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Transfer Station resumed commercial hauling Monday Cost, hours change under county management

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Commercial garbage hauling resumed Monday, Nov. 22, at the Union County Transfer Station after the county's new waste-hauling company, Republic Services Inc., committed to picking up local trash about a week earlier than its initially offered starting date of Dec. 1.

The county missed its projected 45-day window to reopen the commercial garbage area by less than a week, as the process was complicated by a combination of price negotiations, national supply chain issues and labor shortages

during a particularly inflationary economic period.

Much about the Transfer Station remains the same – garbage services and residents alike will still be crossing the scales to back into the commercial dumping shed on the county-owned property at 348 Deep South Farm Road.

But people will notice key differences there, as the Commissioner's Office has taken over operating the commercial garbage side of the Transfer Station after Waste Management abandoned the site in early October, according to County Manager Larry Garrett.

For starters, hours are changing slightly, now open

from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday instead of the previous 4 p.m. closing time. Saturdays remain 7 a.m. to noon, closed Sundays, and the site will not be shutting for half a day each week to clean unless it becomes necessary.

As an initial cost-saving measure, the county is reopening the commercial side with reduced hours, with plans to expand hours at a later date, potentially to accommodate even greater hours than were previously available.

Also new are commercial site renovations completed during the roughly month and a half closure, as previously reported.

The renovations are

designed to improve safety, ease of use and overall experience, featuring a newly paneled and painted dumping shed reinforced by solid concrete walls and structural support beams; resurfaced driving areas on the premises; and even a new roof on the scale house and landscaping.

Basically, the county has committed to creating and maintaining a cleaner, safer commercial dumping environment under its management, which, unfortunately, is going to cost people more money at the scales.

The rate for commercial haulers, including local garbage



As of Nov. 22, commercial dumping is back in business at the new and improved Union County Transfer Station.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Lamar Paris makes proclamations, welcomes guest speakers

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Happy Birthday to William Clyde Collins, who turned 100 this month. In recognition of this milestone and Collins' contributions to the country and Union County over the years, Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris has proclaimed Nov. 7 as William Clyde Collins Day.

Paris personally delivered the proclamation to Collins on his Nov. 7 birthday, and Collins' niece, Alexis Moore, accepted the proclamation on his behalf at the Nov. 18 Commission Meeting.

Born in Blairsville on Nov. 7, 1921, Collins graduated

from Union County High School in 1938, attended Young Harris College for two years, and served in the U.S. Army Air Corps from 1942 until 1946.

After graduating from the University of Georgia with a bachelor's degree in education, Collins worked in the Union County School System for over 40 years as a teacher, a school principal, and, eventually, as Union County Schools Superintendent.

Moving along, Paris proclaimed Nov. 18 as Dr. James H. Varnell Jr. Day in honor of Varnell's 13 years of service to Union County in the field of cardiology. Varnell has announced his retirement as of December 2021, and his staff joined him for the

proclamation.

In tandem with Gov. Brian Kemp proclaiming Nov. 7 as Retired Educators Day for the State of Georgia through the Georgia Retired Educators Association, Paris also proclaimed Nov. 7 as Retired Educators Day through the Union County Retired Educators Association.

In other business, Paris adopted the revised Drug and Alcohol Testing Policy for the Union County Transit System, as required by the Georgia Department of Transportation, which added "zero tolerance – 04/21" to the bottom of each page of the policy.

"These policies are based on federal and state guidelines

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Local cardiologist Dr. James Varnell Jr. and his hardworking staff with The Heart Center of Northeast Georgia Medical Center in Blairsville accepting a proclamation Nov. 18 from Commissioner Paris.

Photo by Mark Smith

Teachers of the Year, others honored by school board



L-R: The 2022-23 Union County Teachers of the Year are Tessa Yarbrough, Jennifer Ludlum, Heather Mitchell, Susan White and Patricia Wallace. Congratulations! Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

In their Nov. 16 monthly meeting, members of the Union County Board of Education recognized excellence in the schools by announcing the 2022-23 Teachers of the Year for each of the five district campuses.

"The Teacher of the Year is voted on each year by school (faculty)," Assistant Superintendent Dr. Paula Davenport said. "The teacher has to be a full-time teacher with at least three years of experience."

