaga

Sheriff's Office confiscates likely record cocaine amount

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

A patrol deputy with the Union County Sheriff's Office stopped a vehicle speeding down Loving Road in the early morning hours of Monday, Feb. 17, resulting in the largest local cocaine seizure in recent memory.

David Anthony Milam, 38, of a Union County address, has been charged with felony trafficking for possessing 30 grams of cocaine – a trafficking charge is triggered at 1 ounce,

or 28 grams – as well as a misdemeanor probation violation regarding a separate arrest warrant.

The traffic stop occurred at approximately 2:38 a.m. that Monday at the GA 325 intersection of Loving Road. In addition to speeding, the driver's license plate showed expired, but further investigation revealed the tag had been renewed, according to UCSO Narcotics Lt. Tyler Miller.

After making contact,

See *Cocaine Arrest*, Page 8A



David Anthony Milam

Moore, Gordon swear in to new posts at City Hall

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

It's official – Robert "Buddy" Moore is the new Mayor of Blairsville after swearing into his new position on Friday, Feb. 28.

Moore is a familiar face at City Hall, having served on the Blairsville City Council for years. His fellow council members appointed him mayor last month at the recommendation of outgoing Mayor Jim Conley, who decided to retire before the end of his term that runs through Dec. 31.

"After serving Blairsville as council member since 2009, it is an honor to continue serving in a different capacity as mayor," Moore said. "We have a great City Council that works well together with



New Blairsville Mayor Buddy Moore and Councilman Brock Gordon after swearing in on Friday. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Department Heads and all employees toward making Blairsville fiscally responsible, while delivering dependable services to the citizens in the community." As mayor, Moore said he will continue to work with Department Heads to look for

See *Swearing In*, Page 7A

GBI charges Blairsville man with rape; bond denied

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation arrested a Blairsville man last month, charging him with committing rape, aggravated sodomy and sexual battery against a person he knew.

Following a n investigation, Michael Kelly Ray Warren, 34, was arrested on Tuesday, Feb. 18, and taken to the Union County Jail. He has been denied bond.

The family of the victim reported the incident to the Union County Sheriff's Office on Sunday, Feb. 16, hours after the crimes were allegedly committed.

Sheriff Shawn Dyer is

personally familiar with the families of both parties in the case, and in order to avoid the perception of partiality during an investigation, he requested assistance from the GBI.

"Due to us being very familiar with everyone involved in this case, the GBI was notified, and they responded very quickly and assisted with the case," Sheriff Dyer said. "And we do that on a lot of our more serious cases."

Added Dyer, "We're capable of working the case, but just to keep everybody's mind at ease, we brought in the GBI."

According to the GBI, Warren worked for Union County Government as an HVAC technician at the time



Michael Kelly Ray Warren

of his arrest. Regarding his employment status post-incarceration, County Manager Tony Hughes said last week, "We are not prepared to

See *Warren Arrest*, Page 2A



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Sorghum Festival...from Page 1A

We have made many friends over the years. Good Luck and God Bless.”

A major point of the online speculation was whether new Sole Commissioner Harold Collins had pressured the Sorghum Festival Club into a situation of having to turn over thousands of dollars in proceeds in order to receive the county's assistance in running the festival.

For his part, Collins said Sunday that he remained eager to assist the club in any way possible to continue the festival, to include the event running as always with free assistance from the county, and he noted his belief that there had been a misunderstanding about what he had been offering.

A response directly from Commissioner Collins on the cancellation appears separately in this week's newspaper.

The county assists by providing the use of Meeks Park as the festival grounds, where the club-owned sorghum mill and big 16-by-3 woodfired syrup-cooking pan reside, as well as first responders who are paid to coordinate traffic and parking.

Festival Organizer Lisa Kane clarified on the festival's Facebook page Sunday that Commissioner Collins did not have “any input in our decision to cancel the festival.”

“That decision is ours and ours alone,” Kane said. “We are a small group of volunteers and in no capacity work for the county or in the direction of the county.”

In the interest of quelling the “pecking contest ... ignited by our post to our wonderful vendors, fellow nonprofits and demonstration vendors,” Kane shared a “true brief rundown” of her understanding of what transpired between the club and the Commissioner's Office.

Kane said she had requested a meeting with Collins in early February, noting, “We have always touched base with the commissioner prior to any year's festival.” This meeting took place Feb. 11, during which Kane said she asked if the Syrup Makers “were good to go for 2025.”

