

North Georgia News

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Shirley Miller Center re-opens after renovation

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Former First Lady of Georgia Shirley Miller has championed the cause of accessible education for all, no matter age or circumstance, due to her unwavering belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to improve their lives through literacy and learning.

Thanks to her efforts, the Shirley Miller Adult Education Center for Lifelong Learning opened at 38 Blalock Street in Blairsville in 1996 – before even the advent of North Georgia Technical College's Blairsville campus.

Her late husband, Young Harris native and former

Gov. Zell Miller, signed the legislation to bring the center into being, and it has served the community as a place of second chances ever since.

And now, the center has been gifted a new lease on life with its grand re-opening on Wednesday, March 26.

About a year and a half ago, the center closed for extensive renovations that, according to Instructional Coordinator Paula Ary, needed to be made to ensure the building was up to safety standards. Classes moved to the main campus of North Georgia Tech in the meantime.

NGTC President John Wilkinson welcomed everyone in attendance to open the program last week, and Dean

of Adult Education Shelby Ward shared clippings and photos from the original dedication when the building first opened.

"The center represents (Shirley's) unwavering dedication to education and her lifelong dedication to improve literacy among adults in Georgia," Ward said, revealing that more than 1,000 students have passed through the doors since that initial opening.

Free of charge, those students can earn their GEDs and take classes in essential skills such as computer literacy. They can also learn workplace literacy, and there are opportunities for integrated educational training, making graduates more likely to find

jobs. Shirley Miller herself was present, and even before being invited to speak, she was eager to explore the facility – especially the computer room, which she poked her head in first. Overall, she was in awe at how "beautiful" it was following the remodeling.

At the podium, Shirley confessed that her lifelong advocacy of literacy and learning was a "labor of love." Though she could tell "many stories" of her time on and off the campaign trail, she offered some insight into the establishment of the Adult Education Certified Literate Community Program.

Zell Miller launched the See Adult Education, Page 7A



Shirley Miller offered words of encouragement to people looking for a second chance at learning and literacy during her namesake Adult Education Center grand re-opening last week. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Rep. Gunter to seek input on 5-member commission



By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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A change in the form of county government from a sole commissioner to a multimember commission board may be in Union County's future, but there are several steps in that process, and District 8 State Rep. Stan Gunter first wants to gauge people's appetite for such a change.

That's why, once the Georgia General Assembly's current legislative session is over – lawmakers are expected to adjourn around April 4 – Gunter will be working to schedule a series of educational

town hall meetings in Blairsville to foster local debate on the issue.

For these town halls, Gunter will be inviting the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government, local elected officials, District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch – who oversaw, as a sole commissioner, the same transition in Lumpkin County years ago – and other stakeholders.

Information on what the change in government would mean will be provided to better inform the public, with a key aspect of the meetings being to solicit input and questions from

attending community members.

The town hall process will potentially culminate in Gunter introducing legislation known as a "local act" at the General Assembly's next session to call for a nonbinding advisory referendum specific to Union County.

If this local act is indeed introduced next year and passes out of the assembly, a referendum will appear on 2026 midterm ballots in Union County to ask voters if they wish to change from a sole commissioner to a multimember board of commissioners, with much riding on the results.

Like the referendum

call, changing government form can only be done via passage of an act in the General Assembly, and as the legislators representing Union County, Rep. Gunter and Sen. Gooch would be responsible for prepping such legislation to be enacted if a referendum passes.

But first: the town halls. "I don't want to just throw it on the ballot and people not be educated about it," Gunter said.

Himself a resident of Union County, Gunter said he would honor the nonbinding result, whatever it may be, even if he personally does not see a need to change government

forms at present.

"But I've got enough constituents out there that are raising Cain about this and want it done, and I'm not hearing from anybody that is happy and all that," Gunter said, citing a single exception of an individual who messaged him last week.

"People need to get active, and they need to get involved in their community," Gunter continued. "That's the whole idea behind these town halls, is to hopefully get people to come out, to ask questions, to listen to what we have to say about what all it takes to See Rep. Gunter, Page 7A

Huffman sentenced to life in prison without parole

By Shawn Jarrard
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Wade Allen Huffman is now a convicted murderer who will spend the rest of his life behind bars.

His crime? Gunning down 38-year-old Union County resident Eric Heritage in cold blood on Thursday, Dec. 8, 2022.