As opposed to just kudos from the boss, a teacher being recognized by his or her peers – the very people who serve in the trenches with them every day and see them on both good and not so good days – is the height of accomplishment for any educator, Davenport said.

The 2022-23 Teachers of the Year are Patricia Wallace of the Primary School; Tessa Yarbrough of the Elementary School; Heather Mitchell of the Middle School; Jennifer Ludlum of the High School; and Susan White of Woody Gap School.

Union County School District Teacher of the Year will

be chosen from among the five individual school winners, to be announced in December.

Of equal import that evening was the award of recognition given to Jim Clark, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran and graduate of both Young Harris College and the University of Georgia employed by Union County Schools from 1971 until 2018. That's 47 years.

Clark was awarded the 2021 "Pioneer in Education Award" for Union County from Pioneer RESA on Nov. 5, with further recognition garnered in the Tuesday school board meeting.

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Williams educates public on septic system do's, don'ts

By Jeremy Foster
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

On Thursday, Nov. 18, the local University of Georgia Extension Office hosted an information session for the public at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center on the maintenance of septic systems, which are much more prevalent than sewage systems here in the mountains.

Jacob Williams, the Agriculture & Natural Resources Extension Agent for Towns and Union counties, led the educational program with an informative slideshow presentation featuring data, how septic systems work, septic tank upkeep, and various other septic subjects.

Ag agent here since June 2018, Williams said that many people have been moving to the mountains lately, "which also entails more phone calls regarding questions on the septic tank system, as they were all previously used to city municipal sewage systems."

"There are many things unbeknownst to people about septic system care and maintenance," Williams said. "Some indicators of a septic system failing are sinks and toilets that drain slowly, backed-up plumbing, gurgling sounds coming from the plumbing, sewage odors in the house or yard, wet or mushy soil in the yard, standing water greyish in



Local Ag Agent Jacob Williams explaining the ins and outs of septic system management in his Nov. 18 program in Blairsville.

Photo by Jeremy Foster

color, grass growing faster and greener in one particular area, and bacteria in well water.

"Bacteria and other microbes are responsible for partial decomposition of the sludge going through the system, and a new supply of these is added to the septic tank with each flush, which is why no additives are needed."

"However, the microbes cannot break down all the material in the sludge, so that

is why the general consensus is to have your tank pumped every 10-30 years depending on your house/family size, the tank size, and number of tanks that you have."

Williams also said that the No. 1 rule of thumb is to never flush anything down the toilet that is not biodegradable.

"Cleaning agents are fine from time to time, but make sure it is not anti-bacterial, as

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Transfer Station...from Page 1A

services and construction companies, is increasing from \$46 to drop off a ton of trash to \$57 per ton.

Likewise, the minimum weight rate to dispose of household items like, say, couches and appliances, is

doubling from \$10 for up to 400 pounds of trash to \$20 for the same weight, with no significant changes as to what will or will not be accepted for dumping.

County Purchasing Agent Pam Hawkins said the increases may seem like a big jump from what people were paying previously, but it's actually in line with regional commercial rates. She also said Union has essentially benefitted from an artificially low rate over the years.

"When Waste Management and Advanced Disposal and all those companies ran it, they owned their own landfill," Hawkins said, "and they had truck drivers and haulers, equipment, and all of that.

"So, they weren't paying \$45.50 a ton to pick it up and haul it to a landfill, they were just paying the guys to haul it because they owned their own landfill.

"The other thing is, with them having the bagged trash side and then the Convenience Center on SR 325 – the bagged trash is where the money is, when people are paying per bag. So, they were making enough money on that side to offset a lower rate.

"They were also picking up trash in front-end loaders and dumping it in their trailers at the commercial side, so that added to their tonnage, and it's all those effects that helped them have a cheaper price per ton. If we owned our own landfill, that would be cheaper

for us, too."

According to Hawkins, of several companies, Republic offered the best deal of \$45.50 per ton to transfer Union's commercial trash to the company's Ranger landfill near Calhoun. But that's just to take the trash – the county must still cover operating expenses for the site.

The Commissioner's Office came up with the \$57-per-ton figure after factoring in costs necessary to offer commercial garbage services at the Transfer Station, including salaries, benefits, equipment, utilities, etc., all in an attempt to simply break even in terms of operations.

