

# North Georgia News

2 Sections 22 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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## Gun Range grand opening set for June 27

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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Members of the public are invited to attend the long-awaited grand opening ribbon cutting for the Union County Gun Range on Thursday, June 27, at 10 a.m.

During the ribbon cutting, local, state and federal dignitaries will commemorate the yearslong process that began in July 2017 as a grassroots effort led by residents who banded together to form the Union County Gun Club, with assistance from Union County Sheriff Mack Mason.

The dream of the Gun Club was to find a suitable place to build a shooting range, which was eventually accomplished in partnership with the U.S. Department of

Agriculture Forest Service, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and Union County Government.

People can find the range off Georgia 180, just past mile marker 18 about five miles from the turnoff at US 129 South/Gainesville Highway.

There are only 42 parking spots at the range, so those attending the ceremony may want to head out a little early to use the shuttle service that will be set up for the occasion at Union County Fire Station No. 12 at 101 Choestoe Road.

The public range will officially open for shooting on Friday, June 28, to feature a 25-yard pistol range with 10 shooting bays and a 150-yard rifle range with 14 shooting bays.

Once the range opens, all

guests will have to check in at the Main Office building before shooting. First-time shooters must watch a six-and-a-half-minute safety video and sign a liability waiver. Each guest will receive one free target upon check-in at every visit.

Chief Range Master Craig Davenport said he can't wait for people to see what has been built for them. A former member of the Sheriff's Office, Davenport is in charge of managing the facility.

"This range has been a long time coming - it's been a long journey, there have been a lot of moving parts for this range," Davenport said. "Without the interest of the Gun Club, the county wouldn't have a range up here."

"The Gun Club and See Gun Range Opening, Page 3A



U.S. Rep. Andrew Clyde of Georgia's Ninth Congressional District took a tour of multiple Union County facilities June 18. Pictured here: Clyde with local officials at the new Gun Range. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## BOE discusses promotions, free meals, budget and more



School Board Members Julia Barnett, Tony Hunter and Jason McCarter in their June 13 regular meeting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Some exciting news and big changes were shared at the Union County Board of Education regular meeting on June 13.

The board voted unanimously to promote two school staff members: Athletic Director Mandy Hunter will now also serve as Union County High School Assistant Principal, and Charley Cattanach will fill

the role of Career, Technical and Agricultural Education Director.

Hunter has enjoyed a 25-year career with Union County Schools as a math teacher and coach, becoming the district's first female Athletic Director in 2020. In 2024-25, she will begin a new chapter as UCHS Assistant Principal while continuing to serve in her athletic position.

Cattanach, meanwhile, has been the UCHS construction teacher for four years, having

brought over 20 years of industry experience with him. With Josh Davis' promotion to UCHS Principal, Cattanach will follow in his footsteps as the new CTAE Director. Like Hunter, he will maintain his current role as well.

As revealed by School Nutrition Director Heather Miller, children enrolled in Union County Schools no longer have to pay for their meals for the next four years.

Before, students could enjoy free breakfast, but now, thanks to the Community Eligibility Provision from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service, every student can enjoy free breakfast and lunch, with no meal applications necessary.

Parents familiar with the morning traffic shuffle to get children of different ages to the right school will be pleased to learn a new option may soon be available. An experimental "morning shuttle" is being planned, with details to be announced after they are finalized.

The concept received the go-ahead from the board that night before being introduced to the community at large.

As explained by Transportation Director Kody Owenby, the shuttle will consist of five buses that will ferry kids between schools as needed - at no additional cost to the system - after parents drop their kids off at a single location.

"You drop off all your kids at the lowest school," Owenby said. "We've got a different plan for each school where the kids would go."

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## Rescuers locate Suches man who went missing last week

By Shawn Jarrard  
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SUCHES - First responders located a 68-year-old resident Friday after he went missing nearly 48 hours earlier in a densely wooded area off Cooper's Creek Road. He was transported for medical treatment and is expected to be OK.