Huffman shot Heritage in front of his then 12-year-old daughter – a particularly cruel act that caused a child in this community to witness the terrible instance of violence that forever robbed her of her father.

The murder trial started with jury selection on Monday, Feb. 24, and ended with a malice murder guilty verdict



Wade Allen Huffman by a jury of his peers on Friday, Feb. 28, inside the Union County Courthouse.

Enotah District Circuit Superior Court Chief Judge Joy Parks sentenced Huffman to life in prison without the possibility

of parole on Thursday, March 6. Huffman, 34, was transported the day after sentencing to his new home at Ware State Prison, which features the highest level of security for prisoners in the state: "These offenders never leave the prison and require supervision at all times by a correctional officer."

Enotah District Attorney Jeff Langley and Assistant District Attorney Daniel Garrett prosecuted the case, and Langley said there was never any doubt whether Huffman shot Heritage; he admitted as much, though his defense attempted to argue that he did so out of a jealous rage.

If the defense had been successful in convincing the See Huffman Sentenced, Page 2A

UCSO increases patrols in public recreation areas

By Shawn Jarrard
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Now that spring has officially sprung, heralding much more time spent outdoors by residents, the Union County Sheriff's Office wants to ensure that people and families can enjoy the natural beauty of the North Georgia Mountains in peace.

To this end, Sheriff Shawn Dyer has a message for those who would disrupt such enjoyment with illegal activity: keep inappropriate behavior off trails, out of parks and away from Nottely Dam.

Last month, a 79-year-old Towns County man was arrested in Hayesville, North Carolina, for lewdly observing women and children at Lake



Chatuge. And while there have been no recent arrests of that nature in Union County, Dyer said he wants to get ahead of any such activity here.

As a reminder, would-be offenders are on notice that they will be arrested if they act indecently in public, including at boat ramps, walking trails,

campgrounds, Meeks Park, the Appalachian Trail, Vogel State Park, the dam and any other recreational spot.

And thanks to the inclusion of a local deputy on the FBI Task Force, Dyer said his office will pursue federal charges for people who get caught behaving lewdly in federal jurisdictions such as the dam, which is controlled by the federal Tennessee Valley Authority, and other areas.

"We're not going to put up with it," Dyer said. "We're going to go for everything we can get if someone is crazy enough to pull that stuff here. Every chance we get to take a federal charge, that's what we're going to do."

The sheriff said there's See UCSO Patrol, Page 2A

UCSO traffic stop, investigation result in four local arrests

By Shawn Jarrard
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The Union County Sheriff's Office uses every law enforcement tool available to safeguard the public, demonstrated most recently by four arrests across two cases, one involving a routine traffic stop and the other an active drug investigation.

Around 7:30 p.m. on Sunday, March 23, Night Shift Sgt. Michael Kearns was patrolling Murphy Highway when he noticed a vehicle with defective taillights. So, he conducted a traffic stop in the vicinity of Hughes General Store, Narcotics Lt. Tyler Miller said.

"Upon making contact with the driver, (Sgt. Kearns) could smell the odor of

marijuana," Miller said. "Once he smelled the marijuana, he requested additional units to meet with him and assist him."

"During the search of the vehicle, he located methamphetamine, marijuana, two pistols – one loaded under the driver's seat – and multiple drug-related objects."

The driver, Justin Ward Clark, 31, was arrested and charged with possession of methamphetamine, possession of a controlled substance (crushed Percocet) and two counts possession of a firearm during the commission of a crime – all felonies.

He has also been charged with the following misdemeanors: possession of marijuana, less than an ounce; two counts possession of drug-related objects; and a brake

light/turn signal violation.

Clark's address is listed on his driver's license as Aquone, North Carolina, just east of Andrews, but he told the Sheriff's Office he has been staying in Murphy, North Carolina. He was still in custody at the Union County Jail at press time.

In a separate case, the Narcotics Division acted on information obtained during a drug investigation to stake out an area in western Union County around 2:30 a.m. on Wednesday, March 26.

"Narcotics Inv. Jay McCarter was working a case on Dustin Dwayne Townson," Miller said. "The investigation led us to the area of Loving Road coming out of Fannin County, where we tried See Multiple Arrests, Page 7A



A loaded pistol and over \$1,500 in counterfeit \$20 bills were confiscated after a drug investigation that led to a vehicle chase this month.



