

North Georgia News

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15 candidates running for local office

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The 2024 election season took shape by the end of qualifying last week, with 15 candidates officially declaring their intent to run for county-level offices in the General Primary and Nonpartisan elections set for May 21.

Qualifying for federal, state and local office ran March 4-8, with local candidates submitting their paperwork to the Elections Office inside the new Union County Voting Center.

Incumbent Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris was the only Democrat to qualify in any local race, and he will face this re-election test in the Nov. 5 General Election.

Two Republican candidates qualified to run against Paris: Harold Collins and Patrice Kilpatrick. But before Collins or Kilpatrick gets a chance to take him on later in the year, they must first face each other for the Republican Party nomination in the upcoming General Primary.

The remaining county offices up for grabs feature either Republican or Nonpartisan candidates whose races will be determined in May – or June if a primary runoff is needed – so the only contested local election come November will be for Sole Commissioner.

Just one other qualifying incumbent is facing a re-elect challenge in 2024: Republican Janna Akins, who currently occupies the District 1 seat of the Board of Education. Running against her for the Republican nomination is Paige Thornton.

There will be a new sheriff in town next year, as Sheriff Mack Mason has decided not to seek another four years as top lawman in the county.

Three Republicans

SOLE COMMISSIONER



Lamar Paris (D)
Incumbent



Harold Collins (R)



Patrice Kilpatrick (R)

TAX COMMISSIONER



Lee Knight (R)
Incumbent

CLERK OF COURT



Judy Odom (R)
Incumbent

UNION COUNTY SHERIFF



Shawn Dyer (R)



Doug Loyd (R)



Tom Jones (R)

PROBATE JUDGE



Kristin Stanley (NP)

MAGISTRATE JUDGE



Cary Cox (NP)
Incumbent

have qualified to serve as the next sheriff of Union County: Shawn Dyer, Doug Loyd and Tom Jones.

With three candidates in the sheriff's race, there is a potential for a June 18 Runoff Election if no candidate receives a majority of the vote in May. Ultimately, whoever wins the primary will be the presumptive next sheriff, as no Democrats qualified to present a challenge in November.

Tax Commissioner Lee Knight, Coroner Jeff Fortenberry, District 3 School Board Member Julia Barnett, Superior Court Clerk Judy

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BOE DISTRICT 1



Janna Akins (R)
Incumbent



Paige Thornton (R)

BOE DISTRICT 3



Julia Barnett (R)
Incumbent

CORONER



Jeff Fortenberry (R)
Incumbent

County hopes to install temporary bridge soon

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Any day now, Union County Government is hoping to receive the green light to erect a temporary bridge over the Nottely River at Fisher Field Road.

Built more than 40 years ago, Fisher Field Bridge has experienced major structural

deterioration over the years. When the Georgia Department of Transportation examined the bridge last August for its biennial inspection, state officials told the county it needed immediate corrective action.

Since then, the county has been implementing steps to replace the bridge, such as contracting with Carter

Engineering to determine a solution to the problem and ordering a prefabricated bridge to speed up the replacement timeline.

The next step in the project is to install a temporary bridge to safely divert traffic at Fisher Field Road so that replacement of the permanent bridge can begin; getting the

See *Temporary Bridge*, Page 2A



Union County Government will be replacing the one-lane bridge at Fisher Field Road starting this spring.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Chef Showdown brings competition to cause



The Coosa Methodist Men's Bible Study won the Grand Champion prize with their Mama's Chicken Noodle Soup by raising the most money through ticket sales and donations.
Photo by Daysha Pandolph

By Daysha Pandolph
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

For 12 years, the Hope House of Union County has hosted an annual Super Chef Showdown to raise money for Union County residents in crisis.

By appealing to foodies and philanthropists alike, the

organization and its volunteer community chefs were able to draw an impressive crowd to the First United Methodist Church on Saturday, March 9, for the 2024 edition of the culinary competition.

As the band Southwind played live music from the stage, attendees made their way around the room to taste

16 different dishes and donate money at the table of their favorite chef. Simultaneously, a panel of judges also tried the dishes.

At the end of the event, the three tables with the most donations earned Peoples' Choice Awards, and the judges' three favorite tables received

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Qualifying Candidates...from Page 1A

Odom and County Surveyor Jason Henson – all Republican incumbents – qualified without opposition for their primaries, and with no Democratic competition, all five are set to cruise to victory in the General Election.

Cary Cox, the incumbent Magistrate Judge, also qualified unopposed for re-election to his office, so he will automatically win election to a new four-year term at the end of the Nonpartisan Election that will run alongside the May 21 General Primary.

