

# Merry Christmas

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# North Georgia News

5 Sections 40 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, December 21, 2022

## Short-Term Rental hearing packs courthouse

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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Union County Government and its community-based Short-Term Rental Committee have released a third draft of the proposed Short-Term Rental Ordinance, published to the county website at the end of last week.

The latest draft features input from the Dec. 5 public hearing held at the Union County Courthouse, where more than 100 people attended the standing-room only event.

People may find this most recent working draft, which is subject to further revision, at <http://www.unioncountygov.com>

government/commissioners-office/business-licences/.

Once enacted, the ordinance will establish the first ever local restrictions on short-term rentals, which to date have not been regulated in Union County.

The ordinance defines a short-term rental as a "lodging accommodation offered to transient guests for a period of time not to exceed 30 consecutive days."

There are many stipulations for short-term rentals in the ordinance, such as rules governing level of occupancy, septic capacity, fire and life safety, parking, amplified sound, pets, trash, violations enforcement, etc.

Regulation is aimed at

supporting "the health, well-being, and safety of guests and residents while minimizing the negative secondary effects on surrounding properties, to ensure proper safety precautions are in place, and to facilitate the collection and payment of STR taxes and related fees."

The purpose of the public hearing earlier this month was to provide information, answer questions and ask for feedback on the proposed ordinance.

It remained unclear at press time if future hearings would be scheduled to solicit additional feedback on working drafts, but the public will have opportunities to review updated drafts at the above link and contact the county with

See *Short-Term Rentals*, Page 2A



The proposed Short-Term Rental Ordinance has generated a lot of interest in the community, as people are anxious to see how these types of businesses will be regulated by the county. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Kids enjoy Christmastime, visit Santa at Sports Center

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Santa Claus came to town at the invitation of the Union County Parks and Recreation Department, spending time with children and families at the Union County Sports Center on Dec. 11, 14 and 17.

There, he made plenty of spirits bright with opportunities for kids to get their pictures taken, write letters, and deliver their lists personally on the Jolly Old Elf's lap.

As it turns out, his visits were the first of their kind, and the Rec Department hopes that there will be many more like them in the coming years. In truth, the tradition was a staple in Union County for years before "it got changed around a little bit."



Santa holding Miles Turner during the Rec Department's "A Classic Christmas" event on Dec. 14.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Scotty Thompson and other Rec Department associates sat down as a group this year and decided to breathe some new life into

the event, bringing it back in time for 2022's holiday season. This iteration had some other interesting twists, too.

See *Santa at Sports Center*, Page 6A

## Historical Society celebrates '22 with Christmas Banquet

By Jeremy Foster  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

On Tuesday, Dec. 13, the Union County Historical Society held its annual Christmas Banquet inside the Community Center to close out the year with a celebratory buffet dinner and to announce achievement awards within the group.

Historical Society President Mickey Cummings emceed the event, in which he related news about who would lead the volunteer outfit as officers in 2023.

Jim Williams will be taking Mary Allison's place as Treasurer, while everything else will remain the same; Patti Everett will continue as Secretary, Freya Jones as Vice President, and Cummings as



Historical Society Member Marta Mead received the "Preservationist of the Year Award" during the group's annual Christmas Banquet on Dec. 13. Photo/Facebook

Award plaques.

During the presentation of awards, Tommie Burrell, Chuck and Tracy Chandonnet, Libby Griffith, and Richard and Teresa Reece received Lifetime

"Volunteer of the Year" went to couple Tom and Cindy Rafter, who have been Union County residents and Historical Society members for many years. See *Historical Society*, Page 2A

## Motorist hospitalized after crashing dirt bike into truck

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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Drive, according to the GSP Crash Report.

At the same time, a 2020 Ford Ranger was traveling north on Ivylog Drive, with the driver negotiating the 20-mph curve from the other direction, per GSP.

"The dirt bike crossed into the path of travel of the pickup," GSP said. "The dirt bike was laid down on its side and struck the front/under carriage of the pickup. The pickup continued to travel over the dirt bike and its driver."