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Huffman Sentenced...from Page 1A

jury to believe its “why and how” of Huffman’s actions, the convicted killer could have been found guilty of a lesser manslaughter charge, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years and is parolable, Langley said.

“It was not a question of, ‘Did he pull the trigger?’” Langley said. “It was a question of proving it was in no way self-defense and proving it was not in the sudden heat of passion out of jealousy, which

is essentially what the defense was.”

But the overwhelming amount of evidence in the trial – 141 physical pieces and 12 witnesses, including a 911 operator and state and local law enforcement officials, plus Huffman’s own testimony to investigators – painted a clear picture for the jury: he planned to kill Heritage.

According to Langley, Huffman entered Heritage’s life after starting to date the latter’s

ex-girlfriend, Amber Moreno. Heritage lived in a camper in Moreno’s yard at the time, and his daughter was staying inside the Fortenberry Road home with Moreno, who had served as the child’s other caretaker for years.

In Fall of 2022, Moreno entered a relationship with Huffman, subsequently allowing him to move in with her and the girl despite knowing he was a convicted sex offender, Langley said.

Huffman got out of prison three months before the murder, having served six years of a 20-year sentence for twice failing to register as a sex offender upon moving to Union County. His sex offender status came by way of an Ohio conviction for a sexual offense against a 13-year-old girl.

He lied to Moreno, however, downplaying the severity of his sex crime by telling her that he had been 19 and the girl in Ohio 16, which Moreno apparently accepted, Langley said.

“What happened then is, she had moved this man in with this young girl,” Langley said. “Then there was an outcry on Dec. 7 (2022) that he had inappropriately come into the child’s room and made some inappropriate comments to her.

“Amber Moreno did kick him out of the house and reported him to the father and reported him to law enforcement. At that point, law enforcement knew we had a sex offender that had moved into the house with a minor.

“A probation revocation warrant was issued for him, and an investigation began concerning his conduct.”

Langley said Huffman caught wind he was going to be arrested, but his whereabouts remained unknown to law enforcement because Moreno had dropped him off somewhere on the side of the road after making him leave the house Dec. 7.

“He had made his way back to the residence on Dec. 8 and was basically prowling around (the property),” Langley said. “Law enforcement was called out; he was not found. Investigators then took the child to an interview as part of the investigation on Mr. Huffman’s conduct.

“After returning, they had been advised that it would be better for them not to stay there that night, so they were in the middle of packing up their things to go to a relative’s house when, suddenly, Mr. Huffman broke through the door with a pistol in his hand.”

Huffman had stolen the pistol from Moreno, who had loaned him the firearm to carry before she decided to kick him out, but he never returned it, Langley said.

“With the child, Eric Heritage and Amber Moreno standing in the house, he broke through the door, reached around Amber Moreno, and shot Eric Heritage twice – once in the chest and once in the stomach,” Langley said.

Continuing, “We don’t know which shot was fired first, but he remained standing after the first shot. He then shot him a second time, and he fell to the floor. The child ran to a bedroom.”

Moreno began begging Huffman to leave the property, but he refused, instead “ranting and raving” about incorrect assumptions that Moreno had moved Heritage back into the house, Langley said.

Meanwhile, Moreno dialed 911 without Huffman seeing, put the phone down with an open line, and repeatedly pleaded with Huffman to let her call an ambulance – a clear

signal to the listening 911 operator, who immediately sent law enforcement and medical assistance to the scene.

The recorded call was placed around 7:20 p.m. on Wednesday, Dec. 8, with the next eight or nine minutes serving as Heritage’s last moments on earth.

During the 911 call, Huffman could be heard expressing that he had no regrets and was glad he shot Heritage, who “didn’t deserve an open casket.” He even threatened to “shoot him again if I need to” while checking to see if Heritage was still breathing.

The recording also included Huffman denying he was a child molester – a charge eventually brought against him, but not tried, regarding the Dec. 7 encounter with the child in the home – and despite his previous conviction and sex offender status.

Union County Sheriff’s Deputies arrived at 7:28 p.m. and immediately drew their firearms to take him into custody.

Langley said Huffman’s behavior completely changed; his supposed fit of passion had transitioned to total compliance as he answered deputies’ questions with hands in the air, admitted to shooting Heritage and even added “sir” to responses.