Collins informed her then that County Clerk Jennifer Mahan and County Manager Tony Hughes had come up with a plan for the festival, Kane said.

This plan included having the county organize the

vendors and mark the field for vendor setup on the eve of the festival, but responsibility for any vendor-related problems that arose during the festival would be left up to club volunteers to handle, Kane said.

The rationale supplied for making the club responsible in this way, according to Kane, “was that it would be a conflict of interest for the county to manage the vendors during the festival.”

“I did not ask why that would be a conflict of interest, but I assume one of the three of them will address this when they are ready. In exchange, they (wanted) 100% of the vendor booth fees,” Kane said, which ultimately proved untenable for the club.

It seems that the festival has been close to closing for several years, as club members, with their dwindling volunteer base, had originally decided “to let 2019, the 50th anniversary, be the end,” especially after the 2020 outing had to be canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

But Kane said that, in 2021, the county and club came to an agreement that the club would pay for everything festival-related inside the gates while the county would support the volunteers by having “our wonderful” firefighters manage traffic and parking, “which falls outside the gates.”

“In 2021, we were heavily courted by the Commissioner's Office, the Chamber of Commerce Office and the (Blairsville Downtown Development Authority) that we would have all the help we needed,” Kane said, “and the county would hold their end of the bargain of traffic control and parking.

“Yes, like the idiots we were, we believed it all and decided OK. The revenue brought into this county by the Sorghum Festival itself is more than enough to cover any expense that the county expends to the fire department

for directing traffic and parking.

“Of course we know this. It's not our first festival, Margaret. We didn't beg to put the festival on – they begged us to continue it (in 2021). Let's get that straight for future reference.”

To continue the festival then, the club began working with nonprofit Enotah CASA, which assumed responsibility for vendors and admissions, and the festival ran this way for three years, though the club took back full control in 2024 due to organizational differences with CASA.

And everything appeared set for the 2025 festival. But according to Kane, not only would vendor booth fees be going to the county under the commissioner's new plan, but “we were told that in exchange for fire/rescue they would also require the gate/entrance revenue.”

“They told me that they would be taking the approximately \$56,000-\$60,000 Sorghum Festival generated income and letting all the children that pay ball at Meeks Park play for free,” Kane said.

In summation, Kane said the club was told that the county “would let us put the festival on with those stipulations, and they would have an attorney draw up paperwork for the agreement.”

“I told them to hold off on that, probably wouldn't be required,” Kane said. “Sorghum Festival people held a meeting (and) decided that would not be beneficial to what we accomplish with our festival-generated income ... and (we) said we'll just let it ride at 55.”

Moving forward, Kane said club members will continue their scholarship funding and various projects in the county until their funds are depleted; maintain their corporate name, officially “The Blairsville Sorghum Festival”; and “continue to be the very

fine people that we are.”

Just last year, the Sorghum Festival Club opted of its own accord to donate \$35,000 to the Fire Department for equipment purchases there and sent \$15,000 to Western North Carolina relief efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

It remains to be seen if the festival will be salvaged at this point. Online commenters have suggested moving it, but the club has definitively told vendors – now on the hook for booking the second and third weekends in October – that the event is “permanently shut down.”

In response to the controversy, County Manager Tony Hughes posted the following statement to the Union County Manager Facebook page Sunday evening:

“On Tuesday, Feb. 11, our staff met with (a) Blairsville Sorghum Festival representative. She wanted to know if they still had our support for the Sorghum Festival, stating that they had not had a lot of help in the past.

“We offered to help with vendors, man the gate, etc., if that would lighten the load on the organization. If so, the funds could go towards Parks and Recreation. Absolutely no funds were demanded.

“We were left with the impression we were on good terms and they would speak with their members and let us know what decision they made. Until vendors contacted me and the social media stir-up, we have not heard anything back from the Sorghum Festival Representatives!

“If the organization feels led to continue as they have in the past, I assure you our office will support the Blairsville Sorghum Festival 100% as we have in the past as always by providing Meeks Park at no charge, UCSO, EMS, UCRD, Park & Rec, etc.”

Collins Responds...from Page 1A

Festival folks had my full support. I let her know on the spot that the Fire Department and the Road Department would still handle the parking of vehicles for the festival.

