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There, they will monitor traffic and keep an eye on a situation that really is unprecedented in recent history, as this event will be the first total eclipse to blanket Union County in over 500 years.

Dyer, who is also 911 director and county fire chief, led a solar eclipse workshop meeting with more than a dozen agencies in attendance on Thursday, July 20.

The workshop was designed to hone in on the concerns of the different segments of the first responder community, as well as local government and the school system.

“Unless you’ve been under a rock, we’re having a solar eclipse here that’s coming,” said Dyer to those gathered. “It’s going to be a big, huge deal in this area, kind of unique for North Georgia.”

This is the second EMA eclipse meeting Dyer has held in the last month.

On June 29, Dyer invited two speakers to talk about the nature of the eclipse with first responders: Steve Morgan, director of the O. Wayne Rollins Planetarium at Young Harris College, and Tobie Chandler, tourism director of the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce.

In the July 20 meeting, Dyer asked the various agencies in attendance to fill out a discussion sheet on problems and concerns about the eclipse, whether law enforcement planned to have extra personnel, if any department anticipated additional needs just for that day, etc.

The partial phase of the eclipse will begin just shy of 1:06 p.m. that Aug. 21, and spectators will need special eclipse glasses to watch the eclipse until the moment of totality, which will occur just



Union County EMA Director David Dyer led the workshop on July 20. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

shy of 2:35 p.m.

That totality, when the moon completely blocks out the sun and only the sun’s outer atmosphere and other solar phenomena are visible, will last 1 minute and 59 seconds in Blairsville.

Then, the eclipse will re-enter the partial phase, at which time eye protection will once more be necessary to watch the eclipse until it finally ends around 4 p.m.

There is a festival taking place at the Union County Saddle Club Arena over the eclipse weekend, and on the morning and day of the eclipse, Dyer expects several thousand people to drive into Union County.

“The population of Union County is about 23,000, and the summertime influx is about 8,000 people,” said Dyer. “I’m still expecting about 5,000 to 6,000 people in just Union County (for the eclipse).”

Of course, the number of eclipse visitors could be more

or less than that, depending on the weather and other factors, and it has been reported that some 200 million people live within a day’s drive of the eclipse’s path of totality.

“We’re thinking about the Atlanta area, all of North Georgia coming to our area – Union County, Towns County, Rabun County,” said Dyer.

Traffic seemed to be the biggest concern among other first responders, too – thousands of extra vehicles in the area to view the eclipse could possibly translate to congestion on the roads, making it harder for emergency vehicles to get around.

The school system reported in the meeting that it was weighing early release versus school closure for that Monday, and that, should the school board decide, the system could potentially use an inclement weather day for the eclipse.

Union County 911 Dispatch will have an extra dispatcher working, and the Union County Sheriff’s Office and Blairsville Police Department plan to have a greater number of deputies and officers working that day, and perhaps even that weekend.

The Tennessee Valley Authority Police will have all personnel on board monitoring 17 different areas for the eclipse, including two law enforcement officers on Lake Nottely Dam, and TVA will have a personnel transport helicopter stationed in Murphy, North Carolina, for emergencies.

Law enforcement with Georgia DNR anticipates having more staff in the parks and on the lakes where people are likely to congregate, and they, too, plan to have a helicopter stationed nearby for use by rescue personnel.

The U.S. Forest Service expects a significant increase in camping over that whole

weekend, as area hotels and motels fill up ahead of the eclipse, and USFS officials expressed concern about traffic in the meeting, while adding that they will have volunteers with the Appalachian Trail Association stationed at points along the trail.

Union County Fire will have their people at the ready, and C.J. Worden of the Georgia Emergency Management Agency talked about the possibility

of getting a communications vehicle moved into the area in case cell towers become overwhelmed by the influx of people.

Dyer will hold another EMA meeting on Aug. 17 to go over last-minute concerns ahead of the Aug. 21 eclipse.

