

North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, June 21, 2023

Old Glory shown respect in Flag Day observance

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Union County Republican Party gathered at the Sunflower Pavilion in Meeks Park on June 14 to celebrate the group's Second Annual Flag Day observance, complete with refreshments and heaping helpings of patriotism.

An extraordinary piece of history helped make Flag Day especially unique this year. Brought by Sr. Vice Cmdr. Mark Harbison of the North Georgia Honor Guard's Eastern Division, a 48-star flag was laid over the mantle and weighted with sandbags to ensure it stayed put.

Many years ago, it had been draped over a veteran's

coffin, and for its age, Old Glory was immaculate.

"This is a very awesome day that we're here to remember, and our beautiful flag represents the greatest country in the world," said Commissioner Lamar Paris, opening the program. "Any flag ceremony, whether it's live, on TV, in a stadium or at the movies, is always emotional to some extent.

"But there is nothing more moving than to witness a veteran burial ceremony where the American flag is the center of the service," he added, alluding to the important role once filled by the attending flag draped behind him.

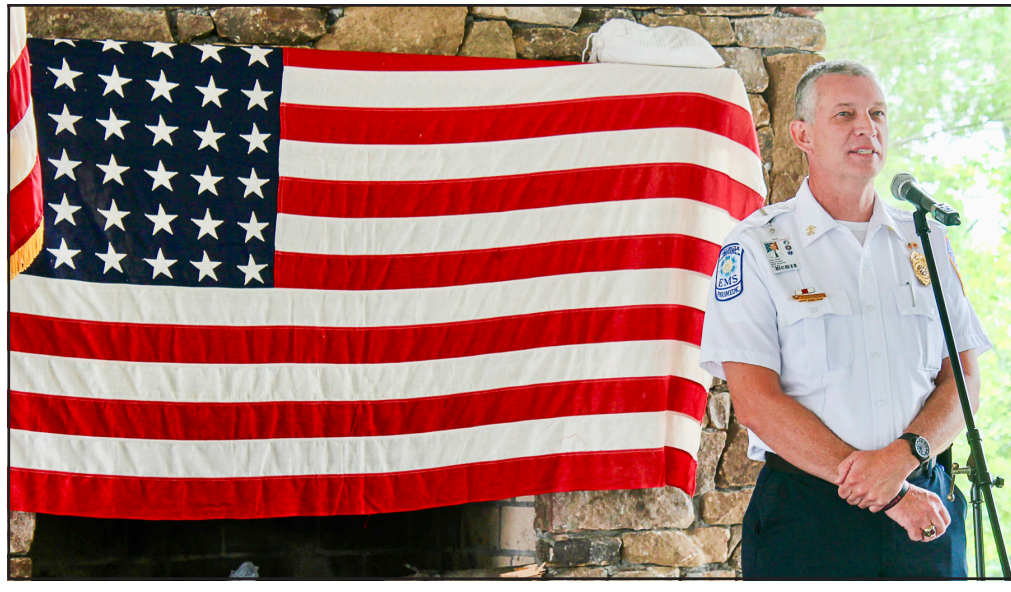
Meanwhile, out in the parking lot, the Union County Fire Department had hoisted a

massive American flag using its ladder truck, as if to allow another chance for Old Glory to preside over the event. Fittingly, Fire Chief David Dyer was the keynote speaker for the occasion.

For 33 years, Dyer has worked with the Fire Department, and when he attained his chief title, he decided to change the department's patch design.

"One of the questions we had was, 'What do we want in the background?' And I said, 'It's easy; we want the American flag,'" said Dyer, lifting a patch for the audience to see. "We're the firefighters, but we always hold onto (the fact that) we're Americans."

Continued Dyer, See *Flag Day*, Page 6A



Union County Fire Chief David Dyer was the keynote speaker for 2023 Flag Day, addressing those gathered amid the backdrop of a historic 48-star flag. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Paris advances crypto-mining ordinance, talks roundabout

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris held the first reading of the new Cryptocurrency and Data Mining Ordinance in his regular meeting on Thursday, June 15.