"Because that's our goal – we don't want to lose money and this cost the taxpayers anything," Hawkins said.

Not only is the dumping rate increasing for garbage services, but fuel prices have been on an upward trend for more than a year, and the costs of doing business have generally risen at a quickened pace since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Increased costs for the seven local garbage pickup services, which have been hauling to the transfer station in Mineral Bluff since the Oct.

4 shutdown, may very well translate to rate increases for their customers, who are largely residents of Union County.

Of course, many people personally transport their own bagged trash to the residential facility at the Transfer Station, but a lot of residents rely on garbage services due to lack of transportation, disability, convenience, etc., so increases will likely have to be absorbed by these folks.

Holbrooks Garbage Service has been in operation for 20 years and features clientele spanning one end of the county to the other. Co-Owner Pam Holbrooks said her family's local hauling business has yet to increase rates and will use the next month or so to see how things go.

"It's going to be hard, but more than likely, it's going to have to be passed (to the customers) too," Holbrooks said of the increase. "We've tried not to go up, but everybody's just trying to survive and get by, and it's hard for everybody.

"That's what it boils down to, because it's like a domino effect; one gets hit, and then you've got to pass it on down to everybody else."

Similarly, Tony's Garbage Service said that, due

to increases in Transfer Station rates, gas prices and other expenses, it will be having to "make adjustments to our rates as well for 2022." People can get Tony's Garbage news via <https://sites.google.com/view/tonysgarbage/home>.

"For most of our customers, this is the first rate increase in over 20 years," a company spokesperson said. "Please check our website for updates as we go.

"In the meantime, for 2021, customers can continue to send in their regular monthly payment by check or money order to P.O. Box 520, Blairsville, GA 30514."

Through last week, the county had spent \$146,643.37 from Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax collections toward the recent renovations and upgrades at the commercial side of the Transfer Station, with still other invoices to come in over the next couple of weeks.

Waste Management continues to operate the residential bagged garbage facility at the Transfer Station, though it recently went up on its rates per bag, citing inflation. Residential garbage and recycling hours remain unchanged.

Septic Systems...from Page 1A

that would actually decrease the breakdown process that the bacteria need," he said. "And the biggest misnomer is about flushable wipes.

"They do not actually dissolve, and research has shown that, if used continuously, they just group up and stick together and eventually create a mass that clogs the entire system from flowing."

Williams concluded the session with tips on maintaining septic systems, as "poor maintenance is the most common cause of septic system failure."

"Fortunately," he said, "it is relatively easy to maintain your septic system to avoid

expensive repairs."

The agent listed suggestions for septic tank health, including having the tank inspected and pumped periodically as per the general guidelines "if you do not know the last time it was pumped."

"Do not drive or park over the tank or drain field, if possible, as it could compact the soil and diminish efficiency," Williams said. "Do not use sinks or toilets as trashcans. If you have a garbage disposal, keep in mind they increase the need for routine pumping.

"Consider the septic system in the landscape design, as tree and shrub roots can grow

into the drains and even the tank. Use water wisely and pay attention to running water that you may be wasting.

"Lastly, do not use additives, as chemical solvents break down solids into smaller particles that do not settle to the bottom of the tank. These small particles remain suspended in the water and move into the drain field, potentially clogging the lines, and acids can corrode concrete tanks and distribution boxes."

For more information on septic tank care and many other issues, from agriculture to pest control, contact Williams at 706-439-6030 or Jacob.Williams@uga.edu.

Sons of the American Revolution holds special commemorative November meeting



President Jared Ogden presenting a Memorial Certificate and a United States Flag flown over the U.S. Capitol to Carolyn Brazil, wife, and Ben Workman, grandson, Caroline Workman, daughter, and Rick Workman, son-in-law, in memory of Bud Brazil.

The Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) November meeting commemorated members who passed during the COVID shutdown when regularly scheduled meetings were canceled. Compatriots Bud Brazil of Blairsville, and Wayne Elliott of Blue Ridge were remembered. Boo Elliott, the widow of Wayne Elliott and Carolyn Brazil, widow of Bud Brazil and Bud's daughter, son-in-law, and grandson Caroline, Rick and Ben Workman were presented a memorial certificate, a flag of The United States previously flown over the United States Capital, and a copy of the deceased compatriot's original application to the SAR.