The man had gone fishing with two friends after lunchtime on Wednesday, June 19. The trio split up to fish Cooper's Creek, but after he failed to return to the vehicle at the agreed-upon time, the remaining friends searched for a couple hours and contacted authorities near dark.

"We did a road search that night in some very tough terrain at Cooper's Creek," Union County Fire Chief David Dyer said. "We stayed on the road and did that Wednesday night. That operation stopped See Suches Man Rescued, Page 2A



Local rescuers combed through the densely grown Cooper's Creek area last week searching for a man missing from Suches.

## Mary Nelson Seabolt Celebrates 106th Birthday



Mary Nelson Seabolt Celebrated her 106th Birthday on June 8, 2024 with family and many Friends. Mary was born in Union County on June 8, 1918, was married to Zed Seabolt and had three children, Jerrell, John and wife Becky, and Ray. Love You and Wish you Many Many More!

## The Sons of the Pioneers to return for October concert



By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

For the third year in a row, one of America's longest-running bands has partnered with an organization that has helped local children develop a love of reading.

This October, the Sons

The Sons of the Pioneers

of the Pioneers will return to the stage of the Union County Fine Arts Center to perform their annual Western-themed benefit concert to raise money for First Readers.

According to organizer John Cochran, the event is extra special this time around because the Pioneers are celebrating

their 90th anniversary.

The concert will benefit First Readers of Union County, which raises money to pay for age-appropriate books to be mailed to the homes of children ages 0-5 - all for free to families.

With their concerts, the See Sons of the Pioneers, Page 2A

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# Suches Man Rescued...from Page 1A

about 1:30 a.m.

"The next morning, we started again about 8 a.m. We had everybody: Union County Sheriff's Office, Fire Department, the Emergency Management Agency, Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Forest Service, dog teams, drones, helicopters."

Dyer opened the Emergency Operations Center first thing Thursday morning to better command and coordinate the search, and rescue workers – many of them volunteers – spent about 12 hours looking that day before putting in a request for additional resources.

On Friday, June 21, help arrived from Fannin, Lumpkin and White counties, adding to the already impressive search team, and the crucial find occurred around 11 a.m. when two other fishermen who were in the area heard someone yelling in the woods.

As it turned out, the man who was lost had started making noise and waving at a passing DNR helicopter, which led the fishermen to his location.

"They went to him, and he said, 'Hey, I'm lost and hurt; I need some help,'" Dyer said. "So, the fishermen came back out to their vehicle and happened to stop one of our vehicles and said, 'We found the guy you're looking for.'"

Rescue teams quickly located the man, who had wandered about a mile from his starting location. After a medical evaluation, responders determined he was OK and carried him to an ATV for extraction to an ambulance for transport to Union General Hospital, Dyer said.

"He didn't have anything as far as injuries, but he'd been out for days without his medication, without much food and water, and the elements had really gotten to him," Dyer said. "He had a little bit of hypothermia."

Deploying so many

resources for a search and rescue operation is unusual, Dyer said, as people lost in the wilderness are typically found quickly. But the terrain – steep and thick with trees – posed challenges that stretched out the search.

Fortunately, the man survived his time alone in the woods, but exposed to the elements as he was, the story could have ended differently if too much more time elapsed before being rescued.

"We have two modes: rescue and recovery," Dyer said. "Rescue mode is the first four or five operational periods (or days). But after that many days, when you get into the fifth or sixth, you've got to kind of assume that they're not alive, although that may not be true."

"We have a book called 'Lost Person Behavior' we go by, and it's got a lot of statistics

about how long a person can survive in certain environments. After two days, chances of survival drop to about 50%. On the third day, it almost drops to zero. So, we were getting pretty close to that."

Dyer commends all the agencies and rescue workers who assisted in the search, applauding the close-working relationships and professionalism that were on display last week.

"Thank God we found him," Dyer said. "It's a successful mission, which we like, of course, but we were worried about it."

"I think our community is very lucky to have some dedicated people, because a lot of these folks are volunteers, and they volunteered a lot of time, effort, sweat and tears to get out here and find someone that they didn't even know."