Development of these facilities has been subject to moratorium over the last year or so as Paris and his staff have worked to get an ordinance in place to regulate such activities, which can result in noise disturbances to nearby properties as massive fans work to cool computer servers.

"This ordinance will impose rules and regulations related to (crypto and) data-mining sites should a facility of this type try to locate in Union County," Paris said. "We have had no one contact the Building Inspection and Development Office inquiring about such a location of these sites here.

"But we are being proactive in order to protect the citizens. As you know, there have been some issues up in North



Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris and Deputy County Attorney William Mercer in the June 15 regular county meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Carolina where these have been established in the past, and we're just trying to get ahead of that."

Next steps include the scheduling of an ordinance hearing "in the next couple of weeks" to receive public input, followed by ordinance revisions if any are needed, then a second reading and enactment in an

upcoming county meeting, at which time the moratorium will be lifted.

Draft copies of the ordinance were made available to people attending the June 15 meeting, and residents who could not attend may view the current draft once it is uploaded

See *County Meeting*, Page 2A

'Guaranteed maximum price' approved for UCES sitework

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Union County Board of Education members have accepted the guaranteed maximum price for clearing, grading and other sitework at the proposed location for the new Elementary School behind the Fine Arts Center.

The guaranteed maximum price, or GMP, means that the system will pay no more than \$5,985,938 for all sitework-related costs in the runup to actual construction of the building, with a completion timeline aiming to be ready to welcome students in the 2025-2026 school year.

Board members accepted the sitework GMP in a called meeting on Thursday, June 8. On hand to discuss details was Project Manager CJ McDonald of Charles Black Construction, the company that is managing the entire project for Union County Schools.



School Board Members Julia Barnett and Tony Hunter listening to a presentation by Charles Black Construction in their June called meeting at the Board of Education Office. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

McDonald explained that two companies bid on the sitework, with the lowest bid coming from Patton Excavating of Blairsville, which will be doing the work as a subcontractor under Charles Black.

"(Two bids) doesn't sound like a lot, but there's not many grading contractors that can do a job of this size," McDonald said.

The actual sitework will cost \$4,805,112, to go to Patton Black. See *UCES Progress*, Page 2A

Union County youth dies in apparent accidental shooting

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Union County resident Willy McWhirter, 18, tragically lost his life in Cherokee County, North Carolina, in what law enforcement believes was an accidental shooting on Saturday, June 10.

That Saturday, the Cherokee County Communication Center received a call reporting the shooting, according to the Cherokee County Sheriff's Office.

Officers arrived on the scene with paramedics, who attempted life-saving treatment on McWhirter but were unsuccessful.

McWhirter, a native and lifelong resident of Union County, was pronounced deceased at the scene.

The Cherokee County Criminal Investigation Division is still looking into the incident, which, as stated above, "appears to be an accidental shooting due to negligence."

"Investigators have interviewed numerous witnesses and are still continuing to investigate," the Cherokee County Sheriff's Office said in a June 13 Facebook post.



Willy McWhirter

"There is no danger to the public as the person of interest has been interviewed and details are being communicated to the District Attorney's Office for review of possible charges."

the Sheriff's Office concluded. Additional details were not available at press time as the Sheriff's Office was working to complete its investigation. See *Accidental Shooting*, Page 2A

Blairsville Pro Rodeo draws thousands to mountains

By Natalie Mintz
North Georgia News

This past weekend, the Blairsville Pro Rodeo roped in two nights of bull riding, bronc bucking fun at the Union County Arena, presented by the Union County Saddle Club and Circle N Rodeo Productions.

A traditional American pastime, the rodeo did not disappoint on the patriotic front, opening with a celebration of the United States Military featuring local veteran retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. William "Whitey" White.

The June 16-17 affair

also featured a salute to local first responders and plenty of activities for families to do in addition to spectating all the fast-paced rodeo action.