Sadly, Heritage could not be resuscitated by the time help arrived, and first responders escorted his daughter, who had been cowering in a closet when discovered, out of the home in a way that avoided her seeing her father’s body.

Members of the jury heard this testimony as well as the 911 tape, which proved to be compelling evidence countering Heritage’s claim that he had snapped in the moment due to jealousy. And the jury heard other damning evidence of premeditation, Langley said.

In the leadup to the murder, Huffman erected what Langley described as a makeshift hunting blind of sorts, stacking limbs and other natural debris in a creek near the house to hide in the water and avoid being seen by law enforcement and the residents of the home he was watching.

“He described having built it in his statement to the GBI, and we found some of his things down there,” Langley said. “The evidence showed that he’d been out in that creek for hours stalking them, and, therefore, I argued strongly in closing that this was not a sudden fit of jealousy.

“He had traveled back there with gun in hand with the intention of doing Eric Heritage harm. He broke through the door with gun in hand and immediately shot Eric Heritage. No discussion. No words. Nothing. This was not a sudden fit of jealousy about a boyfriend/girlfriend situation.

“This was a decision he made hours earlier that he would kill Eric Heritage. They had called law enforcement about him – he knew that – and he was enraged about their prior calls to law enforcement about him, therefore he lost

his hiding place (of Moreno’s home).

“He knew he was going to go to jail on the Sex Offender Registry violations, and he was angry they had contacted law enforcement as well as being angry about whatever relationship issues they had.

“And, therefore, he had stewed over this for a period of time. He admitted in his statement that he’d taken methamphetamine while waiting on an opportunity to kill Eric Heritage.”

Langley said the trial ended dramatically with Heritage’s daughter taking the witness stand to point out her father’s killer.

Ultimately, jurors found Huffman guilty of murdering Heritage with malice, as well as committing aggravated assault against Moreno and the child, and being a convicted felon in possession of a handgun.

Given the nature of the tried crime, Huffman’s history as a child sexual predator, his recidivism and even violence in the county jail, Langley argued for – and won – the maximum sentence of life without parole, with Judge Parks agreeing that Huffman was too much of a danger to society to ever walk free again.

“We also showed at sentencing that he was a member of the Aryan Brotherhood racist gang,” Langley said, citing recorded phone calls of him claiming to be in the gang and using terminology specific to the Aryan Brotherhood, and he had tattoos associated with the gang.

Huffman can appeal his case, but Langley is confident the verdict and sentence will stand. What Huffman cannot do is take back the murder of Eric Heritage.

“It’s very sad for this young lady, who had her father killed right in front of her,” Langley said. “A conviction in this case was very important for this family to show that they were valued and that Eric Heritage’s life had value, and therefore the sentence speaks to the value of human life.”

The child will be turning 15 this year. She is no longer in the care of Moreno but is staying with family, according to Langley, who added that Moreno ended up being fully cooperative in the case.

Prior to publication, the North Georgia News unsuccessfully attempted to reach Moreno for comment.

Assistant District Attorney Daniel Garrett deserves special recognition for the professionalism with which he conducted himself in the trial and the tremendous amount of hard work he put into prosecuting his first murder case, Langley said.

Additionally, Langley commended the work of all involved law enforcement as well as two other members of his staff: Victim Witness Assistant Devyn Duncan and Investigator Kyle Laramore.

“There was a lot of good evidence in this case, but we needed to make sure this individual got life without parole,” Langley said. “It was a high priority in our office to do that.”

UCSO Patrol...from Page 1A

another important component to this Public Service Announcement: should anyone witness someone acting inappropriately, they should say something about it.

“If you see any lewd behavior, call 911,” Dyer said, further advising people to be aware of their surroundings at all times. “And if a vehicle is involved, try to get us a tag number and description of the vehicle.

“We’ve already stepped up our patrols around these areas, and if people see anything like that, we’d like them to please report it to us, because we can’t be everywhere at once. But what time we can be there, we want to prevent anything like that from happening here.

“We’re going to be stepping up patrols big time in those areas throughout the summer.”

Dyer said he has picked up on a growing national trend of lewd behavior in recreational areas, primarily involving older adults. Such behavior can include displays of nudity, sex acts by individuals and pairings, strangers propositioning unexpected nature-goers and more.

People should know better, of course, and the sheriff said he does not understand what exactly drives some of them to behave in this manner. But he noted it might have to do with perceptions of seclusion in nature and being “out of the public’s eye,” leading to the belief that it is OK to act in certain ways.