The speaker for the dinner meeting was Bob Sapp. Sapp is a former president of the Georgia Society, SAR and currently the Georgia Brigade Commander of the Society of the Children of Washington's Army at Valley Forge. Sapp spoke on "The Why of Valley Forge?" The presentation explained why Valley Forge was chosen as Washington's winter encampment during the winter of 1777/78 and highlighted the problems of feeding and clothing the army, and the diseases that plagued the army during that winter. Sapp also discussed the occurrences of intrigue and subterfuge as rival commanders attempted to wrest control of the Continental Army from General Washington. He concluded that the hardship suffered concurrent with the superior training received at Valley Forge forced the Patriots through the crucible into a fighting force matching the British in disci-



President Jared Ogden presenting a Memorial Certificate and a US Flag flown over the nation's capital to Boo Elliott, in memory of Wayne Elliott.



pline, tactics and bravery and ultimately three years later, led to the victory at Yorktown.

The Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter, SAR meets five times per year; the next meeting is 6 p.m. on January 11, 2022, at Brothers Restaurant in Young Harris. The meetings are open to the public. However, membership in the SAR is only available to male descendants of the patriots who served in the American Revolutionary War or who

contributed to establishing the independence of the United States. The Society's goals are to preserve the knowledge of our constitutional foundations, celebrate, and reward acts of patriotism, and educate citizens and youth on the civic responsibilities required to live in and maintain a nation of free citizens

For additional information, please phone or email Jared Ogden at 770-855-0007 or jaredogden007@gmail.com.

Teachers of the Year ...from Page 1A

School Superintendent John Hill said Clark had served as a high school math teacher, middle and high school assistant principal, and elementary, middle, high school, and Advanced Placement principal.

"It's an honor and a privilege to present you with the Pioneer in Education Recognition Award," said Hill, adding, with a gleam in his eye, that Clark was instrumental in keeping him from becoming a juvenile delinquent when he was a student.

Moving along, four Future Farmers of America students were recognized for representing not just Union County but the State of Georgia at the National FFA Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana.

"These students competed in the National Farm and Agribusiness Management Career Development event in October in Indianapolis," said Career, Technical and Agricultural Education Director Josh Davis. "They did an awesome job."

"They brought home a silver emblem. They have worked very hard on this for over a year and represented the state very well."

Those students were Emma McConnell, Alyssa Sweat, Austin Fairless and Ashley Shipes. Each of the four students received an FFA belt buckle from an anonymous donor as well.

Also recognized were the agriculture teachers who helped prepare the students for the competition: Hannah Taylor, Rusty Logan, Katie Rittenhouse and Haley Sosebee.

In other news, Dr. Jill Olsen, computer science teacher and the new Future Business Leaders of America adviser, enlisted the Blairsville Pickleball Club to hold a round robin fundraising tournament benefiting the FBLA on Sept. 18 at the new Union County Pickleball Complex.

Davis said tournament proceeds of over \$10,700 were gifted to the High School FBLA Program and "will help them attend their competitive events and leadership development conferences throughout the year."

Blairsville Pickleball Club Officers Louise Fortin, Dave Campbell, Lexie Adkins, Henry McCray, Kim Trimble, and Club Member Steve Olsen



Retired Union County educator Jim Clark was honored in the Nov. 16 Board of Education meeting as a "Pioneer in Education," posing for a photo here with longtime friend Superintendent John Hill.
Photo by Mark Smith

stood with Dr. Olsen to accept a Partner in Education Award on behalf of the club.

In his Superintendent's Update, Hill spoke to the fact that "one of the best things we do for the community as a system was last Thursday – our Veterans Day program."

Hill said the whole program was very well done, and he highlighted the Quilts of Valor ceremony that included School Resource Officer Chad Berry and his dad Tom, and the Youth Citizenship Award presented to the entire student body by the Daughters of the American Revolution Old Unicoi Trail Chapter.

According to Hill, approximately 5,000 veterans out of a total population of about 27,000 people live in Union County.

