

Property Purchase...from Page 1A

on more than 100 counts of prescription drug fraud. His prior ownership of the property in question came up during testimony provided in his June 24 sentencing hearing.

For background, Gowder acquired the River Bend Farm Road property from Jackie Hill in 2014 with the understanding that Hill would remain in the home on the land until her death via a life estate arrangement, per real estate documents.

The 3.382-acre parcel is contiguous with other property once owned by Charles and Jackie Hill, namely 580.28 acres of land acquired in 2014 by Union General Hospital Inc. for \$2.6 million after much of the property went into foreclosure, according to qPublic.net.

As CEO of Union General, Gowder had convinced Hospital Authority Board members to buy the 580 acres of land, persuading them with a vision of turning the property into a retirement village of sorts, according to court testimony.

What the board didn't know was that "Mike had a deal with the owner of the house" in the middle of the property, Assistant U.S. Attorney Laurel Boatright said, describing

the arrangement as "another example of the self-dealing of Mike Gowder."

Reportedly, Gowder had used property on the 580 acres as a personal hunting ground for years prior to the hospital purchase.

Furthermore, his private arrangement with Jackie Hill in the midst of negotiating the larger land deal for the hospital presented a conflict of interest that only became more complicated after the hospital fired him following his 2016 arrest for prescription drug crimes, leaving the board holding a large property investment with a key piece missing – a 3.382-acre cutout owned by Mike Gowder.

Again, Paris concedes that purchasing the property may look bad to some; after all, he's used \$750,000 in taxpayer money to buy property recently owned by the disgraced former hospital CEO.

Moreover, Paris' wife, Dinah, serves on the Hospital Board via his appointment as commissioner. She has served in this role for years and was involved in the 2014 decision to purchase the 580 acres of land after Gowder sold the board on the idea.

Paris contends that her presence on the board helps to keep him apprised of the bigger picture, but that he is distanced from all internal workings of the hospital.

Regardless of appearances, Paris said he's hopeful people will be able to see the good in the deal, which he insists is consistent with other forward-thinking decisions he's made over the years, as the commissioner is known for buying property with an eye toward future county use.

By acquiring property during his 20 years in office, he has been able to expand Meeks Park, create the Farmers Market, erect the Horse Arena, provide headquarters for the Department of Driver Services, Health Department and Drug Court, build a soon-to-be completed Double Gym with pickleball courts, plan upcoming ball fields for more youth recreation opportunities, and more.

So for Paris, the purchase made perfect sense, especially since he sees the hospital as the most important institution in Union County, serving as an invaluable medical resource for residents and a major economic draw for the area, both as the largest employer in the county and as a recruitment tool for growth.

In the coming years,

Paris aspires either to sell the county's smaller piece of property to Union General, thereby unifying ownership of the land to greatly increase its value to the hospital, or to purchase the rest of the Hill acreage from the hospital to unify the property and facilitate development there.

Such a purchase would require a likely investment by the county of at least \$6 million, he said, though he believes it would pay off in the end with significant investment via development.

Either way, Paris feels that buying the 3.382-acre parcel is a win-win for the hospital and the county alike, both as a way to protect the hospital financially given the fact that "rural hospitals are closing all the time," and to pave the way for retirement living that he says is sorely lacking in Union.

The entire 584 acres is located just south of Meeks Park II off River Bend Farm Road, a designation that is somewhat descriptive of property that enjoys about 30 acres of Nottely River frontage.

But Paris believes that description to be woefully inadequate; he prefers to think of it as "the most beautiful piece of property in Union County," with its creeks, rolling pastures, forested perimeter, serene, wide-open interior views, and only a few dozen acres in the river's flood plain.

The commissioner said he always knew it was a "pretty piece of property," but it wasn't until about three years ago that he first toured it extensively at the invitation of Gerald Patterson, who clears hay on the property's fields for the hospital. Paris said he immediately fell in love with the land, realizing then how amazing an opportunity it would be for senior living and possibly even recreational activities.

He recalled at the time that Gowder held a central piece of the property, which he figured made it much less desirable as an expandable asset to the hospital.

Wanting to ensure the hospital didn't feel compelled to sell its acreage for regular development because of this fact, Paris kept an eye on the property as a whole over the years, tracking what the hospital wanted to do with its portion — nothing at present — and what was going on with Gowder's stake.

Fast forward to 2020, and Scotty Fain was now in possession of the property. Having heard about the

commissioner's interest in the parcel, Fain reached out to him pre-pandemic, Paris said.

For his part, Paris tried to facilitate a deal wherein the hospital purchased the 3.382 acres from Fain, but that ended up falling through due to financial pressures at the hospital brought about by COVID-19.

The county and Fain then came close a couple of times to hammering out an agreement for the county to buy the property, but for one reason or another things kept falling through, Paris said, and he committed to walking away this last time if the deal collapsed again.

In hopeful anticipation, Paris accepted a tentative purchase agreement of the property in a called meeting June 17, and the sale closed a month later, on July 17. Moving forward, Paris plans to be in touch with the hospital about unifying the property.

Considering the hospital's recent financial struggles with lost revenues due to COVID-19, as well as the \$5 million settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice in 2019 resolving allegations of "improper financial relationships with referring physicians," Paris believes it may eventually be in the hospital's best interest to sell the 580 acres to the county.