Competition included Bareback Bronc Riding, Saddleback Bronc Riding. See *Blairsville Pro Rodeo*, Page 6A



The Blairsville Pro Rodeo filled the stands at the Union County Arena Friday and Saturday for hours of intense rodeo action. Photo by Lowell Nicholson



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Union County Republican Party attends the Georgia Republican Party Convention

On June 9-10, fourteen delegates from Union County traveled to Columbus, GA, to attend the 2023 Georgia Republican Party Convention. Speakers throughout the day included Congresswoman Majorie Taylor Greene, former Senator Kelly Loeffler, and Presidential Candidate Vivek Ramaswamy among many others. Friday evening featured the Victory Dinner, with Kari Lake keynoting. She was a force to be reckoned with as the Republican nominee for the 2022 Arizona Governor race.

The Convention contin-

ued on Saturday with rousing speeches from Congressman Andrew Clyde, our 9th District House Representative, Lieutenant Governor, Burt Jones, Labor Commissioner Bruce Thompson, and many others. Delegates voted on new State GOP representatives to represent the party during the next cycle.

Congratulations to those elected, Josh McKoon as Chairman, Brian Pritchard (Fannin County) as 1st Vice Chair, David Cross as 2nd Vice Chair, Laurie McClain as Treasurer, Jenny Eckman as



2023 UCGOP Delegates at the State Republican Party Convention

Assistant Treasurer, Caroline Jeffords as Secretary, and Suzi Voyles as Assistant Secretary.

The big news from the event was President Donald Trump, who addressed the crowd of over 3000 on Saturday. It was a once in a lifetime event for many of the attend-

ees and it did not disappoint. He spoke for over an hour of his intentions if he is elected as the 47th President of the United States as well as the many legal issues he is currently facing. Despite the recent indictment, he continues to lead the GOP polls for the 2024 Presi-

dential nominee.

We encourage all interested to join us at the next GOP meeting, which will be held on July 15, 2023, at 10 AM at the Union County Community Center.

Submitted by Laura Beggs, UCGOP Media Specialist



UCGOP Delegates attend the Victory Dinner

Accidental Shooting...from Page 1A

“He enjoyed hunting, riding his bicycle, singing and playing the guitar, and animals,” according to McWhirter’s obituary. “He was a loving and caring son, brother and grandson. Willy attended Union Baptist Church.”

Surviving McWhirter are his mother Cecilia of Blairsville; father Hillary of Louisiana; sister Shelby of Athens, GA; grandmothers Nelly Ungab of the Philippines and Jerry McWhirter of Lawrenceville; several aunts,

uncles, cousins, and many other relatives and friends.

Funeral services for the young man were held on Thursday, June 15, inside the chapel of Mountain View Funeral Home, which had charge of his arrangements.

County Meeting...from Page 1A

to <http://www.unioncountygga.gov/>.

The ordinance does not prohibit the development of crypto and data-mining facilities; however, it does aim to restrict them to “areas where any potential adverse effects on the community will be minimized.”

Once a site plan is approved, crypto and data-mining developers would be required to meet specific sound level requirements, and to install sound barriers should the limits established in the ordinance not be met.

Appropriate sound levels and abatement must be maintained throughout the duration of operations, with enforcement for code violations to include potential warnings and citations, as well as a maximum penalty of up to \$1,000 in fines, imprisonment for 60 days, or

both.

Also in the meeting, Paris took two actions related to the proposed roundabout at Pat Haralson Drive and Deep South Farm Road, meant to improve traffic flow near Union General Hospital.

The commissioner accepted an agreement with Carter Engineering Consultants, Inc. “to certify engineering plans for the Pat Haralson Roundabout in an amount not to exceed \$6,000.”

“As part of the \$1 million grant award that Union County has received from the Georgia Transportation Infrastructure Bank,” Paris said, “the plans for utility relocation must be certified, and Carter Engineering is due to do that whenever it’s needed.”

“There should be a maximum of six sets of plans that will each have to be certified at a cost of \$1,000 each per certification.”

He also accepted a contract with Engineering Management, Inc. “to provide design plans, specifications and construction management for water and sewer relocation for the Pat Haralson Roundabout in an amount not to exceed \$46,000.”