I also told her that our front desk receptionist could handle the calls related to the parade and organize that. I advised that the jail crews could be utilized to do whatever they needed to prepare the Sorghum Field for the festival.

All of these things I understand have been done in the past, and I did not see any reason to change that.

I at no point asked for any funds from the festival for these things, but we did discuss the cost of them. I did offer that, if they needed more assistance than this, I would like them to consider letting the county handle the vendors and the gate and be allowed to retain the proceeds from this portion of the festival.

The only reason this was offered was that this was the cost-split they had done with CASA (a nonprofit) a few years back. I even advised her that

I would like those proceeds to be earmarked to go toward our goal of letting all kids who wanted to play recreation sports to play for free.

This offer was in no way an ultimatum or anything to force them to allow us to make money off the festival. It was an offer for their consideration in an effort to take some of the burden off of their volunteers since she expressed multiple times they only have about 12 people doing everything for the festival and they were all tired. It just seemed like a good way to help the festival folks and offer something to the kids of Union County that has never been an option before.

Mrs. Kane did express concern that they had let people handle the vendors and the gate in the past, and those organizations had tried to take over the festival or run it the way they wanted to.

We advised that, if it was agreed to by the festival folks for Union County to handle the vendors and the gate, then we could have the County Attorney draft up an agreement so the

festival organizers could still retain control of the festival.

I am just saddened that it seems to me the entirety of our conversation was misunderstood, and no one has asked any clarifying questions. In hindsight, maybe I should have met with the entire group versus just one of the organizers to make sure everyone within the organization had the same information and understood that I supported the Sorghum Festival wholeheartedly.

If the festival folks would like to reconsider their decision to cancel the festival, my commitment to help by providing parking assistance and traffic control at no cost still stands.

My offer for the county to help with the vendors and the gate still stands as originally presented in our meeting, if they want that much assistance.

This festival, as I expressed to Mrs. Kane in our meeting, needs to continue, and the government organizations should offer whatever help is needed, and I did just that.

Warren Arrest...from Page 1A

comment on that at this time.”

Warren is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

This investigation is active and ongoing.

The GBI is asking anyone

with additional information in the case to call 706-348-4866 or the GBI Tipline at 1-800-597-TIPS (8477); go online at <https://gbi.georgia.gov/submit-tips-online>; or download the See Something,

Send Something mobile app.

Once the investigation is complete, the case file will be turned over to the Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney's Office for prosecution.

Tort reform 2.0 clears Georgia Senate with unanimous vote

By Dave Williams
Capitol Beat News Service

ATLANTA – The state Senate unanimously passed a narrowly tailored tort reform bill Thursday, a week after approving broader, more controversial legislation encompassing most of a civil justice system overhaul Gov. Brian Kemp has made his top priority for 2025.

Senate Bill 69, which cleared the Senate 52-0, is aimed at third-party financing of lawsuits, where financiers who are not a party to a case pay the costs of pursuing litigation in exchange for a portion of any judgement a plaintiff is awarded.

Third-party litigation financing has become a growing concern across the nation, particularly as many are funded through foreign adversaries including China and Russia, Senate President Pro Tempore John Kennedy, the bill's chief sponsor, said on the Senate floor Thursday.

“This is a consumer pro-

tection measure,” said Kennedy, R-Macon. “It is insuring that plaintiffs ... are not taken advantage of by bad actors.”

Rather than abolish third-party litigation financing, the bill establishes guardrails to protect plaintiffs entering into such arrangements.

The legislation would prohibit third-party financiers from recovering any awards that are greater than what the plaintiff receives. Contracts between plaintiffs and third-party financiers would have to be in writing and would be subject to cancellation.

Third-party financiers would have to register with the state, and the bill would put limits on foreign adversaries becoming financiers.

Kennedy warned that foreign parties could steal American intellectual property by entering into litigation financing agreements.

“It gives them a foothold into our civil justice system that could give them access to infor-

mation they otherwise wouldn't be able to have,” he said. “Think data. Think technology.”

The bill now heads to the Georgia House of Representatives. Meanwhile, the broader bill senators passed last week also now rests with the House.

Senate Bill 68, which passed last Friday primarily along party lines, includes an array of provisions aimed at reining in “runaway” jury awards in civil lawsuits. Kemp and Republican lawmakers blame lawsuits for raising insurance premiums so high that businesses have been forced to lay off workers or close their doors.