Longtime Probate Judge Dwain Brackett has chosen not to seek re-election, clearing the way for Associate Probate Judge Kristin Stanley from his office to succeed him as the lone qualifier for the position ahead of the Nonpartisan Election in May.

Candidates for federal and state-level offices selected by area voters reported to the Secretary of State's Office in Atlanta to qualify last week.

The race for District 8 State Representative will see Republican Incumbent Stan Gunter getting a primary challenge from fellow

Republican Dick Mills, and Democratic qualifier Charlotte Sleczkowski will face the winner of the Republican Primary in November.

District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch, who serves as the Majority Leader in the Georgia Senate, qualified for re-election

unopposed in the Republican Primary, and he will not have a Democratic challenger in the General Election.

Incumbent Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court Chief Judge Joy Parks was the sole qualifier for her judgeship in the Nonpartisan Election.

As for Georgia's 9th Congressional District, Republican Incumbent Rep. Andrew Clyde will not face competition in the May primary, but to keep his seat next year, he will have to overcome Democrat Tambreli Cash in November.

Temporary Bridge...from Page 1A

temporary bridge in place will enable demolition of the old bridge and site preparation to accept the new bridge.

Engineers have designed the temporary bridge to consist of three culverts placed across the river, and it will take a couple of weeks to build once construction commences. The county has pledged to correct any disturbance to that area after the permanent bridge goes up.

In January, County Manager Larry Garrett of the Commissioner's Office said he hoped to have the temporary bridge installed in February, but the county ran into a snag; as it turns out, the county owns zero right-of-way to erect the new permanent and temporary bridges.

Due to this issue, the Commissioner's Office has hired a company that specializes in right-of-way acquisition to undertake the legal process of seeking temporary and permanent easements to complete the bridgework.

To proceed, the county needs temporary right-of-way on three parcels to build the temporary bridge, as well as permanent right-of-way on the three parcels plus an additional parcel at the replacement site. Until that happens, work at the Fisher Field Bridge must remain on hold.

The process is tedious from a legal perspective, and Garrett realizes that temporary bridge progress has been slower than people – including county officials – would like, but he said the county is just about ready to approach landowners there with right-of-way proposals.

In the best-case scenario, the private parcel owners will agree to the terms proposed by the county in the coming days, which will allow Union County Government to get started on the next phase of the project.

If the county's right-of-way terms are not agreeable to the property owners, then the Commissioner's Office will have to enter negotiations to buy all of the right-of-way it needs to build the bridges, which will create a longer delay for the temporary bridge.

April 29 is the estimated delivery date for the permanent bridge, so the county expects to have the site ready to take the bridge by that date, so right-of-way needs to be acquired well before then.

In the meantime, the state has deemed the old bridge safe for passage at reduced speed and weight limits, and the county has assured residents that emergency and other services will continue to have access to residents there.

Still, the temporary bridge will go a long way toward providing peace of mind to the dozens of people who rely on a safe crossing as the only way into or out of their neighborhood.

Current estimates put the total cost to replace the bridge at about \$500,000, to be paid for with SPLOST proceeds.

Garrett said that the county has been working diligently at every stage of the project to adhere to GDOT standards, which may encourage the state to reimburse some of the costs associated with the bridgework.

The Commissioner's Office met with GDOT officials late last month to better understand how the Fisher Field Bridge situation arose in the first place, with the state threatening to shut down a local bridge and the county having to scramble to provide an emergency fix.

Road Department employees have been receiving the state's bridge inspection reports for years, but according to Garrett, the reports are coded in such a way that it was not immediately apparent just how bad Fisher Field Bridge had gotten.

In his Feb. 27 meeting, Garrett said the state was pleased with how quickly the county had progressed on resolving the Fisher Field Bridge issue, and he learned more about how GDOT prioritizes recommended and/or required bridge maintenance using "C," "B" and "A" codes.

The codes appear on the state's bridge reports to guide local governments in prioritizing bridge maintenance. "C" means minor priority,

like cutting vegetation and removing debris. B translates to greater priority, like physical repairs to bridge elements. The A code is reserved for highest priority maintenance needs such that bridges classified "A" are closed pending repair or replacement.

Union has more than 300 county-maintained bridges, all with various recommendations for maintenance rated "B" and "C," though neither "B" nor "C" call for immediate corrective action, Garrett said.

The overall classification scheme breaks down even further with "+" and "-" codes, with "+" elevating maintenance priority. For example, a "B+" prioritization means that recommended maintenance for a specific bridge needs to be completed within 12 months of the classification.