"I do want to let the board and the community know, we are going to dedicate the main entrance to Union County High School to the veterans of Union County," Hill said, "and that's going to be the focus when you walk into our high school."

In other business, Assistant Superintendent Dr. David Murphy informed the board that United Pump and Controls had the low bid of 15 vendors for a fuel tank for the fuel island that will be constructed next to the new maintenance and bus barn at a cost of \$206,711 without a canopy.

Murphy said they had 15 days to approve the bid and lock in the price. However,

delivery of the tank will be between 30 and 33 weeks, which is normal these days due to global manufacturing and shipping constraints, so the installation would have to be scheduled for fall of 2022.

The board unanimously approved the bid by United Pump and Controls, which is based out of Suwanee.

Five Union County residents asked to speak before the board at the November meeting. They were Middle School teacher Teresa Hagan, school parents Karen and John Pirie, school mom Jane Wilson, and resident Laurie Brothers.

Hagan, a 13-year veteran of Florida public schools, described in a positive way how she has been "wowed!" in her first 10 weeks as a new employee of Union County Schools.

The Piries, who have two sons enrolled, thanked the school board, the superintendent, and the whole school system for the Veterans Day program and the positive impact the school is having on their children.

Wilson, who has two boys enrolled, thanked the teachers, support staff, janitors, administration, school board, the superintendent, and the athletic director and coaches for the continued commitment to the students.

Brothers spoke broadly about the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine mandates and urged people to reject the vaccine.



Union County High School Future Farmers of America students received recognition last week for competing at the National FFA Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana, pictured here with educators.
Photo by Mark Smith

19th Annual Vogel State Park Christmas Program and Lighting of the Tree to be held Saturday, Dec. 11th

The Vogel State Park Christmas Program and Lighting of the tree will be held on Saturday, December 11th at the ball field. See time frame below:

- 4 to 5 p.m. Parking in the main lots near Visitors Center (parking is limited so try to arrive between the hours listed above). You will have to ride to the ball field or walk up. Golf cart will be available for handicap persons.

- 4:15 to 5:15 p.m. Pre-session music on stage at ball field.

- 5:30 to 6:45 p.m. Main Program on stage and lighting of the Great Tree.

The program this year will be presented by Justin Terry, Knoxville, TN; Debra Perry and Jaydins Call, Dahlonega, GA; Mike and Cheri Young, Dahlonega, GA; Jim and Lydia Cox, Cumming, GA assisting and of course the Christmas Story.

Join us for the 19th annual state park Christmas program and for an evening of fellowship and celebration of the true meaning of Christmas.

Please bring a flashlight, chair and blanket (if needed),



and wear warm clothes. Also, bring an unwrapped gift for a child age 12 and under for the Sheriff's Department to be given to the children that need

a blessed Christmas (no toy guns or knives please). Someone will collect the toys at the Visitors Center. Hope to see you there!

SMART Recovery program

SMART Recovery (Self-Management And Recovery Training) helps individuals gain independence from addiction (substances or activities), by providing an educational and supporting environment

based on SMART Recovery 4 – Point Program.

We teach self-empowerment for recovery from addiction, drug abuse, alcoholism, and alcohol abuse, by teaching how to change self-defeating

thinking, emotions, and actions; and to work towards long-term satisfactions and quality of life.

For more information call 706-994-3692; 76 Hunt Martin Street, Blairsville, GA.

County Meeting...from Page 1A

for testing of safety sensitive employees, specifically the drivers of the transit buses for the Union County Transit System and for personnel that maintain these buses," Paris said.

Resolution R-2021-11 was approved authorizing the filing of an application with the Georgia Department of Transportation and the U.S. Department of Transportation for a grant for public transportation assistance under Title 49 United States Code, Section 5311.

"This is for the grant we receive each year for the Union County transit buses," Paris said.

He accepted an annual \$12,000 agreement with iWorQ Systems, which provides software that is utilized

for public works tracking, with an effective date of Oct. 22, 2021.

"This software is utilized by the Building and Development Office for tracking permits and inspections," Paris said.

The commissioner also accepted an agreement with Caselle, Inc. for the accounting software utilized by Union County Government in the amount of \$2,117 per month for one year, with an effective date of Nov. 9. There is no cost increase from the previous year.

