

# North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, February 22, 2023

## Gun Club annual meeting to feature rifle raffle

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

The Union County Gun Club Annual Meeting is set for Thursday, March 2, and people will want to get to the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center early for a chance to win a rifle raffle.

Courtesy of Alexander's Store, the Gun Club is raffling a Henry Lever-Action .22S/LR Caliber Rifle with a 24-inch Octagon Barrel. The winner will have to complete a Federal Firearms License form and pick up the rifle at Alexander's.

Priced at \$5 apiece or 5 for \$20, people may purchase raffle tickets between 4 p.m. and the start of the meeting at 6 p.m. that Thursday. Ticket sales will resume after the meeting,

which is expected to last about 45 minutes, and the drawing will take place at 7:30 p.m.

Can't stick around for the entire event? No worries – ticketholders do not need to be present to win. All attendees, however, should keep in mind that no personal firearms are allowed inside the Fine Arts Center, as it is school property.

Raffle proceeds will go toward the maintenance of the roughly 400-member club, which got its start on July 10, 2017, and has been active and growing ever since.

It was a humble start to an ambitious endeavor, with local Second Amendment enthusiasts coming together more than five and a half years ago with aspirations of raising enough money to build a Union



Sheriff Mack Mason  
Gun Club Liaison

County Target Range.

And the effort has snowballed since then, going from a search for usable property in 2017 to the end goal being in sight today, as the 90% federally funded Target Range

readies to enter its construction phase off Georgia 180.

"We're proud that, at this stage, the work has begun," said Union County Sheriff Mack Mason, who from the beginning has served as the liaison between the Gun Club and state/federal officials to make the range a reality.

When it opens, everyone meeting the requirements of the "Standard Operating Procedures," such as age stipulations, "can go and have recreation in the shooting sports and practice their Second Amendment rights," Sheriff Mason said.

Importantly, the range will better assist the Union County Sheriff's Office, Blairsville Police Department and state law enforcement to conduct regular trainings,



This Henry .22S/LR Rifle could be yours if you attend the March 2 Gun Club annual meeting and enter the raffle.

which to date has required local agencies to rely on people willing to offer the use of private property for such purposes.

"We will be glad to get this facility up and running because Union County Government has no shooting range within the county," Sheriff Mason said. "This will

enable us as law enforcement officers to get our mandatory qualification with our duty weapons more easily during the course of the year."

Upon opening – stakeholders are hoping sometime this fall – the Gun Club will oversee operations of the facility on about 14 acres of  
See Gun Club Meeting, Page 2A

## County to recover costs with Hill Property sale



Commissioner Paris started his jam-packed county meeting last Thursday with a proclamation honoring Naval Construction Battalion history, welcoming Seabee Veterans Ed Crenshaw and Keith Hunter to the meeting.  
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris debuted a lengthy list of new business items in his Feb. 16 regular meeting, including

a resolution authorizing the \$750,000 sale of the county-owned 3.38-acre Hill Property at 1159 River Bend Farm Road.

Purchasing the property is Hangar One Investors LLC, a land investment company owned by the Payne Family, which

also owns local manufacturing business Advanced Digital Cable.

Late last year, Union General Health System sold its 580-acre parcel surrounding the Hill Property to Hangar One Investors, and the sale

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## Chase suspect charged in statutory rape case

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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The Georgia Bureau of Investigation has charged Caleb Matthew Price with statutory rape, a felony, after conducting an investigation at the request of the McCaysville Police Department, GBI said Friday.

GBI took out an arrest warrant against Price on Feb. 10, after he was already in custody at the Union County Jail on multiple misdemeanor traffic charges for his involvement in a cross-county police chase from Hiawassee to Blairsville.

The chase occurred on Feb. 6, the same day the statutory rape investigation was requested, but the GBI said the two incidents were unrelated.

According to the arrest warrant, Price "willingly and knowingly" engaged in sexual intercourse "with a female child under the age of 16, not his spouse, between the dates of Jan. 31, 2023, at 12 a.m. and Feb. 4, 2023, at 11 p.m., in Fannin County."



Caleb Matthew Price

"Additional charges are likely," said GBI Region 8 Special Agent in Charge Kim Williams regarding the statutory rape case. "Upon completion of the investigation, the case will be provided to the Appalachian Judicial Circuit for prosecution."

Price, 23, of Hiawassee, is currently serving 30 days in jail after entering a Feb. 13 guilty plea in Blairsville Municipal Court to charges

stemming from the Feb. 6 police chase, including fleeing officers and failing to obey traffic lights.

