

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County

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Tractor Supply likely headed to Blairsville

By Shawn Jarrard
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A national retailer is headed to Blairsville, and word on the street is that it's Tractor Supply Company.

Tractor Supply, which has locations in nearby Blue Ridge and Murphy, North Carolina, prides itself on being the "largest rural lifestyle retailer in the United States," offering products for farmers, homeowners, landowners, and owners of pets and animals.

There's been no word yet that the retailer will be Tractor Supply, but confidence in the project is so high that developer site closing documents have been finalized.

The store is to be built on roughly 2 acres of land between the Wet-N-Wild Car Wash and the new Sears building on Georgia 515, with all contracts and paperwork expected to be completed in time for a formal announcement in early April.

Union County Development Authority Executive Director Mitch Griggs has been working to recruit this particular national brand for about six years. Griggs can't confirm at this time that the store will be a Tractor Supply, though he did say everyone will be excited when they find out.

"The only reason that I'm not mentioning their name is that they haven't released me to do so," Griggs said. "Every project is confidential until whatever company I'm working with, be it manufacturing, retail or whatever, is ready to announce."

"I honor their desire for confidentiality until they specifically give me permission to mention their name. And the only reason that they're not ready to make an official corporate statement at this time is that there's still some paperwork that needs to be done."

"Until that paperwork is done, it's not officially official as far as they're concerned. Once that's done, then they'll

be more than happy to release the whole corporate statement and specifics.

"In terms of opening, our goal is to deliver this project in November, and we're pretty sure we can meet that. We're going to try to get it in before that, but certainly by the Christmas buying season, we expect to be open."

The project has followed a rather unconventional development path, taking its time over the years as Griggs worked to build a relationship with the brand to sell the national retailer on the opportunities available here, before things rapidly fell into place in just the last several months.

When it comes to



locations where big brands like to develop, at first blush, Union County doesn't seem like the ideal market: relatively low population, traffic count, per capita income, etc. Simply

put, the numbers just don't add up for most national retailers' models.

But what Blairsville lacks in terms of size, it makes up for in other ways. See *Tractor Supply*, Page 2A

Gun Club to offer Target Range update in March 10 meeting

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

After two and a half years of behind-the-scenes work on behalf of local residents, the public Target Range championed by the Union County Gun Club is finally on the verge of becoming a reality.

Union County Government has been awarded a lease on a 15-acre parcel of Forest Service land.

Gun Club leadership will hold the club's annual meeting on Tuesday, March 10, at 6 p.m. at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center on Wellborn Street in Blairsville.

In the meeting, the Gun Club Board will update members and the public on the Target Range and next steps. "We're going to discuss



where we are now and what we are expecting to happen before we are able to start breaking ground," Club President Paul Clark said. "Once we get that taken care of, we're going to open it up for questions."

"We'll hand out postcards and have (guests) write questions, and then we'll field those questions. After

the meeting, we're going to hold a (roughly 45-minute) preliminary safety orientation meeting for those who would like to stay."

"At the conclusion of that orientation, those that are present and are members will get a colored ID badge to indicate that they have See *Gun Club*, Page 2A

Qualifying started Monday, continues through Friday noon

By Shawn Jarrard
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Qualifying for public office candidacy to participate in the 2020 elections began earlier this week and will run through Friday, March 6.

After qualifying, candidates for each party will square off in a May 19 General Primary Election, and, if necessary, in a July 21 Primary Runoff Election. The General Primary victor from each political party will proceed to the Nov. 3 General Election to face opposing party candidates.

A Nonpartisan General Election will run concurrently with the General Primary on May 19, and winners there will be sworn into office in 2020.

Republican, Democratic, Independent and Nonpartisan candidates running for county

office will need to bring their completed candidacy paperwork to the Union County Courthouse, located at 65 Courthouse Street, between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. today through Thursday, and from 9 a.m. to noon Friday.

Partisan candidates will qualify with their respective political parties inside the courthouse before final registration with Elections Superintendent Libby Stevens.

Nonpartisan and Independent candidates will file candidacy paperwork in the courthouse directly with Elections Superintendent Stevens.

All paperwork must be notarized, and fees should be paid when filing for candidacy. For qualifying fee totals, contact the Union County Commissioner's Office.

Once candidates have paid their fees, they will be entered into the state databank by Elections Superintendent Stevens, and their names will be published for public viewing.

Qualifying at the courthouse for county office candidates only, excepting state court judge candidates, who also qualify locally. Candidates for federal and all other state offices will need to qualify this week in Atlanta with the Secretary of State's Office.

Paperwork for qualifying can be found on the Secretary of State's website at www.sos.ga.gov.

Once there, click on the Elections tab at the top, then hover over the Candidate Info tab, and in the dropdown menu that appears, click on 2020 Qualifying Packet.

