

North Georgia News

2 Sections 22 Pages

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'No Trucks Allowed' on SR 348, per new GA law

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Effective July 1, 18-wheelers are no longer allowed to cross the Richard B. Russell Scenic Highway, aka Georgia 348 – unless their drivers want to receive a traffic ticket.

According to Union County Sheriff Mack Mason, the restriction is a long time coming, as the state-designated "scenic highway" was never meant to accommodate big commercial trucks.

As a "scenic highway," State Route 348 features six types of "intrinsic qualities" the Georgia Department of Transportation believes should

be protected or enhanced: "scenic, historic, natural, cultural, archeological and recreational." Commercial activity is absent from this list.

For years, Sheriff Mason has sought to restrict semitractor-trailers and other sizeable vehicles there due to his safety concerns for the particularly steep and curvy highway leading down from Hogpen Gap, which he describes as a "death trap" for runaway vehicles too heavy to stop.

And the sheriff's concerns have not been idle; according to data he presented to lawmakers last year, from Aug. 31, 2020, to June 6, 2023, 22 wrecks occurred on SR 348.

Several of these accidents involved drivers of speeding sports cars and motorcycles who lost control of their vehicles, but over a third were runaway tractor trailers loaded with heavy cargo that spilled all over the mountainside.

Considering these statistics, Mason believed it was just a matter of time before someone died there because of heavy vehicle activity, whether it be a commercial truck driver going over the shoulder or a motorist in the path of a runaway vehicle with nowhere to turn for escape.

In fact, someone did die there in a heavy vehicle accident that Mason responded to as a Georgia State Trooper

in 1987, when the brakes on an out-of-town church bus overheated to failure, causing the death of one young girl and injuries to the remaining 29 people on board.

Of course, that accident – the worst in terms of injuries Mason has seen in his 40-plus year career in law enforcement – could have been much worse, and the risk is the same for all heavy vehicles, including commercial trucks, that take this 2-mile length of road inside Union County.

"The bottom line is, I've been going to wrecks my whole career, and I know what it's like to see people either killed or broken all to pieces and have

See *No Trucks Allowed*, Page 2A



Sheriff Mack Mason posing with the newly installed signage telling truckers that it is now illegal for them to use Georgia 348.

Council talks water line replacement, police pay



L-R: Blairsville Assistant Police Chief Shawn Dyer and Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter discussed increasing officer pay in a called city meeting July 11.

By Shelly Knight
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

An interesting request to provide horse drawn carriage rides around the square on Friday and Saturday evenings was among the topics discussed in the regular meeting of the Blairsville City Council on Tuesday, July 9.

City Attorney Marvin Harkins said there was no legal reason to deny the request but indicated it might be tough maneuvering. Naturally, the horses would have to obey traffic laws. As this was just a question, the council took no action.

Water / Sewer Maintenance Superintendent

Curtis Corn reported that work continues on the inventory of pipes the city is required to conduct for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

On top of their regular duties, such as keeping the system running smoothly with routine maintenance and

See *City Council*, Page 6A

School System adopts new literacy curriculum



By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Union County Board of Education has adopted a new literacy curriculum called Benchmark Advance, to be implemented at the upcoming start of classes on Aug. 9.

Adopted in a called board meeting in May, the new program is now one of two official curriculum programs that the Union County School System follows, with the other being Math Frameworks through the Georgia Department of Education.

The change comes after the enactment of a new Georgia

law declaring that all schools must use a state-approved literary curriculum based on the evidence-backed "science of reading." Among a list of 12 to 13 programs approved by the state, Union County chose Benchmark Advance.

Currently, the system has entered into a three-year contract with the program to the tune of approximately \$435,000, to be paid for yearly out of the General Fund.

"We sent a team down to review all of the curriculums," said C.T. Hussion, Director of Teaching and Learning, adding that, thanks to the Pioneer RESA, representatives from Northeast Georgia schools spent a day hearing presentations from the different companies touting their programs.

Teachers also had a hand in evaluating that information and returning feedback to their fellow educators. In the

end, Benchmark Advance was chosen due to its "integrated approach" and a consistency in structure that makes it easier for younger children to grasp.

Because the curriculum is based around phonics and comprehension, it will impact primary and elementary children learning to read. That said, one of the reasons it caught Union County's attention was that it can be tied in with other subjects.