Glenda Gooch House available

The Glenda Gooch House is available for families, from the tri-state area, of patients in Union General Hospital as well as local nursing and assisted living homes. Contact Leslie Daniel at 706-745-2050 or go to glendagoochhouse.org.

Swearing In...from Page 1A



Blairsville City Attorney Marvin Harkins, right, swearing in Brock Gordon and Buddy Moore to their new positions at City Hall on Feb. 28.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

“new and efficient ways to improve services for citizens.”

“And I will work with council members to ensure future generations have the opportunity to live and work in our community,” Moore said. “Keeping the economy thriving and making the city more walkable are among important goals.”

Continuing, “We are fortunate to have council members and employees with a ton of knowledge and experience. They work together well and strive to serve. I cannot imagine inheriting a better group of people to work with. Keeping the city vibrant is important to everyone.”

Moore has extensive experience himself in a variety of areas that he will be calling on to lead the city.

He has degrees in accounting and business,

possesses building and manufacturing knowledge, has worked closely with regional and state organizations for the betterment of Blairsville, has volunteered for local clubs, and is a successful financial advisor and local business leader.

Ultimately, Mayor Moore looks forward to combining his considerable experience with his love for the city to keep Blairsville on the path he has helped to forge as an elected official for the past 16 years.

“My wife Teresa and I have lived in the City of Blairsville 19 years,” Moore added. “We really enjoy the sense of community and convenience of living downtown. It has a small-town vibe you really have to live to understand. Blairsville is a really great place to live.”

Teresa Moore looked on proudly during Moore’s

swear-in, saying afterward that she knows her husband to be a man of integrity, consideration and common sense with “a heart for Blairsville” who will carry on the tradition of rational deliberations for which he was known on the council.

“It feels like just a transition,” Teresa said. “He’s been on the City Council for so long, this is just like the next step. And he’s ready for it.”

Also swearing in at City Hall on Friday was political newcomer Brock Gordon, whom the council appointed last month to finish Moore’s unexpired council term, also through Dec. 31.

Gordon and Moore are friends and neighbors, and Gordon is arriving at the council on the new mayor’s recommendation. The councilman is a Blairsville native who teaches U.S.

History at Union County High School, where he also serves as an assistant baseball coach.

“I am excited for this opportunity,” Gordon said. “I hope to do a good job and learn from (everyone at the city), and just do the best I can for the city and make decisions that I feel are right in promoting Blairsville.”

Added Gordon, “It’s definitely a cool opportunity to be able to do something like this and get to see the inner workings of what goes on in the city itself.”

On his last day as mayor last week, Conley watched inside Council Chambers as Moore and Gordon took their oaths of office as administered by City Attorney Marvin Harkins.

“I think they’re both

going to prove themselves to be very good stewards of the City of Blairsville,” Conley said. “Buddy knows enough about the city and the works of the city as far as the different departments because he’s had his hand in pretty much everything over the years, especially with the Water Department and the Airport.”

“And of course, the new council member, Brock, I’m sure is going to grasp things very quickly. I think he’s eager enough and ready to jump right in there and get busy.”

Mayor Moore said Friday he wishes to communicate with residents, property owners and businesses on an ongoing basis the importance and significance of what goes on at City Hall, and he eagerly anticipates working with the public in his

new post.

“Elected and appointed officers of the city are trustees and servants of the residents of the city,” Moore explained. “The City Council is composed of a mayor and five council members. A majority vote of the council is required to pass any policy or significant expenditures.”

“Blairsville City Council is responsible for all legislation. This includes setting policy for the government by enacting various ordinances, resolutions and regulations.”

“The responsibilities of Mayor include presiding over meetings, ensuring that city departments operate efficiently, fostering a sense of community, and providing leadership and services to municipal citizens.”

Championship Bound...from Page 1A

quarterfinal win over KIPP moved Union County into the Final Four for the first time since 1972. Two days later, the Panthers pulled away from No. 2 Tattall County during a 54-38 victory, earning a spot in the finals for the first time

since 1971.

Union enters the title game with a 26-5 record – the second most wins in program history behind the aforementioned 1971 squad that went 29-1.

Thursday will mark the

first time since 2019 that a UCHS team (Men’s Soccer) reached the title game, losing to Thomasville in overtime.