And it is possible that

some people – like folks who meet online and are looking for a place to “hook up” – might be drawn to the Nottely Dam in particular for being a relatively remote location with easy access to the Tri-State area.

But people should keep in mind that public areas are specifically opened and designed to attract visitors of all ages, so there is always a chance of being discovered – a prospect that is especially harmful to witnessing children, with a potential result being the corruption of innocence.

Of course, there are those who know full well the consequences of their actions, like people who perpetrate criminal acts because they are predators or thrill seekers.

Regardless of suspected intent, visitors to public areas should report any lewd behavior, because a big part of staying protected is prevention, and helping the area develop a reputation as a place that does not put up with such things will lower the likelihood of this kind of activity occurring.

“We just want the public to be on the lookout for it and please let us know,” Sheriff Dyer said. “And we’re going to be out there trying to prevent any of that from happening.

“We don’t want a family getting upset or scarred over seeing something that’s inappropriate. We’re going to do our best to stop it before it happens.”

Added Dyer, “You don’t have to be afraid to go anywhere – that’s not the case. We haven’t

had any reports of somebody possibly getting abducted or anything like that. We just don’t want people doing elicit acts in public that anyone could walk up on or see.”

Tipton elected to Honor Society

Skyler Tipton of Blairsville, GA, was recently elected to membership into The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, the nation’s oldest and most selective all-discipline collegiate honor society, at University of North Georgia.



You Are Invited
Union County
Middle School
**Brag Night, Art Display
and Glow Show**
April 17, 2025
5:00 - 7:00 PM (Drop-In)

Adult Education...from Page 1A



Area stakeholders celebrated the completion of renovations at the Shirley Miller Adult Education Center last week with a ribbon-cutting ceremony by the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

program in 1990 to combat low adult literacy rates in the state, thus kickstarting the construction of the Center for Lifelong Learning in Union County in the mid-1990s.

“You folks are all ‘now’ people, and I like to think that I’m a ‘now’ person – a

‘today’ person, a ‘tomorrow’ person, a ‘this month’ person,” Shirley said. “And I just want to let you know that I’ll do my best to spread the word in our community here about what happens in this building.

“I appreciate so much you letting me be a part of this

re-dedication today.”

People interested in signing up for adult education may call 706-439-6342 to set up times to take classes; it’s possible to work around schedules. Normal operating hours are Monday through Thursdays, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., and

Tuesday and Thursday nights from 4-7 p.m.

“Sometimes, the hardest step that some of our students will ever make is through those doors,” Ward said. “To get the courage to step back into a classroom is 90% of the battle.”

Rep. Gunter ...from Page 1A

do that.

“I hope that they would agree that that’s not something we want up here, but that’s my personal opinion. We would need to see what the voters are going to do, and that’s where I’m coming from. If it’s overwhelmingly ‘no’ in the town hall meetings, that may bring it all to an end.

“But right now, I don’t hear it from anybody but the ones that want to have (the change).”

For Gunter, the bottom line is this: if a referendum ends up being called and a majority of voters signal that they want the change, “then that’s what they’ll get.”

The request for a referendum made his radar in February when a small group of constituents visited him at the State Capitol; Gunter said he is unsure if the people who came to see him were the ones behind the referendum petition that was deemed invalid locally last November.

State Sen. Gooch has also said that the soonest a referendum could be called would be 2026.

In a preview of Gunter’s reasoning, last year, Gooch described a need to hold

hearings to allow “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.

Gooch went on to say that if a 2026 government change referendum were to pass local electoral muster, the earliest election to fill the new board would be in 2028, as Sole Commissioner Harold Collins, who won election last year, is guaranteed the completion of his four-year term.

And that is a best-case scenario; it could take longer to flesh out 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.

“People need to be involved in their government,” Gunter said. “I think the last election may have shown them that. And hopefully they will be, and we will know better what our course of action is once we have a chance to sit down and talk about this.”

Multiple Arrests...from Page 1A

conducting a traffic stop on Mr. Townson coming back into Union County.

“Upon doing so, Mr. Townson failed to stop for law enforcement, which led into a vehicle pursuit. When he failed to stop, techniques were used to try to box him in to discontinue the pursuit quickly, which he maneuvered this way out of.”