"If they are learning about the lifecycle of plants, there will be something about lifecycle of plants in all grade levels based upon the standards for that grade level," explained Primary School Principal Debbie Decubellis. "It'll have science and social studies embedded – that will be big, and I think that will support our students."

For his part, Elementary

See *Literacy Curriculum*, Page 2A

UCSO commends Calamari for investigatory successes



L-R: Last week, UCSO Sheriff's Maj. Shawn Dyer, Inv. Bob Calamari and Capt. Daren "Bear" Osborn celebrated Calamari's commendation for a job well done.

News Special

The Union County Sheriff's Office has issued a commendation for the dedicated actions of one of its own: Inv. Bob Calamari.

On Nov. 1, 2023, Deputy Robert "Bob" Calamari was assigned to the Criminal Investigations Division of

the Union County Sheriff's Office.

"Inv. Calamari's primary assignment was to investigate financial crimes, as this type of crime has become the most reported crime in the last few years," said UCSO Capt. Daren "Bear" Osborn, who heads up the Criminal Investigations

Division.

Osborn's commendation continues, "Inv. Calamari has excelled in this position, and in nine short months has either recovered or stopped over \$261,500 from going into criminals' hands. I would like to commend him on the great job he has been doing."

Butternut Creek Festival to return in 25th anniversary



The Butternut Creek Festival will headline Meeks Park this weekend – a local tradition for 26 years.

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Butternut Creek Festival has been a staple in the community for over two decades now, giving artists a beautiful vista inside Meeks Park to sell their wares and meet like-minded creatives.

And this year marks the event's 25th anniversary, and everyone is invited to come

out to Blairsville to enjoy the festival on Saturday, July 20, and Sunday, July 21, starting at 10 a.m. both days.

The 501(c)(3) group High Country Artisans, Inc. got its start 26 years ago, and organizers have run the festival since the nonprofit's inception, so it is no wonder that the two are so deeply intertwined.

"A small group of artists got together to decide that

they wanted to put on a quality show where local artists could display their work, and that the art they were selling was handmade by them and not something from overseas and resold to the public," said key organizer Helena Grossman.

Despite many of the original members having retired or passed away, Grossman reports feedback from the

See *Butternut Creek Fest*, Page 2A



Vol. 115 No. 30

Arrests - 4B Legals - 7B
Church - 9A Obits - 10A
Classifieds - 7B Sports - 2B
Opinion - 4A

Apply for Olin Hughes Memorial Scholarship See Page 6A

Home & Garden Shows to Return July 20-21 See Page 5B

Georgia's "Only American Citizen Voting" Audit See Page 9B



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No Trucks Allowed...from Page 1A

to live with that the rest of their life," Mason said.

That's why he is thankful to the lawmakers who finally addressed the issue.

District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch and District 8 State Rep. Stan Gunter, who represent Union County in the Georgia General Assembly, concretely responded to Mason's concerns last year, working with the Department of Transportation to determine a solution.

The solution presented itself as a simple amendment to state law, enacted as part of House Bill 516 in the 2024 Legislative Session, with assistance from Sen. Greg Dolezal and Rep. Rick Jasperse, who chair the Transportation Committees in their respective chambers.

"Sheriff Mason had requested help on multiple occasions looking for a way to prevent commercial trucks from using Richard Russell Scenic Hwy due to the increasing number of accidents and injuries due to the steep grades and curviness of the highway," Sen. Gooch said.

"After much deliberation with DOT Commissioner Russell McMurray," Gooch continued, "we decided the best approach to the situation was to give the DOT statutory authority to restrict heavy commercial vehicles on steep curvy roads that get closed by a gate in the winter months due to inclement weather.

"The Richard Russell Highway is the only state route in Georgia that presently meets this criteria. The DOT is required to follow all federal highway standards regarding the restrictions of vehicles that can use a state or federally funded highway.

"As majority leader of the senate, I worked with the DOT staff and the attorneys at the capitol to craft an amendment to HB 516 regarding other transportation issues. Gov. (Brian) Kemp signed the legislation after session ended and therefore, the new law is in effect as of July 1st."

Now, the dangerous stretch of SR 348 between Union and White counties is designated as a "commercial motor vehicle restricted

highway" – a singular distinction in the state, as highlighted by Gooch.