To this day, Fisher Field Bridge carries "B" priority classifications for maintenance, even though the state has given the county an ultimatum to fix the bridge or face its closure, leaving the Commissioner's Office to wonder how it should prioritize bridge maintenance generally moving forward.

One takeaway from the meeting was that the state and county would be working closer together to get on the same page as far as what exactly needs resolving on a bridge-by-bridge basis, and GDOT will be helping to produce a priority list of which bridges to tackle next.

Garrett said the Commissioner's Office learned from GDOT that one other bridge in Union County requires replacing: the bridge over Stink Creek on Old Bald Mountain Road.

This will be a much simpler fix than the Fisher Field Bridge, as residents on Old Bald Mountain Road can get to their homes without needing to cross the bridge.

The county has tasked Carter Engineering with drawing up replacement plans to present to GDOT. To save money, Garrett said the county will be examining an option to replace the bridge over Stink Creek, which feeds into the Nottely River, with a permanent culvert bridge.

Union County Fire Department Applauds Chiefs for Completing HRUC Training

Congratulations to Director/Chief David Dyer and Blairsville Police Assistant Chief Shawn Dyer for completing the High-Risk Unified Commander (HRUC) training. This program equips leaders with strategies for the crucial first 30 - 60 minutes of incidents involving active violence, integrating hands-on experience and tactical exercises.

What makes HRUC stand out is its focus on collaboration between the Fire Department and Law Enforcement. The HRUC training provides tools for commanders from different branches to be better prepared to work seamlessly together in crisis situations.

Chief David Dyer and Assistant Chief Shawn



EMA Director/Fire Chief David Dyer



Blairsville Police Assistant Chief Shawn Dyer

Dyer's achievement not only showcases their commitment to growth but also strengthens the collaborative preparedness of the Union County emergency response system. Congratulations to

both chiefs for enhancing the county's response capabilities through effective teamwork!

Union County Fire Department ~Our Family Protecting Your Family~

Fallen Union County Deputy to be honored at Semiannual Blood Drive Saturday, April 6th

Blood Assurance

Blood Assurance and the family of a fallen Union County sheriff's deputy will honor his life during an upcoming blood drive.

The semiannual Derrick Whittle Memorial Blood Drive is scheduled for Saturday, April 6, from 11 a.m.-5 p.m. at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center in Blairsville.

On September 15, 2011, Whittle, 38, was critically injured in a car crash while responding to an emergency call. He died three days later at Erlanger Hospital in Chattanooga.

Since the first blood drive in 2012, Blood Assurance has collected more than 1,000 units of blood in Whittle's memory, which is enough to save more than 3,000 lives.

Due to the overwhelming response from the community, the event now takes place twice a year: once in April to



Derrick Whittle Memorial Blood Drive

honor Whittle's birthday, and again in September, in memory of his passing.

All donors will be entered to win a \$500 donation to a nonprofit of their choice.

Donors can schedule an appointment online at www.bloodassurance.org/dwhittle. You can also call 800-962-0628. Walk-ins will also be

accepted.

To be eligible to donate blood, you must be at least 17 years old (16 years old with parental consent), weigh 110 pounds or more and be in good health. Donors are asked to drink plenty of fluids — avoiding caffeine — and eat a meal that is rich in iron prior to donating.

Children's Daffodil Garden gets biographical update



TUMGA met with local stakeholders last week at the Children's Daffodil Garden in Meeks Park to commemorate the lives of children killed during the Holocaust.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

**By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer**

The Towns-Union Master Gardeners Association met at Meeks Park on Friday, March 8, to commemorate one of the greatest tragedies in modern history – the murder of 1.5 million children during the Holocaust.

Am Yisrael Chai – “The People of Israel Live” in Hebrew – is a 501(c)(3) organization founded in 2008 with the goal of creating a “living memorial” for these children.

The mission of the group is to plant 1.5 million daffodil bulbs worldwide to commemorate such a tremendous loss. As of 2024, more than 900,000 daffodils have been planted at 570 locations across the world in memory of innocent lives taken too soon.

Am Yisrael Chai Project Coordinator Mike Weinroth approached Commissioner Lamar Paris in May 2014 about the possibility of establishing a presence for the Daffodil Project in Meeks Park.

That November, a local garden was officially dedicated

to the children; Am Yisrael Chai donated 180 daffodil bulbs while Union County furnished 420 for a total of 600 planted at the site. And there are plans in the works to add 200 more bulbs this October.

Little Tomas Kulka is just one of the children represented in the garden, his bright smile fitting well with the warm, sunny flowers.