# Board of Education...from Page 1A

"Full transparency – it may be a colossal failure, but it's something we'd like to explore," added Hill. "We can always pull the plug if it's a failure."

On a related note, the new electric buses received totally on grant money have had proper time for evaluation, earning mixed reviews. Out of the four vehicles received, two had to be picked up and returned to the factory for repairs while the other two are operating smoothly.

"We're getting about 100 (miles) on a good 60 or 70-degree day," Owenby said. The buses need to be charged twice as much on cold days, when they require more power to operate below 50 degrees Fahrenheit.

"I think the public ought to be aware," Board Member Jason McCarter said. "You get questions about, 'Can we not convert to all electric (buses)? What are the limitations?' Well, 50% of our (electric) fleet is junk."

As part of the Superintendent's Report, Union County Schools Superintendent John Hill revealed that Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp had appointed him to the Governor's Superintendent Advisory Committee.

"There's just a handful of superintendents in the state on that, so he's got a lot of confidence in Union County Schools and our performance," Hill said. "I think that says a lot about our district and our

leadership at the board level."

Another matter the board voted on was to increase tuition for non-county residents in response to outstanding expenditures in the Fiscal Year 2025 Budget. While previously set at \$1,000 per semester, the rate is going up to \$1,100 per semester.

Payments are due by July 15 for Semester 1 and Dec. 1 for Semester 2, but if preferred, families can pay the \$2,200 fee in full.

Just before the regular meeting on June 13, a hearing took place to allow for public input on the FY25 Tentative Budget, though no guests attended. And in the regular meeting, the School Board held a first reading of the tentative budget, with adoption expected next month.

The FY25 budget, which is the largest budget Finance Director Karen Bundy has ever worked with for Union County Schools, features revenues of \$43,223,085.08 and expenditures totaling \$43,908,899.84 for the General Fund.

Property value increases have resulted in a local fair share hike of just over \$1 million, leading to a reduction in state revenue. In fact, over the past two years, that accounts for a total loss of \$3.3 million in state funding to educate local children.

Liability insurance increased by 14% for FY25; the state salary scale for certified employees rose \$2,500; and

an increase for non-certified employees of 4.1% also contributed to expenditure increases.

"We appreciate the governor's raises for our staff; however, they are not fully funded by the state," Bundy said. "For this reason, there is a local cost associated with these pay increases which must be made up with local funds."

Similarly, another increase in health care costs totaling \$630,000 means that coverage for certified staff went from \$18,960 to \$21,120, while non-certified staff went from \$12,840 to \$16,650.

Non-certified staff, such as paraprofessionals, custodians, bus drivers and school nutrition employees, can expect additional increases in their health care coverage over the next two fiscal years until those funds match those set aside for certified employees.

Taken together, the increases in expenditures for the next school year have contributed to a \$685,814.78 shortfall in the General Fund operating budget.

"We are very blessed to have such a small shortfall considering all of the increases that were not locally driven," Bundy said. "Thankfully, we can cover the budget shortfall by using reserves."

The School Board will meet Thursday, July 25, at 7 p.m. in the Board of Education Conference Room to adopt the final FY25 budget.

# Sons of the Pioneers...from Page 1A

Pioneers have helped Ferst Readers raise enough money to just about cover each of the program's last two years, according to Cochran's wife Janice, who is the Co-Chair of the local branch of the literacy program along with Martha Davenport.

As a former teacher, Janice can especially appreciate how important Ferst Readers is when it comes to learning foundational literacy and comprehension skills.

In June alone, the Ferst Readers Community Action Team mailed out some 380 books to children in Union County. It might sound like a lot, but that number represents a fraction of what kids signed up for the Ferst Readers program receive.

To date, Ferst Readers has sent out more than 40,000 books to 1,100 children of the county. Sponsors are what keep Ferst Readers going throughout the rest of the year and are a major reason why the program is free for the families who receive those books.

Every baby born at Union General Hospital gets a special packet so their parents can sign them up for Ferst Readers, which sends a book every month until their fifth birthday.

Even if the infant isn't from Union County, they're still eligible to receive Ferst Readers in the mail because several counties are also part of the program.