This would, in Paris' eyes, have the effect of shoring up Union General's depleted coffers, which the commissioner believes would help the hospital maintain independence and avoid having to consider potentially selling to a larger hospital system for financial reasons, though Paris said nothing of the sort is currently being discussed.

For now, the two entities own their separate pieces of property, and Jackie Hill continues her life estate arrangement at 1159 River Bend Farm Road. Following her death, the county will take full control of the property.

As to making the purchase during the pandemic, Paris said the county could afford it, and that he was simply loath to pass up the opportunity given the potential of the property, as he "felt led to do it."

Additionally, he said sales tax collections, though down a bit in April and May, have been strong since June, and construction is up as well, giving him multiple reasons to be optimistic about the county's short and long-term financial prospects, even with ongoing property acquisitions.

Stratton...from Page 1A

enable the Historical Society to display them in its Mock House Museum. The project began at the end of May, when Stratton met with the Historical Society to get the details of the work to be done.

With the help of fellow Boy Scouts from Blairsville Troop 101 over three weeks, Stratton cleaned, organized, labeled and neatly hung the tools for display on a wall in the basement of the annex building.

With this new display, Historical Society members are looking forward to showing off more agricultural history.

Society President Judy Carpenter said she was thankful for Stratton's contribution and help with the Mock House Museum.

"He did such a wonderful job on the project," Carpenter said. "That is such a great help to the Historical Society, especially since we have had to be closed during this pandemic."

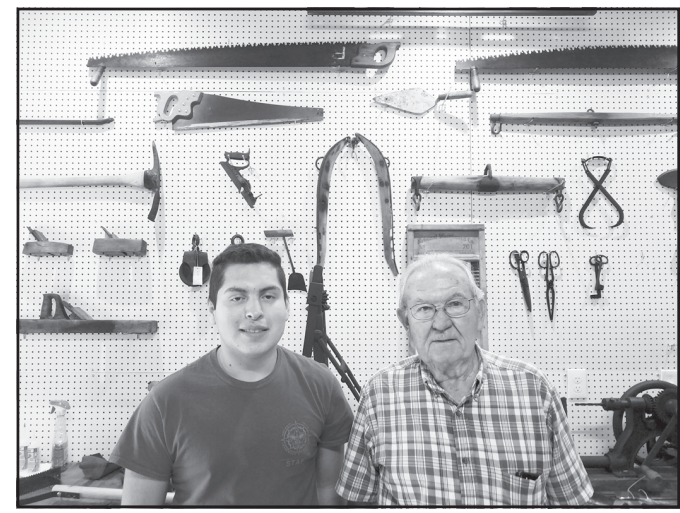
"We have not been able to generate any cash flow, and the work that these Boy Scouts do helps as far as labor and getting things done at the Historical Society. We are very appreciative, and the cleaning of the tools helps to enhance our museum. That is a wonderful display."

"They got all of our tools out that have not been able to be on display because we didn't have anywhere to display them, and they cleaned them up and they did a wonderful job. They look fantastic."

The Historical Society works with the scouts often, helping the young men plan their projects, which benefits both local conservation and the scouts achieving their goals.

Eagle Scout rank is the highest achievement in the program, which can take upwards of six years to reach after continual hard work and effort.

Stratton is still working on the paperwork side of completing his Eagle Scout requirements, but he hopes to have the title by the fall. The accomplishment is important for



Stratton and Bud Akins pose in front of the antique tool wall at the Mock House Annex this summer. Photo/Submitted

Stratton, as it demonstrates his commitment to the program.

"This means a lot of hard work and dedication," Stratton said. "I get to look back on this and be thankful for everyone who helped me. It has taught me how to grow up, how to go about doing things, how to lead and plan ahead; it has helped me learn skills that I will need as an adult."

With these lessons from his time in the scouts, Stratton is ready to take on the future following high school graduation.

"I'm looking into joining the military," Stratton said. "I just want to become a linguist and learn foreign languages."

For more information on the Historical Society, visit UnionCountyHistory.org.

Farmers Market...from Page 1A

fruits and vegetables, and craft vendors offering unique items by the tableful.

For the last five years at the market, Dave Reiswig has sold his hand-crafted wooden bowls, pens and other accessories to use around the house.

"I really enjoy the Farmers Market," Reiswig said. "This is my fifth setup this year. It takes a while to make each bowl – some take 10 days, some take a week. The pens, to be honest, take about 10-15 minutes."

"You have to cut the wood you want to use, drill the hole down in it, and glue a brass tube. That takes a few hours. Then, you just sand down the ends to the brass tube, and it is only a matter of 10 more minutes until it is done."

Vendors like Reiswig attend the market every week in hopes of sharing their products

with the community. For more information on the Farmers Market, which takes place Saturdays from 7 a.m.-1 p.m. and Tuesdays 2-5 p.m., visit UCFarmersMarket.com.

Seminar on Home Solar Battery Systems

Keep the lights on! No more power outages! Carolina Mountain Solar is holding an outdoor educational seminar on Home Solar Battery Systems. Learn how sunshine in our mountains can produce an energy efficient solution right now and in the future! COVID precautions are being taken. Cleaning, social distancing and masks worn by hosts. RSVP required, call 828-835-0015. Saturday, August 15th, 9 AM at Pavilion 3 in Meeks Park, Blairsville, GA. NTJul29/210CA