

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

www.nganews.com

Legal Organ of Union County

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909

Wednesday, March 25, 2020

Effective March 25th, the North Georgia News Will Be Closed on Wednesdays • Lobby Closed Temporarily

Email your ad to cs@nganews.com or call 706-745-6343 during regular business hours.

COVID-19 continues to challenge every aspect of society

Cherokee County, NC, faces community spread

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Georgia Department of Public Health reported Saturday a positive case of COVID-19 in Lumpkin County, which shares a southern border with Union County.

This news came on the heels of an announcement by the Cherokee County, North Carolina, Health Department last week that five people had tested positive there. Those five remain in isolation across the state line.

Health officials in Cherokee County said the initial case was diagnosed locally in a visitor from New York City, after which others in this person's sphere tested positive.

The visitor participated in a March 10 contra dance at the John C. Campbell Folk School, and the virus spread to a Cherokee County resident who also attended the dance. Neither of these attendees was

a student of the school.

Group-oriented contra moves feature lots of hand-to-hand contact, and these free dances are attended by community members from Brasstown and beyond, including throughout North Georgia, with frequent attendance by Young Harris College students.

Indeed, the North Georgia Mountains and bordering North Carolina communities are connected in many regards, with cross commerce and visitation occurring regularly over the state line.

"Cherokee County Health Department will continue necessary contact tracing on this patient in identifying close contacts," the Health Department said.

Of the three remaining positive cases, two are being considered "household contacts" of the visiting New York resident, while the third is in town from Illinois and had been staying in the same Cherokee County home as the

New Yorker.

"Both of the Cherokee County individuals and the Illinois case have been on isolation since before becoming symptomatic," the Health Department said of the remaining three. "For this reason, contact tracing on these three cases will not be necessary.

"We can say with great certainty that these cases were isolated during the symptomatic phase of the illness and therefore had little to no opportunity to spread the virus."

After the initial diagnosis, the Cherokee County Health Department said there was no ongoing risk of exposure at John C. Campbell, but that people should contact their local health department if they develop COVID-19 symptoms, including fever, cough or shortness of breath.

Addressing the issue for the public, the Brasstown-based Folk School said that approximately 90 students and community members attended



The Union County Board of Education made sure to incorporate responsible social distancing practices in the regular school board meeting last week. Photo by Mark Smith

an introductory contra and square dance on March 10 from 7-8 p.m.

"As of March 10, there were no federal, state or health department recommendations or bans for limiting the number

of attendees for public events," the Folk School said.

After the state issued guidance on limiting event size March 13, "the Folk School suspended all activities including events, dances and

classes through April 18," and as of March 21, "we have suspended all activities until further notice."

Folk School representatives are in the See COVID-19, Page 6A

Seabee Island X-3 hosts 78th Anniversary Military Ball

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

HIWASSEE – A recent celebration by the Navy Seabee Veterans of America as Seabee Island X-3 of Blairsville serves as a stark reminder of a not too distant past, before viral anxieties totally seized the national conscience.

In honor of the 78th anniversary of the Seabees' creation, the seafaring veterans hosted their annual Military Ball, complete with dinner, cake and dancing at the Ridges Resort in Hiwassee on March 14.

Island X-3 Cmdr. Keith Hunter said the event was more than just a Seabee affair – it was open to military veterans from all branches and even to civilians.

U.S. Navy Seabees came into existence on March 5, 1942, not long after the



Retired Navy Capt. Bruce B. Geibel, right, served as the keynote speaker in the March 14 Military Ball. He was accompanied by his wife Sandy.

Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.

The term "Seabees" was coined at the time using the first two letters of the organization's actual name -- Construction Battalions, or CBs. The Seabee motto is "Can Do!!!"

As with all American military functions of this sort, the Missing Man Table was displayed in honor of those who paid the ultimate price in service to America.

Retired Navy Capt. See Military Ball, Page 2A

Development Authority talks small business virus impacts

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

A major topic of discussion in the March 20 meeting of the Union County Development Authority Board of Directors was, of course, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the local economy.

Blairsville and Union County run primarily on small businesses: restaurants, coffee shops, homebuilders, grocery stores, auto repair shops, small boutiques, farmers, ranchers, and the list goes on. And these businesses rely on regular foot traffic and interaction with the community.