The Commissioner’s Office said Thursday that Engineering Management’s plans are “almost done,” and based on the most recent timeline estimate, the county is looking for the project to be bid for construction in about three months.

“We’re hoping to be getting close to going to bid on (the roundabout),” Paris said. “But as I’ve told you in the past, every utility known to man is in that area where this work is going to be done.”

“So, it’s taking a lot of engineering work and cost to the county, a lot of which we hope is going to be covered by the grant, but we don’t know where

we’re going to come out on that without the cost yet.”

Moving on, Paris approved the 395 business licenses for short-term rentals that have come in since the new online application portal went live in April after enactment of the comprehensive Short-Term Rental Ordinance in March. These include new and returning license holders.

According to the county, there are still a few hundred licenses available for people who wish to apply to run a short-term rental business, though demand has dropped off lately.

Relatedly, he also appointed seven individuals to serve on the recently established Short-Term Rental Board to assist short-term rental license holders as well as hold them accountable.

The STR Ordinance requires that board members be appointed based on specific representative qualifications, and that these members serve as volunteers in their official capacities on the board.

For instance, Fire Chief David Dyer was appointed as the Fire Department Representative, and Building Inspection Code Enforcement Officer Martin Pilote was appointed as the Building Department and Development representative.

Rounding out appointees are AnaLuisa Salvatti as the local property management company representative; Laura Jenkins as the Short-Term Rental Enforcement representative; Patrick Woodall and Susan Phillips as local members at large; and Karen Sweeney as the local short-term rental owner representative.

Toward the end of the meeting, Commissioner Paris adopted a resolution amending the county’s Fiscal Year 2022 Budget.

“We do this every year to comply with state and audit

requirements as our audit wraps up,” County Finance Director Laura Driskell said. “Our 2022 audit is being finalized this week, so the timing coincides with our budget adjustment.”

The budget was revised upward by about \$1.5 million, which, according to Driskell, was primarily due to an “increase in our (Local Option Sales Tax) revenue that was offset by the increased cost of expenses due to inflation.”

Paris accepted four Accountability Courts Grants totaling \$734,098. These are state-based grant funds earmarked to assist local individuals and families dealing with legal issues in the Enotah Judicial Circuit involving problems of mental health and drug addiction.

Resident Joe Davis appeared as a public speaker on the agenda, offering remarks warning against allowing non-resident property owners to vote in local elections – an idea that was forwarded in a recent letter to the editor.

In his Commissioner’s Comments, Paris said that the new Voting Facility next to the Sports Center on the Glenn Gooch Bypass was nearing completion, with an expected finishing date of October this year.

Further, Paris was happy to announce that it looked like the new First Station No. 13 up Murphy Highway on the north end of the county would be wrapping up construction by the middle of August.

He also took time to note the passing of Teresa Colditz earlier that day, sharing his condolences and expressing his admiration for her dedication to the community as the business owner and operator of Colditz Trucking and Paving.

Monthly commission meetings take place inside the Union County Courthouse at 6 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month unless otherwise advertised.

UCES Progress...from Page 1A

Excavating, with an additional \$1.2 million consisting of other costs like fees and overhead for construction manager Charles Black, and contingency, the latter of which is reimbursable if it’s not needed.

“We recommend on this job a \$500,000 contingency up front,” McDonald told School Board members. “On a project like this, all the risk is in the sitework package.”

“Anything that could go wrong, any sizeable sums of money that you could run into and go over the budget, is in the sitework – that’s (potential mitigation for) rock, groundwater, bad dirt. So, we recommend a \$500,000 contingency.”

“We hope we don’t have to use any of that, and I’m hoping we won’t use any of it, but that’s the lion’s share of the contingency on the job.”

“That is not a slush fund for the contractor to use for mistakes or anything; that is only if rock or groundwater or bad dirt is hit. And that will be verified by a third-party testing agency that works directly for the School System.”

Describing the scope of the sitework, McDonald said that “this includes the front roadway from Beasley Circle, and it catches the roads that the School System has been working on (leading into the property).”