Continuing, "(A witness) stated that he observed (the bike) on its rear tire coming up the grade, crossing the centerline, leading into the curve. He then stated once (Harkins) observed (the truck), he laid the bike down, losing control before being struck."

Harkins was not wearing a helmet in the crash and was taken to Union General Hospital for "suspected serious injury" last Wednesday before being transferred to another medical

facility, per GSP.

As of Saturday, Georgia State Patrol said it was the agency's understanding that Harkins remained in critical condition.

Both vehicles suffered disabling damage, but the couple in the Ford Ranger did not require medical attention due to the crash, per GSP.

The Crash Report lists Harkins as the driver suspected at fault for the accident, noting reckless driving and loss of control as contributing factors. It also appeared that Harkins' motorcycle was not insured for driving.

Charges against Harkins are pending, GSP said over the weekend, but specifics were unavailable by press time.

The north end of the county was experiencing rain around the time of the accident, and the investigating trooper observed that the road was wet, but weather was not listed as a contributing factor.

## 'Shop With A Panther' treats second-graders to Christmas

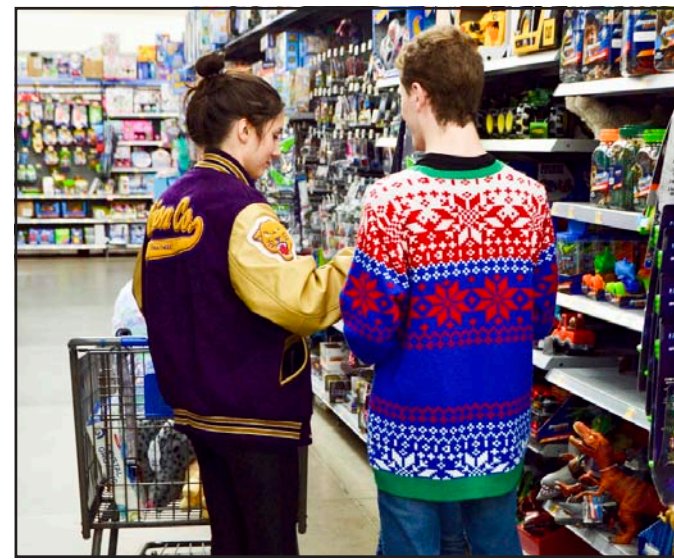
By Jeremy Foster  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Union County High Beta Club students and school staff volunteered to take 18 second-graders shopping at the Blairsville Walmart for the annual Shop With A Panther Christmas event on Monday, Dec. 12.

Instituted in 2012 by the late UCHS Principal Ed Rohrbaugh as a way to provide for students whose families may be struggling financially during the holidays, Shop With A Panther has been going strong for years now.

High School Science Teacher Dixie Conger, who is also the sponsor for the Beta Club, has been a driving force behind the Christmas program for nearly nine years.

"Every year, I just want to keep with that tradition to help these second-grade students," she said. "The Beta Club is a national academic community service club, and members must



UCHS Beta Club students chaperoning second-graders during the annual Shop With A Panther event at Walmart last week. Photo by Jeremy Foster

maintain a 93 GPA or higher and then complete a certain number of community service projects per year in order to get their recognition."

That's why, on Dec. 12, sophomore, junior and senior

members of the Beta Club acted as role models for and mentors to their younger counterparts, who will surely follow in their footsteps someday. After shopping, everyone See *Shop With A Panther*, Page 6A



A 32-year-old Union County man was hospitalized with serious injuries last week after he lost control of his motorcycle and traveled into the path of an oncoming pickup truck, according to the Georgia State Patrol.

The accident occurred around 11:30 a.m. on Wednesday, Dec. 14, as Tucker Harkins was attempting to negotiate a left curve while riding his 2012 KTM 250cc dirt bike southbound on Ivylog

Vol. 113 No. 52

Arrests - 2C Legals - 4D  
Church - 3C Obituaries - 4C  
Classifieds - 4D Sports - 2B  
Opinion - 4A

BASKETBALL

BATTLE OF THE STATES  
Dec 26-30 @ Towns Co.