Finally, Paris accepted an agreement with GovOS for management of short-term rentals in Union County in the amount of \$48,219.30 annually, with an effective date of Nov. 5, 2021.

GovOS will provide short-term rental discovery and

identification, ad listings and property reconciliation, data reporting, online registration and payment integration.

"The cost of this service will be covered in part by the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce, along with an increase in the cost of business licenses for short-term rentals to cover the remaining costs," Paris said.

GovOS services will be handled by staff in the Commissioner's Office and the Union County Tax Commissioner's Office, Paris said.

Resolution R-2021-12 was approved appointing Gavin King as the Floodplain Administrator for Union County as required by Chapter 34, Article III, Section

34-71 of the Union County Code of Ordinances.

Paris said King has 16 years with the Union County Building and Development Office and is fully qualified.

"Gavin will be taking on the role of Chief Building Inspector. Our long-time Chief Building Inspector Randy Day will be leaving us fairly soon," Paris said.

Paris approved Resolution R-2021-13 to open a separate bank account for the Union County Transfer Station, as the county has taken over the operation of the commercial side that was formerly operated by Waste Management.

"A separate checking account must be established for the funds paid into and paid out for the Transfer Station," Paris said.

GUEST SPEAKERS

More than 50 people attended the meeting from the public, four of whom made the agenda to speak, and County Attorney William Mercer addressed attendees at the outset to clarify what the Commissioner's Office believed to be some apparent misconceptions about public meetings.

"The monthly Union County meeting is where the official business, policy, or public matter of Union County is formulated, presented, discussed, and/or approved," Mercer said. "Each meeting will consist of a multitude of topics for Union County that will be discussed with the public.

"The public can add up to three topics per meeting (on the agenda). Everybody will get five minutes apiece for that. If you want to be on the agenda next time, please call up the County Commissioner's Office and (make a request) the Monday, before noon, prior to the meeting (which is the third Thursday of each month unless otherwise posted)."

Mercer added that a question-and-answer period would be opened following the main business of the meeting, at which time attendees could ask whatever they wanted regarding the agenda topics.

As noted above, four speakers from the public were scheduled to appear at the Nov. 18 meeting, beginning with Laurie Brothers, who spoke about vaccines and the recently defeated Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax referendum.

Brothers urged Paris to "use (his) influence to encourage the hospital to stop this madness immediately" concerning the distribution of vaccines against COVID-19.

Based on executive action by the Biden administration, in order to continue collecting payments via Medicare and Medicaid, Union General Health System is being compelled by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to comply with a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for health care workers.

Qualified exemptions are being granted, but the mandate is a condition that all health care facilities are dealing with nationwide. CMS has given the Health System until Dec. 6 for first vaccinations and Jan. 4 to be fully vaccinated.

Gov. Kemp and Georgia Attorney General Chris Carr have filed lawsuits to stop the mandate for health workers and employees of large businesses alike.

Regarding TSPLOST, Brothers said she was "somewhat insulted" by Paris' statement in the Nov. 10 edition of the North Georgia News, in which he said: "It's a tough issue, because it's hard for the general public to know and understand the details of why it's so important."

Cindy Vandereedt spoke about TSPLOST as well, saying she also disagreed with Paris' statement in the North Georgia News.

"I believe the citizens of Union County are very smart, and we fully understand what TSPLOST is about," Vandereedt said.

She went on to express her belief that it is unlawful for Paris to have spent county SPLOST dollars on projects not specifically planned for, and she alleged that Paris has threatened to raise property taxes if TSPLOST failed to pass.

Alexis Moore spoke about integrity and trust in government and made several claims about Paris' behavior as an elected official.

"Something that I've observed, a theme over the last few years in politics," Moore said, "is noticing, as a behavior specialist, that our political leaders are displaying the same behaviors that I would expect to find in an emotional abuser and narcissist.

"What I mean by that is gaslighting, scapegoating, isolating dissenting voices, silencing people ... I started noticing some behaviors, that I'm finding these traits also in our sole commissioner."

Diana Barton spoke about



Alexis Moore, the niece of William Clyde Collins Sr., joined Commissioner Paris to publicly accept her uncle's namesake proclamation in last week's county meeting.