The "fixed gates" mentioned in the bill came courtesy of Sheriff Mason advocating for increased safety on SR 348 after he talked GDOT into installing the gates several years ago to close the road during rough weather, accidents, etc.

As a result of the new law, anyone found to be operating a commercial truck equipped with more than six wheels on SR 348 can be issued a misdemeanor citation and fined up to \$250 – a crucial enforcement tool to deter such large vehicles from taking the scenic highway.

Signs at both ends of SR 348 that previously warned motorists about the potentially treacherous road conditions – also installed in recent years at Mason's request – have been modified to read "NO TRUCKS ALLOWED," and the sheriff hopes commercial drivers take notice.

Mason is about to retire after three terms as sheriff, and he concedes that future local leaders may need to seek expanded restrictions to account for heavy personal vehicles and equipment that face similar safety issues, like fifth-wheel campers, horse trailers and other tow-behinds.

For now, Mason is just grateful that the road has been made safer by the state.

There has been one reported runaway wreck on 348 since Mason contacted lawmakers last year with an extensive list of reasons, crash data, photographs, and even GDOT's and U.S. Forest Service's own 2002 study stating traffic volume and

accident monitoring would be a top priority.

"The only monitoring and concern came from me," Mason said.

And the fact that there has been just one wreck in the past year is a promising sign that GPS companies have taken note of the conversation about SR 348 and modified recommended routes for commercial truckers, who have access to safer routes like SR 19/US 129 and SR 515/US 76.

In terms of large trucks needing to make deliveries to homes and properties located on SR 348, Sheriff Mason said "common sense" would be used to allow these vehicles passage as long as they do not enter Union County via the White County side of Richard Russell Scenic Highway.

For their part, Rep. Gunter and Sen. Gooch are happy to have helped.

"When Sheriff Mason made me aware of the danger these trucks were causing traveling GA 348 and there was no help from DOT," Gunter said, "I introduced legislation to stop these trucks from traveling that scenic highway.

"After passage of this bill, DOT erected signs directing these trucks not to travel GA 348. Our citizens should not fear being injured by a runaway truck while traveling GA 348. Truckers are on notice it is illegal to travel this scenic highway."

Added Gooch, "I want to applaud Sheriff Mason for his persistence in finding a solution to a serious problem that puts Georgians at risk on our busy highways in North Georgia. His commitment to the safety of the citizens of Union County is appreciated by us all."

Literacy Curriculum...from Page 1A

School Principal Jerry Bavero believes it's "crucial" to adopt a curriculum that can be applied and added onto as students grow, and he says Benchmark Advance succeeds due to its consistency.

Basically, it boils down to two main goals: one for primary students and one for elementary. Benchmark Advance suggests younger readers focus more on the "building blocks" of literacy, such as helping them focus on letters and the sounds they make.

Once they grasp the basics, they can then move on to more advanced ideas like building their vocabularies, learning about prefixes and suffixes and retaining the meaning of the passages they read.

"Primary's all about learning to read, and then that shift from primary to elementary is reading to learn," Bavero said.

Of course, the new curriculum follows the

standards outlined by the State of Georgia, and a bonus is that it fits well with the current phonics program employed by UCPS. It also pushes for more traditional classroom interactions, which Hussion believes will help with the attendance issues faced ever since the COVID-19 pandemic.

And while there's a lot that Benchmark Advance brings to the table, system administrators and staff want parents and guardians to remember how important it is to foster a love for reading early.

Hussion and Decubellis, for example, both agreed that reading to a child or having them practice reading aloud at home can help with learning.

To foster that connection, Decubellis said UCPS has been reevaluating what homework means to the youngest grade levels. A sort of rehaul is in order, considering that the "traditional" way of doing homework isn't necessarily the best way.

"Right now, the best thing that we can get parents to do is to invest in reading with their child," Decubellis said. "That's going to be our focus, is getting parents to understand how crucial they are in helping their child to be successful, but also in what is appropriate for that level."

As a parent, Bavero has seen the model in action and can attest to its results. He suggests that, alongside the changes that the new curriculum brings, parents set good examples like reading in their spare time and encouraging the same in students.