For example, a little one born in Gainesville can be signed up for their monthly book so long as they live in the state of Georgia, although there are similar programs in other parts of the country.

Children in North Carolina can sign up through Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, and in fact, it was the Imagination Library that inspired Robin Ferst Howser to start up Ferst Readers in 1999.

Where Ferst Readers is a relatively new organization, the Sons of the Pioneers has represented the American West for almost a century. In 1931, Ohio-born Leonard Slye's life

of driving trucks and picking fruit in California was changed after his talent was noticed at a singing contest.

Later that year, Slye ended up leading a group known as The Rocky Mountaineers, through which he met Bob Nolan and Tim Spencer.

It wouldn't be until 1933 that the trio would form their own group, the Pioneers Trio, and in 1934, gained bass singer and fiddle player Hugh Farr.

A cheeky radio announcer pointed out that the men were too young to be true pioneers, but that they could pass as the sons of pioneers. With good humor, the musicians accepted the remark as their new name – especially since they weren't a trio anymore.

Leonard Slye would go on to become known as Roy Rogers, King of the Cowboys, and the rest of the group would earn so much notoriety that the Sons of the Pioneers were named a National Treasure in 1977 by the Smithsonian Institution.

While its members have changed over the years, the band's sound is indistinguishable from the classic vocals of its founding members – or at least, they've been good enough to earn Cochran's respect.

And Cochran knows what he's talking about; one of his first memories is going to a Sons of the Pioneers concert with his mother, and he's loved them – and the lifestyle they represent – ever since.

Cochran has openly admitted that "in another life" he must have been a cowboy, as

he "loves everything about the West." Helping his heroes to collaborate with a local cause just strengthens his bond.

"They're glad to help. They want to help Ferst Readers; they think it's a good thing, a good cause. They're always asking about Ferst Readers," Cochran said, with Janice adding that the group has essentially "adopted" the local literacy organization.

There are still "some things to work out" with printing the tickets, but anyone who is interested in acquiring one can contact John Cochran now at 706-897-0486. It's Cochran's personal number, but he doesn't want folks to feel shy about ringing him; Sons of the Pioneers fans from as far away as Wisconsin and Mississippi have already been reserving their seats.

Cochran hopes to see the audience doubled this year, which is an ambitious order considering that last year, the concert drew in the most money it ever has for Ferst Readers.

But it's important to remember that the event isn't just about fundraising – Cochran says it's also about raising awareness of an iconic symbol of living American history.

"I want to promote the Sons of the Pioneers and get their name around," Cochran said. "Young people need to be exposed to the Sons of the Pioneers, that kind of music ... Everybody that's known them over the years has fallen in love with them. They've tried and have kept this music alive for 90 years, and we want it to continue."

# Union County Public Library hosts free BINGO event July 9th

The Union County Public Library will be hosting a free all-ages BINGO event on Tuesday, July 9th from 1 PM to 3 PM.

Children, teens, and adults are all invited to join in the fun. Players will compete to win books as prizes, with authors and genres to appeal to all readers!

This program is part of

the library's annual Summer Reading Program, which is open to the public whether you have a library card or not.

To see even more of the library's upcoming free programming for all ages, follow their Facebook and Instagram pages or visit the calendar of events on their website: [www.mountainlibrary.com](http://www.mountainlibrary.com).

# Gun Range Opening...from Page 1A



Range Safety Officers setting up a target for some pistol practice at the Gun Range last week.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

their members, Sheriff Mason, (former Gov.) Sonny Perdue, (Commissioner) Lamar Paris – so many people were instrumental in getting this range up and running. I can't thank these people enough."

The range is a tremendous asset to a community that is known for its strong support of Second Amendment activities, particularly in a day and age when the growing population has made it harder for people to simply hit the woods to practice shooting.

"When I was a kid here in the late '70s, early '80s, I could shoot pretty much

anywhere," Davenport said. "As time goes on, houses spring up, subdivisions spring up, and the days of being able to go out into your backyard and safely shoot are rapidly dwindling."