Photo by Mark Smith

a property transaction that the commissioner executed on behalf of Union County last year, previously covered in detail by the North Georgia News.

Specifically, Paris purchased the Hill Property on River Bend Farm Road for future development, which has proven controversial for several reasons, including the two degrees of separation from former Union General Hospital CEO Mike Gowder, who is currently in prison for prescription drug fraud and owned the property as recently as six months before its purchase by the county.

Then there's the life estate for former property owner Jackie Hill, which Barton took issue with that evening for liability and other reasons, as the arrangement allows Hill to utilize the home on the now county-owned land until her death.

Barton said local businessman W.C. Nelson Jr. owned the company the county purchased the property from, BLK LLC. However, BLK LLC is a Wyoming-based company started in January 2020 by Scotty Fain of Hiawassee, per the Wyoming Secretary of State's Office.

The North Georgia News is unaware of any connection between BLK LLC and Nelson, though Paris did make a completely separate purchase of the old Georgia Boot Shoe Factory at around the same time last year from Nelson's company Blairsville Motel Properties Inc.

Paris said then that he purchased the old factory property in the hope of one day building a new Union County Sheriff's Office and Jail there.

Barton questioned the legitimacy of the Hill Property purchase and effectively opined in the Nov. 18 meeting that it was not in the best interests of Union County.

During his Commissioner's Comments, Paris said he did not have time in the meeting to address all the issues presented by the guest speakers but offered a blanket rebuttal of many of the claims made that evening about him and the decisions he has made in office.

"I was born, raised, lived, went to school in Union County," Paris said. "I've been in office here going on 21 years. Anybody that knows me in Union County knows that these things that are being said are not accurate, or they are misrepresenting the facts.

"Sometimes the people are doing it intentionally. Most times, I think they're doing it (just because) of a lack of proper information."

Highlighting Barton's remarks as an example, Paris said her "facts" were wrong.

"It's just a typical example of how misinformation is out there all over the place," he said. "I can't get up here and in just a few minutes respond to these many things, but I can tell you, a lot of them are misrepresentations.

"In every decision we make, we try to do what's best for the citizens of Union County."

Paris urged anyone with misgivings about how the county is being run to come to his office and speak directly to him, or

people may write down their concerns and submit them for an official response by the county.

Q&A SESSION

A lengthy Q&A session followed the Commissioner's Comments portion of the meeting, in which one attendee asked about how the county might avoid a crypto mining operation coming to Union.

Crypto mining has to do with bitcoin and blockchains and requires an enormous amount of computing power to operate, which necessitates a great deal of electricity.

Paris said he found out that at least one such operation had made its way into Murphy, North Carolina, because of the low cost of electricity there, and that some residents were complaining about residual noise from the mining process.

He said he would be much better prepared now if anyone wanted to bring such an operation to Union County, which he thought was unlikely.

Another attendee asked if residents had been given the opportunity to provide input on the Department of Transportation's plan to install an R-Cut at the intersection of Georgia 515 and 325, which is the same intersection design implemented at the 515 exit from the Blairsville Walmart, where people leaving that way must turn right.

The attendee raised concerns about the R-Cut causing increased traffic at a separate intersection, at Murphy Highway and Pat Colwell Road, especially for people with horse trailers utilizing the Saddle Club Arena and not wanting to make a U-Turn to go toward Blairsville.

Paris said the choice GDOT gave the county was to either install an R-Cut or do nothing, and for reasons of safety and cutting down on traffic crossing 515 at an intersection that has seen many accidents over the years, the county decided an R-Cut was better than nothing.

Other topics raised by residents during the Q&A included the 515-facing property that was once considered for a youth target range, the hospital's masking policies, the county's relationship with the Health System, and increased fees at the commercial side of the Transfer Station.

The meeting ended at about the one hour and 15-minute mark after Paris and an attendee got into an argument about the appropriate venue to answer questions from the public.

Paris said it was not appropriate for him and his staff to answer a lengthy list of questions the evening of the county meeting when everyone had already been working since early in the morning, and he noted that most questions should be submitted to his office for answering during regular office hours.

The resident objected to this, saying he disagreed that there should be a cut-off point for taking questions in a public meeting, and following a brief back and forth, Paris asked that the resident be escorted out by deputies, and he promptly closed the meeting.