For additional information on Union County basketball’s State Finals run, see this week’s Sports Section.

Clarification:

Last week, Naveela Philbeck reached out to the North Georgia News to clarify reporting on her harassment allegations that appeared in a Feb. 26 article titled “New allegations leveled at

Superintendent Hill.”

The newspaper originally reported that Philbeck accused former school employee Crystal Beach of harassing her outside the Board Office after the January School Board

meeting, but the reporting did not include Philbeck’s comments that the alleged harassment was initiated inside the building.

Beach has “emphatically (denied) all of the fallacious allegations Ms. Philbeck made regarding me harassing her.”

Cocaine Arrest...from Page 1A

deputies smelled marijuana coming from the vehicle, giving them probable cause to search it, Miller said.

During the investigation, the subjects explained the odor by admitting that marijuana had been smoked in the car, but none was present at the time of the stop, Miller said.

Milam, a passenger, was asked to exit the vehicle, and he took off his jacket and put it in his seat when he got out, "which was odd considering it was below freezing," said Miller, noting that a subsequent search of the jacket turned up the trafficking amount of cocaine.

The driver of the vehicle was issued warnings, and Milam was taken into custody without incident for booking at the Union County Jail. He has been denied bond.

Milam is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.



UCSO confiscated more than an ounce of cocaine last month, a potentially record amount in Union County for a particularly uncommon drug to be found here.

Miller said that the narcotic cocaine is a relatively rare drug in Union County, with cheaper means of getting high – particularly methamphetamine and marijuana – being considerably more prevalent.

"We don't deal with cocaine much – it's very seldom," Miller said. "In my time in Union County, that's the most cocaine I know of that's been confiscated. Cocaine costs so much is the reason you don't see it much; it's the most expensive drug you're going to buy as far as what we commonly see."

Sheriff Shawn Dyer said the Sheriff's Office has been making a lot of drug arrests recently, which he attributed largely to adding a third investigator back to the Narcotics Division.

As with any profession, personnel levels fluctuate at UCSO. The last time the Sheriff's Office had three dedicated deputies working narcotics was around 2020, and Dyer said the increased manpower is certainly welcome in the division, which operates on "doper time," that is, anytime.

"Eventually, our goal is to go to four investigators," Dyer said. "We're getting a lot of drugs off the street here lately. Being proactive on patrol and the third guy in the Narcotics Unit has been yielding higher arrests."

Sheriff Dyer said he was also working to attach one of his deputies to a special federal task force "to help our drug investigators gain more intel, gain more resources, and gain us some extra help in combatting these drugs."

"This is all a process that we're going through to help our Narcotics Division, and we'll disclose more information at later date," Dyer said.

Lastly, Dyer asked residents with information regarding any drug activity in Union County to contact the Sheriff's Office to place a tip – anonymously if they so choose – at 706-439-6066.

Cross-County Chase...from Page 1A



The 31-year-old driver of this red Dodge Charger tried but failed to outrun law enforcement last Wednesday night.

of maximum limits, driving on the wrong side of an undivided street, reckless driving, failure to stop at a stop/yield sign, passing in a no-passing zone, failure to report striking a fixed object, failure to report an accident with injury/damage, and failure to maintain lane.

Additional charges are expected from Helen PD.

At press time, Ginaga remained in custody at the Union County Jail with a \$14,000 bond. He is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

The chase began after 7 p.m. when the Helen Police Department attempted to pull the vehicle over for a traffic infraction in White County, but the driver refused to stop, according to Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter.

Helen PD pursued the vehicle over Richard Russell Scenic Highway into Union County.

UCSO Sheriff Shawn Dyer received word about the pursuit and was waiting for the Charger at the intersection of Richard Russell and Georgia 180. He tried but failed to block the car's path, with Ginaga evading the sheriff using the shoulder.

"I gave him the least amount of room he could get, but he got out in the grass and went around me," Sheriff Dyer said.

GSP caught up on GA 180 to take the lead as Dyer transitioned to the secondary position in the chase that continued toward Gainesville Highway.

The trooper attempted an unsuccessful "PIT maneuver" when the line of vehicles reached Gainesville Highway, and the Charger took off north toward Downtown Blairsville.

Anticipating the chase route, the Blairsville Police Department successfully deployed tire-deflating "Stop Sticks" at the Shoe Factory Road intersection of Gainesville Highway, popping the tires of the fleeing vehicle to slow Ginaga's progress as he continued to the downtown area.