In 1934, Kulka was born a year and a day after his parents were married. But a few weeks before his fifth birthday, the Germans occupied his home, Czechoslovakia. He was only 7 when he was separated from his family and sent to Sobibor extermination camp in German-occupied Poland.

His and other biographies are displayed for the first time in the gardens, marking a new tradition originally thought up by Tom Allen, husband of TUMGA member Jo Anne Allen.

“We were brainstorming to figure out what we could do to get the community more aware of the garden and some of the children that actually perished,” said Jo Anne, who shared the idea with Grace Howard, manager of the

daffodil garden at Lloyd's Landing in Hiawassee.

From there, Howard contacted Weinroth, and Am Yisrael Chai agreed, sending digital links to biographies that were then printed on yellow paper to match the daffodils blooming around them. Now, laminated and stapled to posts, they give a name, face and story to each bulb.

“It's touching to see these people that keep all this history going so that people don't forget history and forget what's happened in the past so that it doesn't happen again in the future,” Commissioner Paris said Friday. “We've got a lot of good, caring people in Union County.”

To allow another chance for the community to come out and pay their respects, the gardeners will be returning to Meeks Park on Wednesday, March 13, from 1-3 p.m.

A similar recognition was to take place Friday at the Lloyd's Landing Daffodil Garden, but it was postponed due to rain. However, residents will get another opportunity March 13 to visit with garden volunteers in Hiawassee, also from 1-3 p.m.

Super Chef Showdown...from Page 1A



As judges and attendees tasted each dish, the band Southwind performed live rock, bluegrass and folk music at the Super Chef Showdown Saturday.

Photo by Daysha Pandolph

Judges' Choice prizes.

For this year's Peoples' Choice Awards, the Blairsville Police Department won First Place with its Brunswick Stew; the Methodist Youth Fellowship won Second Place with their chocolate chip cookies; and the Twins, a local bakery, won Third Place with their Heavenly Hash Cake.

The Twins also received the First Place Judges' Choice Award, followed by the Tri State Business Women with pasta salad and the New Sunday School Class FBC with Bunny Buns Garden Pudding.

A grand champion was also chosen from the teams of chefs based on how much money they raised through both ticket sales and donations. Coosa Methodist Men's Bible Study, which served Mama's Chicken Noodle Soup over the weekend, was selected for this award.

Other participating organizations included the Fellowship of the Hills Youth with Elevated Mac and Cheese, the All Saints Lutheran Church with chili, and the Union County 911 Emergency Center with meatball sliders.

Union County Fire Station No. 4 served Duck Soup Gumbo; Big Daddy Dre's made Cowboy Stew; Full Throttle Ministries served baked beans; and A Servant's Heart Cleaning prepared banana pudding.

The Union General Utilization Review Team also cooked up a lemon blueberry bread pudding for the event; VFW Post 7394 made baklava; and the Law Office of Daniel Duello baked cookies.

Combining the admission price and the table donations, this event alone raises a great deal of money for the Hope House. The organization then uses the money to support Union County residents who can't afford to pay necessary bills.

“This money goes to help anybody in crisis in Union County,” commented Pamela Anderson, the executive director of the Hope House. “We're like a one-stop shop. We try to figure out how to get them out of whatever cycle they are in and show them where they can go to get other help.”

In the past, Hope House has assisted people in need by buying bicycles for the carless, providing gas cards or restaurant gift cards to those struggling financially, directing single mothers to women's enrichment programs and more.

“Our biggest crisis right now is that there is no place in Blairsville to rent,” Anderson said. “Waiting lists are four to six weeks long (even) in our government-subsidized housing.”

“My big goal is to find a shelter here. I know that a lot of people don't think that we have homeless here, but we do; and it's not always because they made a bad choice.”

Anderson stressed that

the program is a “hand up, not a handout,” meaning that the Hope House aims to get people back on their feet to take care of themselves.

One of the beneficiaries of the organization spoke during Saturday's event to explain her journey with the Hope House.

“It's just an amazing outreach that helps people even if it's just for a short time,” said the woman, who contacted the Hope House while battling cancer. “It just means so much to have that and to know that there is someone who can help take care of you when you can't take care of yourself.”

The good nature of the program can also be credited with drawing many of the participants to the Super Chef Showdown, such as the award-winning group, Twins.

“It really is a blessing that we can do something like this and give up our time to help give back to others who are less fortunate,” a representative from the group said.



Members of the community attending the 2024 Super Chef Showdown stopped at each of 16 tables to sample the participating chefs' creations March 9.

Photo by Daysha Pandolph