Of course, people can still shoot on their property if they follow safe shooting practices, but the range will enable folks to hone their skills in a controlled environment specifically designed for the exercising of Second Amendment rights.

"This facility is now going to give people a place to come shoot safely," Davenport said. "It's going to be manned

by active Range Safety Officers who all went through a (National Rifle Association) Basic Range Safety Officer course. And some of us are Chief Range Safety Officers that are NRA certified."

Currently, the county-run Gun Range employs nine staff members who will work in shifts to man both shooting pavilions during all operating hours to enforce proper safety protocols, like calling hot and cold firing periods to allow shooters to safely place targets.

Operating hours will be Tuesdays through Saturdays, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. over

spring and summer months, and from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. in fall and winter. Sunday shooting will take place from 1-4 p.m., and the range will be closed on Mondays.

Individuals may purchase an annual membership for \$200, and families can obtain an annual membership for \$300. The daily shooting fee for non-members is \$15 per person, and \$5 for people 15 and under, though children 5 and under will not be allowed on the range.

Davenport said he looks forward to fostering a family-friendly environment where people feel comfortable teaching their children and grandchildren how to shoot – the way he learned as a kid – "whether it's for protective purposes, hunting purposes or target purposes."

"I want people to come and have a good time," Davenport said. "I want people to understand safety is first; without a doubt, safety is a priority up here. Shooting can be a dangerous sport. It is our job as Range Safety Officers to ensure you have the safest possible experience out here."

The Gun Range features a small store in the Main Office where people may buy eye and ear protection, range-branded merchandise, gun cases and other items. There are bathrooms on-site, plus a dedicated indoor classroom that will enable safety courses for the public in the future.

U.S. Rep. Andrew Clyde visited the range last week to tour the facility and fire off a few pistol rounds, and he offered high praise for what has been accomplished in Union County. Clyde will be

in congressional session this week, so he will not be able to attend the ribbon cutting.

"This is among the top tier ranges that I have been to," Clyde said June 18. "This is phenomenal. This competes with anything that you see out in Phoenix, Arizona, or some of the really high-end ranges."

"This is incredibly well built. It's ergonomic. You've got incredible capacity here for folks to come out and shoot. You've got an amazing training room in here, a great place for staff. It's pleasing to the eye in its aesthetics."

"Not only that, but I can tell that it was built with incredible care. To have this in the Ninth District – to have this in Union County, it's wonderful."

Clyde said he was excited for people to have a safe place to shoot, especially families, and he relished the thought of more of his constituents getting the chance to "really learn more about their Constitutional rights" by utilizing the Gun Range.

"The Second Amendment is what protects the First Amendment, which is the most powerful of our amendments," Clyde said. "That's the right to speak, to assemble, to bring our grievances to the government, the right of freedom of religion. All of that's built into the First Amendment."

"And if we don't keep a Second Amendment to maintain the First Amendment, we won't have a First Amendment very long."

## Blairsville Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1101 celebrates 10th Anniversary July 13th

Blairsville Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1101 celebrates its 10th Anniversary with a barbeque at Trackrock Stables Saturday, July 13 from 10:30 AM to 1:30 PM. Cost is only \$5 per person

and is open to all Vietnam-era Veterans and their families.

"We had a very successful event for the 50th Anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War in March and wanted to mark our 10-year history at this event," explained Malcom McRaney III, president of the Chapter. "Trackrock Stables has been very generous letting us use their pavilion and facilities and we look forward to having everyone back together again."

Jim's Smokin' Que catering will be preparing pulled

pork, coleslaw, potato salad, baked beans, rolls and sauce. Additionally, local band "Struck by Lightning" will be performing from 11 AM to 1 PM.

Reservations are required to ensure enough food and refreshments. Reservations can be made by email to blairsvilleva@gmail.com before Saturday, July 6. Please respond with the Vietnam-era Veteran's full name and the number of people in your party.

"Although we are the Blairsville Chapter, this event is open to Vietnam-era Veter-



ans in Union, Towns and Fannin Counties," McRaney added. "However, please RSVP ASAP to ensure we have food and space for everyone."

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