As part of his Blairsville sentence, he has agreed to pay a fine of \$3,378 and serve 12 months on probation following his release, and his license has also been revoked, according to Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter.

He is facing additional chase-related traffic charges in two other jurisdictions – Hiawassee and Union County – in addition to his felony charge of statutory rape in Fannin County.

As previously reported, the Feb. 6 chase began when Hiawassee Police Officer J.R. Murray spotted a dark Ford Explorer that had been the subject of a "be on the lookout" for erratic driving.

Murray tried to pull the vehicle over after it entered city limits from the west, but the Explorer declined to stop and continued to drive erratically while turning around in the

See Statutory Rape, Page 3A

## City Council hears from department heads in meeting

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Members of the Blairsville City Council held their regular monthly meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 14, at the usual location inside City Hall, with Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce President Steve Rowe kicking things off that evening.

Rowe offered an update on citywide Wi-Fi, saying, "We are in the final stages and any day it should be up and working."

The chamber will also be introducing a new program called Blairsville Bucks, meant to stimulate the local economy and encourage the support of small businesses.

"It's actually a Blairsville

gift card that can only be used in the county," Rowe said. "There's a lot of them (that's) been purchased now, so if you know a vendor, make sure they get enrolled in the Blairsville Bucks Program."

"And then that way, all these gift cards – they can only spend them in Union County. It's not an Amazon card; you

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The Blairsville City Council meets the second Tuesday of each month in City Hall.  
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## Blairsville, a Tree City USA, celebrates annual Arbor Day



Local stakeholders and arboreal enthusiasts attended an indoor Arbor Day celebration in Blairsville City Hall on Friday.  
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

It was so cold on Friday, Feb. 17, that a few flakes of snow were falling around Union County. Unfortunately, that didn't make for an ideal Arbor Day celebration in the

traditional sense.

Still, local officials, Towns-Union Master Gardeners, Georgia Forestry Commission employees, and environmentalists of all walks of life gathered inside Blairsville City Hall to observe the proclamation of Arbor

Day.

Attendees were reminded that Blairsville has been a part of Tree City USA for 29 years. According to the program handout, a few stipulations must be met before a community can officially become a "Tree

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# Gun Club Annual Meeting...from Page 1A

U.S. Forest Service land, with a dedicated Range Safety Officer to be on duty at all times the range is open.

People will be able to enjoy a 12-lane pistol range at 25 yards and a 14-lane rifle range at 150 yards that will operate independently, meaning one range can be “hot” while the other is “cold,” and the facilities will be open to

the public on certain days and times of the week.

The range will also feature a Club House Office Building with a classroom to host meetings, plus storage/office space for Gun Club use and bathrooms with plumbing.

A full update on the progress of the range will be made in the March 2 annual

meeting, where Gun Club members will also be able to pay their annual dues, currently \$35 for charter members and \$70 for non-charter members – cash or check only.

For people looking to join the Gun Club, becoming a member grants exclusive access to the range during non-public hours, and members don't have to pay daily range

fees to shoot. Money from dues will help cover equipment, range officers, etc., once operational.

To find more information, including a look at the bylaws, the “Standard Operating Procedures” and range presentation drawings, and to print off a membership application, visit <http://unioncountygunclub.com/>.

# County Meeting...from Page 1A

authorized last week will unite the two parcels under singular ownership while allowing the county to recoup its initial investment.

Hangar One spokesperson Cory Payne said in October that the family plans to keep the majority of the property for private use with the potential for dividing up around 30 or 40 acres to provide some affordable housing for the area.

As background, in July 2020 and on behalf of Union County, Paris purchased the Hill Property for \$750,000 after it came on the market, as the hospital, which would have benefited from owning the piece in the middle of its much larger stake, could not afford to do so at the time.

Paris' idea was to protect the hospital's investment in the larger parcel by negotiating a future sale of the county's piece, while holding open the possibility of the county acquiring the hospital's portion for the purpose of one day providing retirement living there.

“The opportunity to buy that tract came along,” Paris said Feb. 16, “and we felt that it was the best opportunity to buy

that property so it was there for the betterment of the (entire) property no matter who ended up buying it.”

Charles and Jackie Hill once owned the 3.38-acre parcel – hence references to the “Hill Property” – as well as the 580 acres acquired in 2014 by Union General Hospital Inc. for \$2.6 million after much of the property went into foreclosure.