That's why the current economic environment is presenting such a challenge – two of the most important preventive prescriptions for COVID-19 are isolation and social distancing.

In response to the pandemic emergency, President Donald Trump, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Gov. Brian Kemp



Mitch Griggs of the Union County Development Authority. Photo by Mark Smith

and the Georgia Department of Public Health have strongly encouraged Americans to basically shelter at home to arrest the spread of the virus.

On top of the official recommendations, many people appear to be panicking from lack of information about the virus, and there's a proliferation of

rumors and misinformation on social media and elsewhere.

These factors have conspired to produce a sudden, previously unheard-of decline in customer traffic across the small business spectrum, locally and abroad, causing crushing circumstances for See Virus Impact, Page 2A

School District goes above and beyond for students, community

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

In the March 17 Union County School of Education meeting, School Superintendent John Hill said the district was doing all it could to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 while continuing to educate students.

"Thank you all for being here tonight. I realize it's a very unorthodox situation, but everyone in our nation and, actually, throughout the world, is in the same boat," Hill said, referring to the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Following guidance from Gov. Brian Kemp, State School Superintendent Richard Woods and others, Hill decided to close district campuses effective March 16, instituting online learning March 17 and canceling all school activities, including sports following a Georgia High School Association recommendation.



Union County Schools Superintendent John Hill lent a helping hand to the school nutrition staff during recent meal delivery days for students of the county. Photo/Facebook

The governor took things a step further on March 16, closing all public elementary, secondary and post-secondary

schools in Georgia from March 18 to March 31.

Fortunately, Hill said the See School District, Page 2A

Virus concerns delay federal sentencing for Gowders, Heaton

By Linda Erbele
North Georgia News

Three Blairsville men scheduled to be sentenced in federal court this week for prescription drug fraud have had their court appearances postponed due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Former Hospital CEO Mike Gowder, his brother and former Emergency Room Director Dr. David Gowder, and former Blairsville physician Dr. James Heaton were set to appear in the Gainesville courthouse, but that was before the appearance of COVID-19 cases in Hall County.

The sentencing for Heaton and Mike Gowder has been rescheduled from March 25 to April 21, though David Gowder's sentencing – originally March 23 – had not been rescheduled by press time. All three remain free on bond until sentencing occurs.

David Gowder pleaded guilty just over a year ago, on March 15, 2019, to a single



count of prescribing oxycodone to a patient without a legitimate medical purpose.

At the time of his guilty plea, he faced dozens of charges, including counts of illegally obtaining a controlled substance, distributing controlled substances for no medical reason, and obtaining controlled substances by fraud or misrepresentation.

As part of his plea, Gowder agreed to forfeit his Georgia medical license, disclose financial matters and cooperate with the government's investigation, though he was never called to testify in his

brother's case.

In a court filing last week, federal prosecutors recommended a 34-month sentence for David Gowder in what they called "the middle" of the applicable Guidelines range.

Similar recommendation filings for Mike Gowder and James Heaton were not available by press time.

Mike Gowder and James Heaton were co-defendants in the same federal prescription drug case in which a jury of their peers found them guilty on Oct. 24, 2019, after nearly two weeks of trial.

Heaton was convicted of 75 counts of dispensing prescriptions to Mike Gowder without a legitimate medical purpose; Mike Gowder was convicted of 75 counts of aiding and abetting those charges.

Furthermore, Gowder was convicted of 27 counts of acquiring controlled substances by fraud, with Heaton being found guilty of aiding and See Sentencing Delay, Page 3A

Vol. 111 No. 13
4 Sections 20 Pages
Weather
Thurs: Cloudy Hi 73 Lo 54
Fri: Cloudy Hi 81 Lo 59
Sat: Cloudy Hi 78 Lo 54

Inside
Arrests 4C
Church 2B
Classifieds 2D
Opinion 4A
Legals 3D
Obits 3B
Sports 2C

MOUNTAIN REGIONAL LIBRARIES CLOSED

See page 5C

Ninth District Opportunity Cooling Help Available

See page 3A

DERRICK WHITTLE MEMORIAL BLOOD DRIVE APRIL 14

See page 1C

CENSUS 2020 Complete Forms Now

See page 1C