The chase went around the Blairsville Square, where GSP once again tried to execute a PIT maneuver, and down Bob Head Street onto Georgia 515 W, with GSP, UCSO, Blairsville PD and Helen PD still in hot pursuit.

GSP attempted a third

PIT maneuver on 515, and just after the pursuit turned left onto Murphy Highway, the trooper made contact with the driver-side rear bumper to finally bring the chase to a dramatic end as the car rotated and slid into a raised concrete edge, causing it to flip.

The airbags deployed, blocking law enforcement's view to the driver inside the vehicle.

"We got around to the passenger side where we could see in, and (Ginaga) was hung in his seatbelt upside down," Sheriff Dyer said. "We had to reach in and cut the seatbelt, and then we dragged him out."

"We made sure he wasn't hurt; he said he wasn't hurt at all. We had EMS come check him anyway – no visible injuries at all. It was a very low-speed turnover (thanks to the Stop Sticks)."

No one was hurt in the incident, including the trooper who rammed the vehicle. The suspect was the lone occupant of the car, which was not stolen, and he did not have any weapons on his person or in the vehicle.

Multiple spectators gathered at the open businesses near the wreck. At one point, some teenagers who were parked at the McDonald's across from the scene reportedly blasted the "Bad Boys" theme song from the TV show "Cops" through their car speakers after the driver was arrested.

Union County resident Sherrie Diaz said she had just gotten back to her car after a visit inside the Circle K when the chase turned down Murphy Highway. Parked facing north, she feared at first that the car might head straight for her after getting rammed by GSP.

"At least nobody got hurt – that's the main thing," Diaz said. "It was just exciting to watch; I was like, wow, we never see this."

Sheriff Dyer said law enforcement always uses discretion in deciding whether to chase a vehicle. Dyer said the risk to the public was minimal in this case given that the pursuit occurred later in the evening, well after schools let out and most working people had gone home for the night.

"A lot of people complain about chases and having to run somebody down," Dyer said. "If they're the victim, you can bet that they want us to do

everything we can do to catch these people. But if they're not a victim, they don't care if they get caught or not.

"We're not going to sit around in Union County and let this turn into Atlanta where people can break all the laws they want and we're not going to do anything about it if they tell us they don't want us to. I'm not that type of person."

"I watched the chase; it didn't get very dangerous with our oncoming cars or anything like that. But you've got to do your job, and if you quit doing your job, then crime will take over. And that's a proven fact in Atlanta, Georgia."

Added Dyer, "I can't disengage the state anyway; their policy is to chase, and I can't tell them not to chase. But I am going to be there with them to help if somebody gets out of a car and starts shooting at them."

Some people argue that law enforcement should simply get tag information and disengage before a dangerous chase ensues, and Dyer said that is what they do in cases where officers decide the risk is too great during times when more of the motoring public is out and about.

"In the daytime, sometimes you can look and see who they are, identify them and then call off a chase," Dyer said. "But just because you got a tag number doesn't mean that's always right."

In the case of the fleeing Charger, Dyer said the driver had already committed a felony with his driving and had clearly demonstrated reckless disregard for the public, which is why law enforcement worked so hard to apprehend the suspect in a nighttime pursuit.

"Some of these DUI drivers, you can't let them go because they're going to go up the road a half a mile and kill somebody whether you're chasing them or not," Dyer said in general. "You have to consider the totality of the circumstances on what you do and don't do, and it changes every day and every second."

"In the real world, if you've got somebody that's so drunk they can't keep on their side of the road at all, you've got to get them off the road. And if they just won't stop, you've got to force them off the road. If not, they're going to hit somebody."

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Union Co. Family Connection host Health Resource Fair

Union County Family Connection was able to host our first health resource fair this week.

Almost 30 agencies gathered to share information and resources with community members. We were able to conduct hearing and vision screenings, offer vaccines, provide hygiene items, food boxes, medication lock boxes, a hot meal, clothing, connections to mental health services and insurance, substance prevention materials, and much much more!

One lucky winner won a \$150 grocery card for her participation.

A huge thank you to all agencies and community members for your attendance.



(L-R): Grocery card winner Maria Mendoza, Katy Jones (Family Connection Coordinator)



Union County Family Connection Health Resource Fair participants