Then-CEO Mike Gowder convinced Hospital Authority Board members to buy the 580 acres by persuading them with a vision of eventually turning the property into a retirement village of sorts, per court testimony from Gowder's 2019 federal trial for prescription drug crimes.

What the Hospital Authority didn't know was that Gowder had privately negotiated to purchase the smaller parcel in the center of the larger acreage, creating a life estate for Jackie Hill in the process that allows her to reside in the home on the property for the duration of her lifetime.

Gowder's ownership of the Hill Property, which changed hands before the county purchased it in 2020, left the board holding a large property investment with a key piece missing, thereby significantly diminishing the value of the hospital's acreage.

In more recent years, the Health System came to view its property off River Bend Farm Road as an asset for which it had no plans, and it put the property up for sale in 2022 to raise money for ongoing expansions, reaping about \$7 million in gross profits in the sale to Hangar One.

As forwarded by Paris as a possibility in 2020, he told potential buyers of the hospital's stake last year that he would sell the Hill Property for the county's original purchase price to unify ownership of the land, which is exactly what he authorized in last week's meeting.

Then and now, the county's 2020 purchase of the Hill Property has proved controversial for several reasons.

For starters, the life estate for Jackie Hill constituted a developmental burden on the Hill Property that, when coupled with its position in the middle of the hospital property, caused issues for the potential resale and development of the Health System's 580 acres.

Paris provided what he believed to be the best possible remedy with the 2020 purchase, which made perfect sense to him, as he sees the hospital as

the most important institution in Union County, serving as an invaluable medical resource for residents and a major economic draw for the area, both as the largest employer in the county and as a recruitment tool for growth.

But several residents have questioned the wisdom of using taxpayer dollars to buy an unusable piece of property that particularly benefited one individual in the county.

Further, the Hill Property's proximity to disgraced former hospital CEO Mike Gowder presented a problem for many in the public, as Gowder was convicted on more than 100 counts of prescription drug fraud in 2019 following his high-profile arrest in 2016.

To be clear, Gowder was not a party to the county purchase in 2020, as Scotty Fain of BLK, LLC had bought the parcel from Gowder about six months before he sold it to the county. But that didn't stop the appearance to some that taxpayer dollars were used to benefit Gowder.

And according to property records website qPublic.net, the price BLK, LLC paid Gowder for the property was \$450,000, which was \$300,000 less than the county paid for it about six months later.

Paris said at the time that the price negotiated between Fain of BLK and Gowder settled a personal debt between the men, and he cited a private appraisal as showing that the county's purchase price was actually more than \$100,000 below fair market value.

Additionally, the Hill Property had a longstanding valuation of \$705,978 when the sale went through, as appraised by the Union County Tax Assessor's Office.

So, selling the property for what the county paid for it is enabling Paris to stay true to his original intent in purchasing the property, not as an investment vehicle to turn a profit, but to protect the integrity of the entire River Bend Farm Road acreage and, by extension, the Health System.

In other business from the Feb. 16 county meeting, Paris welcomed two Navy Seabee veterans from Island X-3 in Blairsville for a proclamation recognizing March 5, 2023, as the 81st Birthday of the United States Navy Seabees.

Island X-3 Cmdr. Keith Hunter and Secretary Ed Crenshaw received the proclamation honoring the vital contributions of the Naval Construction Battalion, including “fighting for freedom, and in peace time being Good

Will Ambassadors all while living by the Seabee motto ‘Can Do!’”

The Seabees will soon be hosting their annual Military Ball to celebrate the 81st birthday of the Construction Battalion. The ball has already sold out of available seating and will take place on March 4 at The Ridges Resort in Towns County.

Paris also accepted the quitclaim deed for the Union County Community Center property from the Urban Redevelopment Agency of Union County, making the transfer of the property official after the URA Board voted Jan. 30 to turn the Community Center over to the county.

The commissioner accepted a build agreement with communications company Windstream to distribute \$11,162,231 in Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds grant monies for broadband internet expansion. Specific areas of expansion have yet to be finalized.

After announcing the Notice of Award to build the new Elections Facility in January, on Thursday, Paris accepted the \$1.85 million contract with Winkler and Winkler Construction of Blairsville, with work to be “substantially complete by Dec. 31, 2023.”

Paris held the second reading of the proposed Short-Term Rental Ordinance in hopes of enacting a final draft in the March county meeting. In the meantime, people may continue to offer feedback on the ordinance, which can be found on the homepage of [unioncountyga.gov](http://unioncountyga.gov).