On the very next screen, See *Qualifying*, Page 8A

Union County man killed in two-car crash on Skeenah Gap

By Shawn Jarrard
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A Union County man lost his life last week when his vehicle went over the double-yellow line and into the path of an oncoming truck as he headed north on Skeenah Gap Road, according to Georgia State Patrol.

Coming out of a curve about two miles south of Old Blue Ridge Highway, Sterling Wilson, 42, lost control of his silver Subaru Outback on Skeenah Gap around 1:45 p.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 26, resulting in a head-on collision with a black Chevy truck in its southbound lane of travel, GSP said.

The vehicles came to rest on opposite shoulders of the roadway, and both were totaled in the crash.

Wilson died at the scene, and the other driver was taken by ambulance directly to Northeast Georgia Medical Center in Gainesville to be treated for injuries that were not considered life-threatening, GSP said.

Contributing to the crash were Wilson's rate of speed, which GSP determined to have been in excess of the posted 50 mph speed limit, and wet roads, as it had been raining that day, factors that, when combined, caused Wilson's car to veer out of its lane, GSP said.

Both drivers were



Sterling Wilson
wearing their seatbelts, and neither driver was suspected of driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol, GSP said.

See *Skeenah Crash*, Page 8A

Early voting underway, runs weekdays through March 20

By Shawn Jarrard
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Three weeks of early voting for the March 24 Presidential Preference Primary began Monday, with voters casting the very first ballots using the county's new Dominion Voting Systems machines.

And every weekday between now and Friday, March 20, registered Union County voters can cast their votes at the Union County Courthouse from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., even during lunchtime.

Early voting has historically been held at the Registrar's Office in the courthouse, but this election



cycle, in order to better accommodate new equipment and anticipated longer voting lines, early voting is taking place in the Jury Assembly Room on the courthouse's bottom floor.

Voters who find themselves too busy to vote during the scheduled weekdays

will be able to take advantage of one weekend day of early in-person voting on Saturday, March 14, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the courthouse, also during lunchtime.

Signs will be posted indicating where voters should go to cast their ballots in the courthouse.

Since this is a primary, voters will need to declare a political party to receive a ballot, and they will be able to declare a different political party when voting in the May 19 General Primary.

Election Day for the Presidential Preference Primary, in which voters will

See *Early Voting*, Page 3A

Rice facing multiple charges in gun-pointing incident

By Shawn Jarrard
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Rebecca Rice was drunk when she entered a Downtown Blairsville restaurant with an underage child last week and pulled a loaded 9 mm pistol on one of the establishment's employees, according to arrest warrants.

The incident occurred at approximately 6:30 p.m. on Monday, Feb. 24, inside Copeland's Burgers & Southern Eats across from Blairsville City Hall.

Acting quickly, restaurant patrons took Rice to the ground, disarmed her and detained her at the scene until Blairsville Police Officers could arrive, according to the Police Department.

Fortunately, no shots were fired, and no one was injured in the ordeal, Blairsville

PD said. The most serious charge facing Rice is that of aggravated assault, in which she is alleged to have knowingly assaulted the restaurant employee "with intent to murder with a deadly weapon," according to arrest warrants.

Rice, 46, of Union County, had a total of four handguns on her person at the time of her arrest, according to arrest warrants: a Sig Sauer SP2022 9mm, a Smith & Wesson Compact .22, a Smith & Wesson .357 revolver and a North American Arms .22 short revolver.

The Union County resident has been charged with aggravated assault and possession of a firearm during the commission of a crime—both felonies—and misdemeanor charges of pointing a gun at



Rebecca Rice
another, cruelty to children in the third degree, and public drunkenness.

She has been charged only and is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law. Rice was still being held without bond at the Union County Jail by press time Monday. See *Rice*, Page 2A

Reece pleads guilty to sexually touching student, alleges blackmail

Plea agreement permanently strips teaching credentials, Langley says

By Shawn Jarrard
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Ex-teacher Shawnetta Dawn Reece has signed a negotiated plea agreement that will result in no prison time following a pair of 2017 arrests for allegedly having sex with two male students while employed by the Union County School District, according to court documents.

In Union County Superior Court on Wednesday, Feb. 19, Reece pleaded guilty to a single felony count of sexually touching a student enrolled at the middle school.

The guilty plea comes by way of a negotiated agreement with Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley's

Office, which will see Reece, 43, spending the next four years on probation.

A key provision in the agreement, Reece has also agreed to permanently surrender her teaching certificate and/or ability to pursue one anywhere in the United States. The law only required that she give up her certificate for three years, but the District Attorney's Office negotiated the tougher penalty.

Reece entered what's known as an Alford plea, which means she did not directly admit guilt but admitted that there was enough evidence that a jury would likely convict her if she were to go to trial.

Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court Judge Joy Parks



Shawnetta Reece
presided over the case, and she determined that Reece would not have to register as a sex offender as part of her conviction.

In the leadup to the guilty plea, the former educator was facing charges of having sex with two students while See *Reece Plea*, Page 6A

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