It's important to recognize that, despite all the irons in the fire, the new curriculum is just that – new and untested. Parents and guardians are encouraged to come to teachers with any concerns they may have, whether that means their child is having difficulty with the program or they notice something about Benchmark Advance that might not be working.

Butternut Creek Fest...from Page 1A

vendors through the years has been positive. Generally, they are pleased with a "quality" event that doubles as a show for their crafts.

As a matter of fact, the Butternut Creek Festival placed 64th out of Sunshine Artist's 200 Best last year, as voted on by vendors. Sunshine Artist touts itself as "America's Premier Art & Craft Show Resource," listing off the "best shows for artists and makers to sell arts and crafts."

But it's not just about reputation. The Butternut Creek Festival gives back locally in a big way, Grossman said, because the entry fees artists pay to participate eventually end up back in the community as donations to the art programs at Union County Schools.

In the last two years, this has amounted to some \$6,000 to split between the Elementary School, Middle School, High School and Woody Gap.

These funds help teachers purchase supplies for the classroom and in turn provide artistically inclined kids a way to explore a potentially lucrative passion.

"You know, in today's world, the poor teachers are pulling money out of their own pocket to pay for these things, so they're very appreciative of what we do, and we hope to continue that this year," Grossman said.

In 2024, Union County Primary has been added to the list of schools to receive money brought in by entry fees, because even the smallest students "should have a chance too" at exploring their creativity – a skill Grossman said has been easy to take note of with the schools' art shows.

Grossman believes the students benefit from other

aspects of showmanship, also.

"They use those skills in their life going forward in terms of spatial work, design aspects, solving problems," Grossman said. "So, those are basic skills that they learn through art."

To a lesser degree, some festival proceeds go to local groups that are either art-oriented or could benefit from art. For example, the High Country Artisans' most recent endeavor involves working with the Appalachian Veterans Memorial Park Project.

Along with the money made by mere participation, there's also the revenue that comes into the area via the tourists who visit the festival or vendors who travel long distances. By utilizing local businesses like restaurants and hotels, they help bring money into the community.

"We're a community-based event, and we're so fortunate that the community supports us," Grossman said. "I'm just so enthused about

this show."

What sort of arts and crafts can one expect to see at the Butternut Creek Festival? This year, guests will find everything from jewelry and paintings to creations forged in the fires of a blacksmithing family.

Grossman mentioned that there are also several woodworkers who will be offering goods like bowls, hand-carved toys and table turners.

In addition to the main event, visitors can enjoy finding something to munch at one of the food trucks that will be available, and if patrons would like to take a break from browsing, there will be live music to sit and listen to as well.

On Saturday, July 20, the festival will be open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and on Sunday, July 21, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Meeks Park is located about one mile west of Blairsville on Georgia 515.

Blairsville Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1101 hosted Anniversary BBQ



More than 35 Vietnam War and Vietnam-era Veterans and their spouses and families attended the Blairsville Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1101 commemorative 10th Anniversary BBQ at Trackrock Stables and BBQ by Jim's Smokin' Que.



Blairsville Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1101 hosted a commemorative Chapter 10th Anniversary BBQ for more than 30 Vietnam War and Vietnam-era Veterans and their spouses and families July 13 at Trackrock Stables.

The event was a recognition of the service these area Veterans have continued to give in our community since the end of the Vietnam War. During the BBQ buffet, from Jim's Smokin' Que, the local band "Struck by Lightning II" played a variety of hits from the Vietnam era and patriotic music as well.

"We are so thankful to Trackrock Stables for providing a wonderful setting for this event," explained Malcolm McRainey III, Chapter president. "Coming together for fun, food and relaxing together is a valuable opportunity for these Veterans. Today, with many of these Veterans facing disabilities from not only battle, but the chemicals used in Vietnam and others entering their senior years, it is vital to remind others that freedom is never free."

The Blairsville Chapter holds its monthly membership meeting the third Thursday of each month with the next meeting being July 18 at 1 PM in the Leon Davenport Veterans Center, 78 Blue Ridge Hwy.

Additionally, the Chapter members gather every Wednes-

day at 11:30 AM for lunch at the Blairsville Restaurant for comradeship and support.

The VVA serves to highlight the brave and faithful service of the Armed Forces during a very divisive period of American history. Upon returning home, many were mistreated and condemned for the country's involvement in the Vietnam War.