The latest draft of the ordinance has been uploaded to the county website and has incorporated several changes suggested in the Feb. 9 public hearing.

Notable amendments in Draft 5 include the removal of potential misdemeanor arrest and imprisonment for ordinance violations; a provision for licensing transfers following property sales; and the potential to receive a waiver for the “Good Neighbor Notification” requirement.

Paris conducted even more business in his Feb. 16 meeting, additional coverage of which will appear in an upcoming edition of the newspaper.

The March county meeting will take place on the second Thursday next month – March 9 at 6 p.m. inside the Union County Courthouse – instead of the usual third Thursday to accommodate scheduling conflicts in the Commissioner's Office.

# Arbor Day...from Page 1A

City.”

The biggest criteria is that the city cooperates with Georgia Forestry, but on a more detailed scale, a city must also appoint a tree board, issue proclamations from said board to make an effort to protect native flora, follow guidelines of the National Arbor Day Foundation, and hold a program annually to observe Arbor Day in Georgia, always the third Friday in February.

A bigleaf magnolia tree was scheduled to find a new home to take root in the city, but between the cold weather and shipping difficulties, the actual planting of a sapling was delayed last week.

Master Gardeners and Blairsville administrators will let the public know when the time comes to complete the second part of the local Arbor Day tradition.

Until then, there's nothing wrong with celebrating togetherness for the united cause of bettering North Georgia's ecological environment in recognition of the nation's 151st Arbor Day.

“Glad to see everybody coming out for Arbor Day,” Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley said. “Sure is good to have this many people out on a day like today. (I) just felt that everybody would probably appreciate being indoors.”

Conley presented the proclamation once again declaring Blairsville to be a Tree City, reading it aloud before he and Union County

Commissioner Lamar Paris signed the document in recognition of the holiday.

For Union County's continued support of native plants and trees, the Georgia Forestry brought some goodies as a reward that day.

Lanyards, magnets, stickers, rubber bracelets, and even temporary tattoos were among some of the items guests could choose from, but by far the most popular choices were the seedlings, saplings, and tree-care handouts available to future tree planters.

Dogwoods, bald cypress, white oaks and redbud saplings all went to caring homes along with informative pamphlets like how to plant and establish new trees, care for mature trees, handle bark beetle infestations,

and even what sort of invasive species to guard new saplings against.

Finally, a big group photo with the Tree City flag marked the wrap-up of the event, giving everyone a chance to commemorate the first part of Blairsville's 29th Arbor Day celebration. With any luck, the weather will be warmer when the magnolia tree arrives for proper planting.

Keep an eye on the Towns-Union Master Gardeners Association Facebook page for updates on the new magnolia or call the Georgia Forestry Commission's Blairsville office at 706-781-2398.

And to learn about becoming a certified arborist, visit [www.treesaregood.org](http://www.treesaregood.org) or [www.isa-arbor.com](http://www.isa-arbor.com).

## Union County Lions Club Trash To Treasure



March 25, 2023 - 8 AM-1 PM  
Union County Civic Center  
165 Welborn Street  
Blairsville, GA 30512

It's time for our next fundraiser. We raise funds to help those in our local community. We have people who sell yard sale items, candles, jewelry, crafts, tools, etc. The cost for a 4x6 space is \$15 each. Setup will be Friday, March 24th from 4 PM-6 PM. You can also set up Saturday from 7 AM-8 AM. If you would like to be a vendor at our next event or have additional questions, please contact Chasity Miller at 706-897-5467 or [chasrcs@gmail.com](mailto:chasrcs@gmail.com). We hope to see you there.

# Statutory Rape...from Page 1A

McDonald's parking lot, and the pursuit headed westbound out of the city toward Young Harris.

Towns County E-911 Dispatchers contacted authorities in Blairsville to alert them to the chase as it approached the county line, and soon after, Officer Murray called off his pursuit near Ensley Road in Union County due to traffic conditions growing heavier.

To prevent the dangerous driver from heading into town, Blairsville Police and the Union County Sheriff's Office stopped

eastbound traffic at Windy Hill Road and set up a spike strip in front of the Blairsville VA Clinic.

UCSO Maj. Shawn Dyer drove ahead to find the vehicle, which officers knew was traveling their way. As he passed Mountain Building Supply, Dyer saw the Explorer going west on the wrong side of the road, and he had to swerve his patrol car to avoid being hit.