Added McDonald, “And it’s all heavy-duty paving

except for the parking lots – that’s just normal-duty paving – curb and gutter ... storm system, sanitary sewer system, water system, fire line, erosion control, and then mass grading. (There’s) over 400,000 yards of dirt to move on this job.”

“So, it’s a big job, but I am very pleased with the price,” McDonald continued. “You try to estimate a job based on acreage when you don’t have any civil drawings done.”

“And when we got these first civil drawings, we thought (just the sitework line item), which came in \$4.8 million, could be as high as \$5.4 million. I think the second bidder was actually at \$5.6 million, so we were very pleased with that price.”

Mobilization on the project, that is, moving equipment to the site in preparation for work to begin, was estimated in the meeting as being likely to occur by the end of June, and Patton Excavating has until the middle of October to get the site ready for construction.

“Contractually, they have to have us a building pad ready where we can start digging footings and pouring concrete in the middle of October,” McDonald said, noting that Patton has provided appropriate bonds to cover the system’s costs if the company is unable to complete the work.

Superintendent John Hill said that the Board Office

wanted to “expedite” the sitework out of an abundance of caution: “We want to get this done before bad weather, because we’re afraid if we don’t, we won’t meet our Fall 2025 opening date for the school.”

McDonald said that a mid-October construction start date would give the project time to lay important foundations before having to pause for winter weather conditions, adding that “we are comfortable with the schedule, and we’re going to make it happen.”

Board Member Jason McCarter asked if the overall figures, including the sitework GMP with contingency, were still on track “to meet our initial estimate” for total costs to build the new school, to which McDonald replied, “Yes, sir.”

Back in January, the Board Office announced a preliminary cost estimate of \$36,506,900 to build the one-story school. This is a few million shy of the \$39,896,409.60 in projected ESPLOST VI collections voters approved to construct the building.

Based on current estimates, the system plans to utilize \$32,031,380 in ESPLOST VI proceeds, with the remaining \$4,475,520 coming from a drawdown of eligible Advanced Funding monies Union County Schools will be applying for in July with the Georgia Department of Education.

Flag Day...from Page 1A



The Union County Fire Department ladder truck proudly hoisted the American flag at the June 14 Flag Day event in Meeks Park.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

“There’s also American values that this represents that we want to relate to: independence, freedom, opportunity and, just lack of any better terms, just good. We want to do good, be good.”

“And this is the greatest place in the world to be – the greatest country in the history of the world – and we want to keep that, so we relate to that.”

To Dyer, the flag symbolizes the individual as well as the community. The 13 colonies are represented as stripes, and all 50 states are represented with stars. Alone, a star and a stripe don’t mean much, but together, they’re immediately recognizable as the symbol of the United States.

“So, every time you see a flag – which, they’re everywhere – it’s great to see that and remember that we’re individuals, but we work better together,” Dyer said.

When Rob Mawyer sees a flag, it reminds him of sacrifice and unity. More than

that, it stands for survival, triumph and defiance in the face of tragedy.

“So, 9/11 happened on a Tuesday,” Mawyer said. “I was supposed to check into the Marriott World Trade Center that afternoon – thank God I had not yet – and I’m in a cube farm in New York with hundreds of cubes on a big office floor.”

“And 9/11 happens, and everybody in that room realized they have a friend, a family member (that) they don’t know where they are.”

Mawyer paused for a moment, holding back tears as he remembered, “I’m driving home from New York City on my way to Atlanta, and I had to come all the way down I-95. Every interstate, people lined flags.”

“They were waving at the convoys of cranes and bulldozers, dump trucks, search and rescue teams, police departments from around the country. It was nonstop, every

overpass. And so, I knew, looking at that, we’d be OK.”

Sr. Vice Cmdr. Harbison read the poem “My Name is Old Glory” by Howard Schnauber, but before that, he advised the crowd to teach their children and grandchildren to “be an American worth fighting for,” as he had learned to be.