The VVA for is open to Veterans with active duty (for other than training purposes) in Vietnam between November 1, 1955 and May 7, 1975 and Vietnam-era Veterans (August 5, 1964 to May 7, 1975) and seeks to help foster, encourage, and promote the improvement of the condition of the Vietnam-era veteran through a variety of programs and efforts on the national, regional, state and local levels. NJUL17Z15CA

City Council...from Page 1A



Blairsville City Council Members Tony Dyer and Mary Ruth Cook in a recent city meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

protecting the community's water for generations to come, water employees must now inspect all the infrastructure at the meter to determine what kind of line it is.

Regarding this project, council members voted to authorize Mayor Jim Conley and City Clerk Kaye McCann to execute a \$30,000 grant agreement for the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority's Drinking Water State Revolving Fund Lead Service Line Replacement Program.

The grant has been awarded to help offset the cost of the project to replace any lead-containing service lines, though the water department is only conducting the citywide inventory at present while the EPA guidelines are being formulated.

In other business, the council held a first reading of Ordinance No. 2021-03 adopting regulations regarding the Blairsville Municipal Airport, with a second reading and enactment expected in the August city meeting.

"The current city code has nothing in writing granting the City Council the right to develop policies or regulations for the airport as needed. Our city attorney developed this ordinance simply to include it in our city code," McCann said.

Council members also ratified a sewer easement

agreement between three properties affected by the August 2023 sinkhole near the Shell gas station at Murphy Highway and Georgia 515 to facilitate completion of the repair, which appears to be wrapping up.

"They need to divert the water flow in the parking lot and reroute the sewer line," McCann said.

Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter reported that the Fourth of July holiday week went quite well and that the city had returned to normal equilibrium.

Airport Manager Aaron Mannheim reiterated that a recent training visit by Special Forces soldiers was exciting to watch and a notable demonstration at the airport, as many members of the community came to observe the spectacle.

"We sold plenty of fuel," Mannheim said. "It was great to welcome the military, and they really enjoyed their time here in Blairsville."

Downtown Development Authority Director Kristen Bentley spoke on exciting upcoming events for the city. The Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival will occupy the square July 27-28, rain or shine, from 10 a.m. to 11 p.m. There are over 110 vendors, and there will be live music in and around the square.

The next big event will be

the annual Heritage Festival on Labor Day weekend. Already 60 vendors have signed up for it.

Following the regular monthly meeting, the City Council held a called meeting on July 11 to discuss the potential of increasing pay rates at the Blairsville Police Department.

Chief Baxter and Assistant Chief Shawn Dyer made the case that the city had fallen behind in recent years regarding officer compensation, making the department less competitive for hiring and retention. Case in point, a nightshift opening has been vacant for more than half a year.

Council members signaled that they were receptive to the idea and asked Baxter and Dyer to prepare a spreadsheet with suggested pay increases to bring rates more in line with other local and area law enforcement agencies, which should be completed before the August meeting.

Also under consideration are changes to the city's benefits package for full-time employees to bring down employee costs for family health care, with further discussion expected in upcoming meetings.

Mayor Conley and the City Council regularly meet the second Tuesday of each month at 6 p.m. inside City Hall, 62 Blue Ridge Street.

Blue Ridge Mountain Conservation District Accepting Olin Hughes Memorial Scholarship Applications

The Blue Ridge Mountain Conservation District is accepting applications for the Olin Hughes Memorial Scholarship. This opportunity is for college sophomores, juniors, and seniors from the district which includes Towns, Union, Rabun, Fannin Counties. The \$1000 scholarship is for students actively engaged in a field of study related to agriculture, forestry, environmental science or soil and water

conservation. Please visit the Blue Ridge Mountain Soil and Water Conservation District web page to download the application. Applications should be completed and returned to BRMSWCD 165 Wellborn St, Box 3, Blairsville, Ga 30512 by September 9, 2024.

The Blue Ridge Mountain Soil and Water Conservation District is a unit of state government that manages and directs natural resource

management programs in Fannin, Rabun, Towns and Union Counties. The District works with farmers, landowners, homeowners, and with other units of government to educate and actively promote programs and practices that support the conservation, and use and development of soil, water, and related resources. More information can be found at www.gacd.us/blue-ridgemountain.