

Regional tourism discussed in GMRC meeting

By Todd Forrest
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YOUNG HARRIS – Since its creation in 1962, the goal of the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission has

been to promote and guide the development of human, natural, physical, social and economic resources in the Northeast Georgia Mountains.

The commission, also known as GMRC, carries out this goal by assisting local

governments within its service area, spread out over 3,500 square miles to include 13 counties, 38 municipalities and 51 local governments.

GMRC member counties are Banks, Dawson, Forsyth, Franklin, Habersham, Hall, Hart, Lumpkin, Rabun, Stephens, Towns, Union and White.

Every month, GMRC leaders convene a meeting in one of their member counties, and the June 28 meeting occurred at the Towns County Recreation and Conference Center.

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw delivered opening remarks highlighting the current prosperous economic environment, which is benefiting everyone in the region.

“I want to welcome everyone to Towns County – you can tell you’re in Towns County by the beauty,” Bradshaw said. “You noticed when you came in that we don’t have airports, we don’t have railroads or a lot of major highways, and for that reason we don’t have a lot of industry.

“But our bread-and-

butter here in Towns County is tourism. When I was elected as commissioner, one of my main goals was to have controlled growth. We want jobs. The best way to do that, and we’ve been working very hard on it, is to take advantage of tourism.

“Tourism is our main industry here, and our numbers will blow your mind on how much money is spent in Towns County. We feel the more people we bring to Towns County, the more people are going to come back, build a home, buy a home or property here, and that’s exactly what’s happening.”

Headlining the June meeting were Jay Markwalter, executive director of the Georgia Association of Convention & Visitors Bureaus, or GACVB, and Chris Hardman, director of membership for the Georgia Hotel & Lodging Association, or GHLA.

The topic at hand, the tourism industry, fit right in with Bradshaw’s opening comments.

“Our mission is to be the unified voice of Georgia’s destination marketing organizations and provide industry education and professional development opportunities to members,” said Markwalter. “We are working with all of the destination marketing folks in your community as advocacy, education and professional development for them.



Jay Markwalter is the executive director of the Georgia Association of Convention & Visitors Bureaus, and he spoke in the June 28 GMRC monthly meeting. Photo by Todd Forrest

“We have 159 counties in Georgia. We have more counties in Georgia than any of the 12 Southeastern states. That makes us compete with each other, but we have nine regions in Georgia, so it’s also very important that, regionally, we work together and not just compete with our neighboring counties.

“We’re also seeing tremendous support across the industry from (Washington) D.C. We’re heading to the Congressional Summit on Tourism in July with the Southeast Tourism Society. Specifically, I know that Sen. (Johnny) Isakson’s office is co-sponsoring and assisting with efforts for our National

Park Service.

“We’ve gotten behind that as Georgia’s tourism industry because we have 10 or 11 National Park units in the state, one of them being the Ocmulgee Indian Mounds in Macon, and we’re thankful for the support we’re getting up there from the Georgia Delegation.”

Following Markwalter’s presentation, Hardman also touched on the tourism industry before focusing in on the importance of hotel/motel taxes.

“Tourism is economic development,” said Hardman. “It’s big business across the state, and it’s actually one of

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Edward Houston, 54, of Blairsville; Cassie Cooper, 19, of Hiwassee; and Curtis Cooper, 57, of Hiwassee.

“Payne was not present at the residence,” said USCO Capt. Chad Deyton, who heads up the Narcotics Division. “We knew that he was riding on a blue-colored Harley-Davidson motorcycle. So, while we executed the search warrant, we had officers standing by in the yard area, just in case he came by.”

As expected, Payne approached the residence on his motorcycle during the search, and upon seeing law enforcement, he fled the scene, according to Deyton.

A brief high-speed chase ensued, and Payne topped 100 mph on his motorcycle in an attempt to get away, though deputies were able to overtake him safely near the Union/Fannin County line on Georgia 515, according to Deyton.

Charges for the abovementioned individuals are as follows, according to the sheriff’s office:

Burrell, possession of a controlled substance and possession of drug-related objects.

Payne, sale of methamphetamine, two counts possession of a controlled substance, two counts possession of methamphetamine, possession of a firearm or knife during certain crimes, possession of drug-related objects, possession of marijuana less than one ounce, prescription drugs must be in their original containers, fleeing or attempting to elude, reckless driving, driving while license suspended or revoked, and no proof of insurance.

Thomas, possession of drug-related objects.

Houston, possession of a controlled substance, possession of a firearm by a convicted felon, and probation violation.

Curtis Cooper, possession of a controlled substance and possession of drug-related objects.

Cassie Cooper, possession of a controlled substance and possession of drug-related objects.

The state Adult Felony Probation Supervision agency also assisted in this investigation.

Also on June 28, authorities arrested Tabitha Barton, 28, of Union County in a separate incident, according to Deyton.

An investigation over the last few months resulted in Barton’s arrest on three counts of sale of methamphetamine, according to the sheriff’s office.

Deputy Drew Stewart, the newest member of the USCO Narcotics Division, led the above investigations.

In a third incident on June 28, detectives with the USCO Criminal Investigations Division arrested Courtney West, 40, of Blairsville, according to the sheriff’s office.

“They had a felony warrant for this subject for burglary in the first degree, so we assisted them in trying to locate Mr. West,” said Capt. Deyton. “Mr. West was located within Union County

where they’re starting to see these pills that have markings that resemble oxycodone, but they’re actually fentanyl and heroin-laced.”

Mullavey has been charged with possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute, felony probation violation, and possession of marijuana less than one ounce.

Snow has been charged with possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute and possession of marijuana less than one ounce.

Pending analysis from the GBI Crime Lab, Mullavey and Snow could face further charges, according to the sheriff’s office.

“I want to thank my team of narcotic investigators,” said Capt. Deyton. “They’ve worked hard, diligently, day and night on these cases.

“And everyone that was involved in this, it took a lot of work from everybody here to put this together and put these people in jail for these offenses. So, I want to thank all of them for all their hard work that day and everything they do for us in the community.”