When the driver got to the roadblock, he successfully navigated around the spike strip

and continued toward Blairsville proper, where he blew through the red light at GA 515 and Farmers Market Way.

At that point, authorities decided that continuing the chase would be too risky, as it was a busy time of day in a busy section of the county. So, in the interest of the "safety of the general public," they terminated the pursuit.

A deputy waited at the GA 515/325 intersection to see if the driver would attempt to leave the county toward Fannin. When he failed to

show up, local law enforcement stepped up area patrols to see if he was trying to hide on a side road, and they searched until dark.

The next morning, UCSO Staff Sgt. Brandon Hogsed found the Explorer parked beside Coosa Methodist Church off Mulky Gap Road. An investigation revealed that the driver had abandoned the car there and gotten a ride from an unknown person shortly after the chase.

Blairsville authorities coordinated with Hiwassee PD to confirm the Alabama tag of the car that fled Towns County, and when a driver's license photo came back, Dyer, who got a look at the driver the day before as the two passed each other on 515, verified Price as their suspect.

Chief Baxter reached out to the Fair Hope Police Department in Alabama - Price had just moved to Towns County from there a little over a month ago - and Fair Hope PD contacted his mother, who helped negotiate Price's surrender later that day.

Initially, authorities were concerned about the driver's wellbeing, as they discovered three bullet markings in the

unclear at press time.

Regarding his outstanding charges, Price is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

# City Council...from Page 1A

can't order online."

In other news, Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter told the council that the start of 2023 was the busiest January he'd ever seen in his career, to include 122 police calls and 18 car accidents.

Baxter said he doesn't believe there to be any single cause for the increased volume, saying that the department has grown used to seeing higher rates of activity: "It's just changing times."

Blairsville Municipal Airport Manager Aaron Mannheim reiterated that, due to fewer people flying in during the winter months, the beginning of each year is largely dedicated to airport

maintenance and equipment servicing.

"Everything's pretty quiet at the airport," Mannheim said. "It will start picking up about mid-March. Until then, I'm just trying to get everything organized and ready to go."

**W a t e r / S e w e r** Maintenance Superintendent Curtis Corn recently returned to duty after several months of battling illness, and he was glad to speak with the council.

"We've had a few leaks ... but nothing major that we've found," Corn said, thanking his coworkers for their dedication in his absence.

Also that evening, the council decided once again to approve accounting firm

Rushton & Company to handle the city's auditing needs. Councilwoman Mary Ruth Cook made the comment that the company had "always done right by them."

And as soon as the weather permits, work will begin on a paving project on Earnest Street. The total cost comes out to about \$18,380 and will be split up between LMIG and SPLOST funds, \$14,023.30 and \$4,356.70, respectively.

The Blairsville City Council holds regular meetings on the second Tuesday of every month at 6 p.m. in City Hall at 62 Blue Ridge Street. These meetings are open to the public, and citizens are encouraged to attend.

## 2023-2024 Pre-K & Kindergarten Registration Open February 13th To March 31st, 2023

Pre-K and Kindergarten School Registration for the 2023-2024 school year:

Monday-Friday, February 13th to March 31st, 2023 from 8:30 AM - 2:00 PM at the Union County Primary School. Pre-K seats are filled on a first come first serve basis.

Please call 706-835-4321 or email registrar@uc-schools.org to set up a registration appointment.

If your child turns four (4) years old for Pre-K or five (5) years old for Kindergarten on or before September 1, 2023, and you are a Union

County resident, your child qualifies for our Pre-K or Kindergarten program. When registering, bring these items with you to complete the child's registration process.

\*NOTE\*- Students who are currently enrolled in the Union County Schools Pre-K program at Union County Primary School will NOT need to register for Kindergarten.

\*\*Below is a list of 6 (six) required documentation for new enrollment\*\*

1. Birth Certificate; 2. Social Security Card; 3. Georgia Immunization Certificate (DPH Form 3231); 4. Certifi-

cate of Vision, Hearing, Dental, and Nutrition Screening (DPH Form 3300), (Completed by the health department or a physician); 5. Two Proofs of Residency documents with physical address and name (Examples include: rental agreement, utility bill, homeowner's or renter's insurance bill, property tax notice, mortgage payment document, etc); 6. Complete the online registration forms at this link: <https://www.ucschools.org/parents/student-registration>

Failure to supply all the required documents will delay your registration. NIFeb22,22/CA

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