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CLOSED Friday, Dec. 23.

The deadline for ads and other submissions for  
publication next week is 4 PM THURSDAY, DEC. 22.



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# Short-Term Rentals...from Page 1A

comments.

Twenty-three attendees delivered remarks in the hearing, offering suggestions, highlighting concerns, and voicing both opposition and support for elements of the ordinance.

Speakers included real estate agents, residents living next door to short-term rentals, owners and managers of short-term rental businesses, and residents who were simply concerned about the issue and ordinance.

The most common complaints lodged against short-term rentals pertained to the detrimental effects noisy visitors have on peace and tranquility of neighborhoods, though multiple speakers pointed out that the local economy relies heavily on tourism, which such rentals help to support.

Several residents touched on the relatively recent trend of properties being purchased for use as short-term rentals, which depletes the stock of available homes to serve as permanent or long-term housing for locals, with implications for workforce development.

Another attendee said regulations should only come by way of a countywide referendum, and a resident whose land adjoins a short-term rental property with a heavily used firepit asked if the county could build in minimum



Members of the county's volunteer Short-Term Rental Committee in the Dec. 5 public hearing. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

insurance requirements to satisfy liability concerns.

Draft 3 of the ordinance, dated Dec. 15, has incorporated new language regarding Short-Term Rental Homeowners Insurance, requiring licensees to "attest to obtaining the correct homeowner's insurance to protect all parties in case of an incident."

Many folks had questions about specifics in the ordinance, like how the committee came up with the 3.5% cap on the number of allowed short-term rentals in relation to total number of housing units in the county, which will impact the real estate market moving forward.

Effectively, the committee incorporated the 3.5% figure after reviewing the ordinances of surrounding counties, and a couple meeting attendees suggested that the cap was too low and needed a proper study to be determined.

After receiving this feedback, the committee upped the maximum number of short-term rentals in Draft 3 to "no more than 5% of total number of housing units as reported by the Union County Tax Assessor's Office annually."

"The committee considered a wide range of percentages," County Project Administrator Renee Deibert said. "It wanted to make sure that there would be additional licenses available after existing licenses are grandfathered in under the new ordinance."

"It is quite possible that after a period of time the ordinance can be revisited to ensure that percentage is still working with the total number of housing units reported for Union County."

One speaker questioned the constitutionality of the proposed ordinance regarding property rights; another denounced new fees being imposed that will perhaps balloon over time; and a property manager expressed concern about the 1-hour response time required after neighbor complaints.

Committee members were grateful for the feedback provided that evening on both sides of the issue, including the suggestion that they consider addressing in a future draft the possibility of people purchasing

but not using licenses, which would diminish overall availability of licenses.

Proposed in the ordinance is a maximum number of two licenses per licensee, though people with more than two short-term rental properties prior to ordinance enactment will be grandfathered in.

Still, "all properties will be expected to meet the new ordinance requirements," Deibert said.

The second ordinance draft was only just completed prior to the hearing, so the county offered people insight into changes from the first draft, such as the addition of a distinct category for short-term rental resorts that feature more than one rental on a single piece of property.

As noted in the third draft, resorts will be permitted separately by the Georgia Department of Public Health as "Tourist Accommodations," which are regulated separately by the state, so "these properties are not considered short-term rentals for the purposes of local licensing."

"However, these properties are responsible for registering with the Union County Online STR Tax Collection System and remitting monthly local excise taxes," according to Draft 3.

The Online STR Tax Collection System is expected to be up and running shortly after enactment of the ordinance and will be used for "processing STR applications, licenses, fees, and taxes associated with operating an STR in Union County," per the ordinance.

The annual fee for a short-term rental license will be changing from the current \$10, but "at this time we do not have a definitive amount," Deibert said. Fees will not be outlined in the ordinance but will be listed in the county's Fee Schedule once adopted.

The state of Georgia will not be getting a cut of fees mentioned in the Union County Short-Term Rental Ordinance, as Georgia has its own fee structure for short-term rentals.