With Lt. Miller in the lead, the chase continued down Loving Road before turning onto Mull Road. The driver of the vehicle, Townson, then made his way to Cook Henry Road, where he turned again and continued fleeing at a high rate of speed, Miller said.

“At this time, other deputies we had set up on Loving Road were coming into Cook Henry Road from the other end and had the road shut down,” Miller said. “When he saw the road was shut down, he turned into a driveway, threw this car in park, and bush bonded

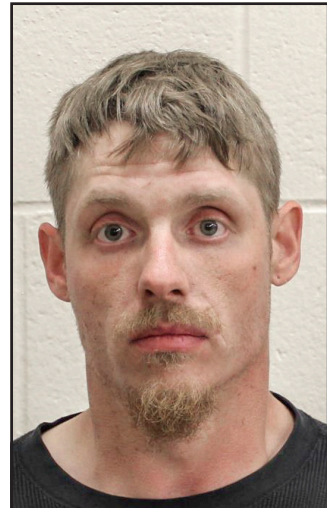
– took off on foot.

“I exited my vehicle, pursued him off foot and caught him after about 200 yards. Upon being caught, he was handcuffed and placed into custody. In his pocket was located an amount of methamphetamine.”

Back at the car, deputies took into custody two passengers who did not run when Townson did: Tosha Savannah Eller, 32, and Robert Charles Weichbrodt, 41, both of the same address in Murphy, North Carolina.

“A search of the vehicle was done,” Miller said. “In the driver’s area was a loaded pistol and over \$1,500 worth of counterfeit money in \$20 bills. After interviews, we learned they did buy a quantity of fentanyl south of Union County, but it is believed to have been thrown out the window during the pursuit.”

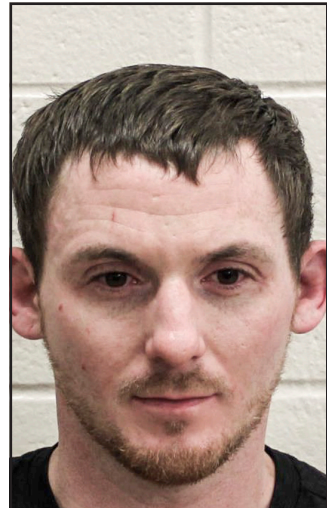
Deputies searched but did not find any illicit packages that may have been discarded



Justin Ward Clark

along the roughly three to four-mile chase route, Miller said, and no drugs were discovered on the suspects during a search as they entered the jail.

Townson, 31, of Union County, was charged with possession of meth and possession of a firearm by a convicted felon – both felonies

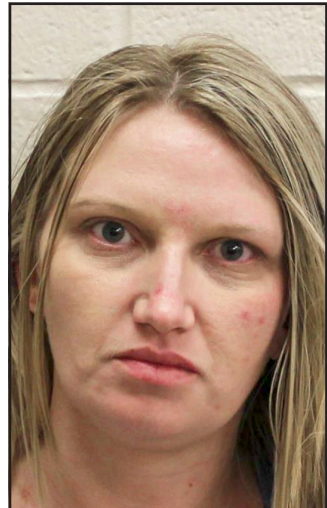


Dustin Dwayne Townson

– plus misdemeanor fleeing or attempting to elude police officers, obstruction of law enforcement and reckless driving.

Weichbrodt has been charged with felony possession of a firearm by a convicted felon.

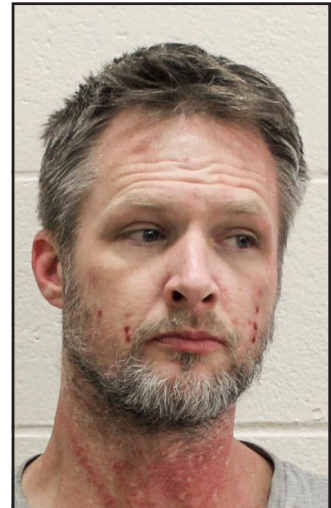
Eller has been charged



Tosha Savannah Eller

with felony possession of a firearm by a convicted felon as well as misdemeanor giving a false name, address or date of birth to an officer and failure to appear.

Additional charges could be forthcoming if the allegedly discarded fentanyl is found and can be linked back to



Robert Charles Weichbrodt

these individuals, and charges could also be brought for the counterfeit money pending further investigation.

The suspects in this case were all released from the Union County Jail last week.

All individuals are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.