Agencies involved in the July 20 solar eclipse workshop included: Union County Fire, EMA, 911 Dispatch, Sheriff’s Office, the school system,

Blairsville Police Department, Union County Government, Blairsville City Hall, Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce, GEMA/HS, USFS, Georgia DNR, Georgia Forestry Commission and the TVA Police.

Some 2,000 pairs of chamber eclipse glasses were still available at press time, though they are selling fast at \$2 per pair for the public, or \$1 for chamber members.

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State Sens. Gooch and Wilkinson with Towns County local leaders. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

emphasized what he said was key to getting things done down at the Georgia General Assembly.

“I’ve been in the State Senate for six years, and one thing I learned when I went to Atlanta is the importance in relationships in what you do,” said Wilkinson. “The relationships you have with people are very important.”

Wilkinson pointed to their varying areas of expertise in the Senate – himself with agriculture and Gooch with transportation – and noted that their work was always complementary in nature.

Gooch thanked Wilkinson for his introduction, and would go on to spend a few minutes looking ahead to the 2018 state races.

“Next year is going to be a big change,” said District 51 Sen. Gooch. “There’s a governor’s race, a lieutenant governor’s race, secretary of state, insurance commissioner – all of those positions are going to be vacated ... so there’s going to be a lot of opportunity there, a lot of turnover.”

“There will be people in the House and the Senate that will be running for some of these seats, which means there will be changes in leadership

in both of those chambers as well.

“There’s going to be a lot of changes, and so, we want to embrace that and do the best we can to bring those opportunities back to our district.”

Sen. Gooch focused that Friday on his positive message concerning the current state of Georgia as he sees it.

“Our state is in good condition,” said Gooch. “Fiscally, we’re sound. We have a balanced budget – that’s the one thing that we have to do every year when we go to the General Assembly in Atlanta, which starts the second Monday in January.”

Added Gooch: “We do balance our budgets, we’re required to do so by the constitution. We wish Washington had that same requirement. They don’t, but they need to.”

“But we have a great system down there; it can be better. We look for ways to improve it every day, and we look for input from you all to make it better.”

Gooch pointed out that the state budget has grown substantially since he first entered office in 2011, a surefire sign that the economy has been on the upswing since the recession back in 2009.

“Jobs are coming back to Georgia,” said Gooch. “We’ve been named the No. 1 state to do business four years in a row. We hope to have that designation again this year. If we get that, we’ll be the only state in the nation that’s ever gotten that five years in a row.”

“I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that we’re in the South. We are a very pro-business part of the country.”

Continued Gooch: “We have good tax policies that help attract industries, and we have the No. 1 busiest airport in the world. We’ve had that designation for many years now, Hartsfield Airport is the No. 1 airport in the world.”

The senator also pointed

out that Georgia has the fastest growing port in the nation, currently third in size on the East Coast, at Savannah Port and Brunswick Port.

“We export more goods out of Georgia than we import, which is a good thing,” said Gooch. “Ports are very important for our commerce. We’re bringing a lot of our goods and services through that port, and we are expanding that port as we speak.”

Gooch also spoke a bit about education, how the state is working hard to tackle employability of students coming out of Georgia schools.

“We have failing schools in Georgia,” said Gooch. “We have children that are in high school in Georgia that can’t read on the third-grade level. We have a workforce problem right now in Georgia.”

“We can’t produce the available workforce that a lot of these companies are looking for, and so we have to do better. We have the No. 1 technical college system in the country, and they’re producing great graduates, but we’ve got to continue to look for ways to make our workforce more employable.”


TCHS Class of 2016 alumnus Adam Penland, who now attends Mercer University, introduced Wilkinson in the meeting.

Mountain Movers and Shakers Co-Founder Sam Fullerton impressed upon those in attendance some statistics he’d recently compiled.

According to the latest data, from 2015, tourism generated some \$25.5 million in direct spending in Union County and \$44.8 million in Towns County.

Fullerton also reported that home purchases in the area are in the hundreds of homes already sold this year, according to statistics from local real estate companies, which is a terrific indicator of a strong regional economy.

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