“But my finest hour comes when I am torn into strips to be used for bandages for my wounded comrades on the field of battle, When I fly at half-mast to honor my soldiers, And when I lie in the trembling arms of a grieving mother at the graveside of her fallen son. I am proud. I am the flag of the United States of America,” the end of the poem reads.

So closed Blairsville’s Second Annual Flag Day, allowing folks not just more time to grab something to eat and socialize, but to reflect on the freedoms they enjoy today thanks to the people who represented the American flag flying overhead.

Blairsville Pro Rodeo...from Page 1A



As usual, the Blairsville Pro Rodeo featured plenty of high-stakes riding, like this acrobatic stunt rider wowing crowds with her daring moves.
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

(Steer Wrestling, Team Roping, Tie-Down Roping, Ladies Breakaway Roping, Cowgirl Barrel Racing and Bull Riding.

Many of the competitors have been riding since they were young, either introduced to rodeos by friends or family.

Cole Ivey is a bull rider who has been competing for 23 years. He has been to every state except Hawaii and Alaska with the sport, usually in a different city every weekend. Ivey described his passion as being “like the rockstar life.”

Of course, it’s common for competitors to make friends along the way, according to fellow bull rider John Burnette, who said, “We want to win, but we’re always pulling for each other.”

Burnette also began riding when he was young and was hooked after his first rodeo: “You remember the first one.”

“We feed off of each other,” Ivey said, explaining how each rider wants whoever is around them to have the same level of passion for winning. He also noted the importance of finding people to travel with, as “it’s harder to go by yourself.”

Even though the sport can be dangerous, the riders agree that the love of what they do is what keeps them coming back to it. The opportunity to win and make money is also important, and “you’ve got to have a drive to win,” said Ivey.

At just 14, Kenzie Bohannon has already been competing for a few years in the Breakaway event. Despite having friends who competed and being raised around horses, she never thought it was something she would do. That is, until one of those friends encouraged her to try.

“I’m glad that happened,” she said. Otherwise, she “doesn’t know what else” she would be doing. On top of keeping up with schoolwork, she travels to different competitions every weekend and practices “at least four to five times a week.”

Competing in rodeos is both time-consuming and

expensive; the price of a horse starts around \$20,000. Bohannon said, adding that she prefers to buy young horses and train them herself instead of getting them already trained.

Like Ivey and Burnette, Bohannon highlighted the importance of the people she’s met through the rodeo and of having people around to ask for advice.

Bohannon’s goal is to make it to the Bob Feist Invitational, the biggest competition for Breakaway roping, and after that, her plan is “to keep doing this until I can’t anymore.”

Stephanie Connor has been attending rodeos for about eight years. She started coming because of her daughters, both of whom have an interest in horses, though she has always loved supporting her local rodeo.

Even before moving to Blairsville six years ago, the Connors would drive from Alabama to attend: “We love how it brings the community together and has things for kids and adults.”

For Connor, the rodeo is about “loving America and her local community.” One way she demonstrates her passion is through membership with the Saddle Club, and her daughters are planning on trying out next year.

Brianna Quick attended her first rodeo on Friday night. She came to support her friend who was competing and is definitely open to returning in the years to come.

“I’ve heard about rodeos before, but I’ve never experienced one,” Quick said. “I like the atmosphere.”

The rodeo also had activities for adult attendees – crowds particularly enjoyed the steer-dressing competition that saw teams of three attempting to dress a steer with shorts, a shirt and a hat – plus events for kids, like the calf scramble, bounce houses, bungee jump and mechanical bull.

Another popular child-friendly activity was the pony ride, provided by Stan Davis. He’s had the business since 1999 and attends both the Blairsville and Blue Ridge rodeos, which he described as “some of the finest rodeos around.”

Some kids who have grown up riding ponies at the rodeo are now the ones competing in the events. Davis pointed out how riding horses provides youth an alternative outlet for competition if they are not interested in other sports.

Be sure to check out the Blairsville Pro Rodeo when it rides back into town next summer.



Steer dressing is a popular event that awards a cash prize for the first team to get a shirt, shorts and hat onto a steer.
Photo by Lowell Nicholson