As for when the ordinance will be ready for enactment, Deibert said, "Whenever it is deemed ready."

"It will take us a couple

of weeks to get with the committee and digest the input we received not only (Dec. 5), but also in the many calls and emails we have received before and since," Deibert said. "Several points have been made that need to be considered."

Added Deibert, "There are people on both sides of the issue — pro-regulation and no regulation — when it comes to short-term rentals. It is challenging, but the committee is trying very hard to find a balanced position on the topic."

The volunteer Short-Term Rental Committee is comprised of Chris Collins, Rob Medwed, Diana Barton, Steve Rowe, Jane Wilson, Laura Jenkins, Shawn Rudd, John Wysocki and Chuck Chandonnet. Rudd could not be present for the Dec. 5 hearing.

This committee was formed for the purpose of drafting the ordinance, with membership from local short-term rental owners, neighbors of short-term rentals, realtors, developers, the Chamber of Commerce, and residents with a personal interest in helping develop such an ordinance.

The committee is not to be confused with the STR Enforcement Board, which will be created after the ordinance is enacted.

Five members will make up the STR Board, to include one representative from each of the following: Fire Department, Building Department, Environmental Health Office, an STR Enforcement Officer, and an at-large community member.

"Because the majority of the members are Union County Employees, we envision the Department Heads will appoint their representative (to the STR Board)," Deibert said. "There is an 'at-large' position that will accept nominees from the appointed board members."

"These positions receive no compensation above their normal county pay. Board members nominated will be volunteers."

Changes are still being made to the ordinance, and people may mail additional feedback to the Commissioner's Office at 65 Courthouse Street, Suite 1, Blairsville, GA 30512, or email renee@uniongov.com.

# Historical Society...from Page 1A

Society members since 2005.

"History is extremely important for people of all ages to know about, and we were both surprised and not expecting to get this award," Cindy said. "We both value history, so we will continue to do everything we can to help preserve it, because it's not only Georgia history, it's American history."

"We love this community and are so happy and proud of being involved with it and for the great friendships and relationships we have made, and I would love to see more young people get involved."

Speaking of the Rafters, Cummings said, "One thing that sticks out about them is that they never say no. You call them and ask them for help no matter what it is. Even if it involves help with things outside of the Historical Society, they are always there."

"Preservationist of the Year" went to Marta Mead, who most recently led the Decorations Committee to get the Old Courthouse ready for the Christmas season.

Mead grew up in the Atlanta-Buckhead area and has been living here since 1979. She studied horticulture and has an associate degree from Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College.

She retired from the Georgia Mountain Research and Education Center in 2019 and has been a Historical Society member for the past three years.

"My father (Leon Colwell) was a Blairsville native, went to Young Harris College and was a World War II veteran, so during my childhood, I traveled nearly every other weekend and spent summers here," Mead said.



Mickey Cummings will remain president of the Union County Historical Society in 2023, pictured here during the Dec. 13 Christmas Banquet. Photo by Jeremy Foster

Continuing, "My love for history came from my father and my love of horticulture came from my mother, so when I retired fully, I became a member of the Historical Society because it was a perfect fit."

"I was truly shocked and flattered when they announced my name for this award. I truly did not see that coming, because there are so many people here who work extremely hard, and I wish my father could have been here to see it in person."

Cummings first met Mead after he moved to Union County, in 1990, "and she has always been a fixture of our community in the area of horticulture."

"She's always lent her time and volunteered to do things for the community, and I just can't say enough

good things about her for what she has helped us accomplish this year," Cummings said. "She's just a great person to be around."

A door prize raffle that evening included donations from Alexander's Store, Chick-fil-A, From Me 2 U, General Supply, Granddaddy Mimm's, Ingles, Logan Turnpike Mill, LongHorn Steakhouse, Odom Springs Vineyards, River City Bank, Sears, Shirley Walker, and United Community Bank.

Community members interested in volunteering to help with upcoming projects may call the Old Union County Historical Courthouse Office at 706-745-5493. Donations are much appreciated, and people can still get their hands on one of the society's 2023 Waterfall Calendars.



# UCHS Shop With a Panther for Christmas...from Page 1A

headed back to UCHS to wrap presents and continue the fun. A pizza lunch and games were provided, with other High School clubs like Key and Interact “joining in to help provide entertainment, make hot chocolate and just making sure it’s an overall good day for the kids.”

UCHS Principal CT Hussion was there to proudly witness the display of Christmastime joy for the hard-working students who deserved a little extra help for the holidays.

“This does a lot of good for our community and our kids that may need to have a little extra, and it does a lot for our (high school) kids to go help and learn to give back to the community,” Hussion said. “And it’s just something that all of us look forward to every year.”

“With inflation, I think the dollar doesn’t stretch as far as it used to, so any little help that people can get I think is a wonderful thing so that these kids don’t realize necessarily that times get tight



A UCHS group photo of those involved in making younger children’s Christmases bright for Shop With A Panther Dec. 12.

Photo/Submitted

and everything like that.

“A lot of these kids think about their families, too, by using some of their money for their parents or

siblings, and many (people in the community) may not realize that, and this is just something that we need to keep on going with and doing.”

2022 marks UCHS senior Eloise Whisenhunt’s second year as a volunteer for Shop With A Panther, and she shared her excitement about helping

the primary school students find joy in the experience.

“It’s super important every year that we can take these kids shopping and help them

get things that they really want and that are important to them,” Whisenhunt said. “It’s great, too, that most times they want to buy stuff for their family.”

# Santa at Sports Center...from Page 1A



Mrs. Claus welcoming Tiffany Zimmerman and daughters Tiana and Tegan to the line to see Mr. Claus at the Sports Center last Wednesday.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

On their way in, little guys and gals enjoyed watching the train circle around a Christmas village before they made their way to the raffle table, where parents filled out forms for prize gifts like dolls, sporting equipment and other boxes of goodies.

The winning names will be drawn from a hat at a later date, and families will be called up and informed of their luck.

Farther down the hall sat the craft table, where children could color a picture of Santa Claus and write a letter to the North Pole to be turned in at a festive mailbox right beside the sleigh where St. Nick – under the alias of Dustin Rogers – awaited.

Denise Kelly, in the guise of Mrs. Claus, had help from Willow the Elf when it came to entertaining those waiting in line for their photo to be taken.

“We were asked, so we said, ‘OK, we will; we’ll gladly do it,’” Kelly said. “It’s been so much fun.”

When it came to

grabbing the kids’ attention for the camera, however, Hannah Smith, the event’s photographer, had it handled.

Throughout the evening, Smith used a plush Minnie Mouse to capture the interest of distracted babies, providing quick but nonetheless adorable shots of everyone smiling – or at least looking – directly at the camera.

And to top it all off, all the tykes got early Christmas presents on their way out: paper bags filled with an apple, orange, candy cane, and a tiny bag of popcorn each.

Ben and Holly Turner brought their children to visit Santa on Dec. 14, and Miles and Rosie seemed to enjoy themselves. At any rate, they impressed staff and parents alike with their lack of fear or crying.

“It’s great. It’s good to have something to bring the kids to,” Ben said, suggesting that the rest of Blairsville “come out and support their community.”

Meanwhile, Tiffany Zimmerman attended with

her two daughters, Tiana and tiny 3-month-old Tegan. Zimmerman was particularly pleased with the event’s timing; it started at 5 p.m.

“This is nice because I just got off work,” Zimmerman explained.

Tiana was excited to see Santa and had no issue being lifted onto the sleigh and climbing into his lap, happy to pose for multiple photos from several sources.

Tegan was especially fascinated with the fluffy white beard in close proximity to her face and seemed more interested in it than Minnie Mouse or the menagerie of teddy bears on display.

Many parents took pictures on their own phones, but a few signed up to get copies of Smith’s professional photos for \$15.

Hopefully, Santa will stop again in Blairsville between his rounds next year to collaborate with Smith and provide more opportunities for fun while creating permanent positive memories for local families.