

North Georgia News

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Road crews, first responders work hard during wintry weekend

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Winter weather proved a major inconvenience last week and through the weekend, but no major incidents had been reported in Union County as of press time Monday.

Union County Sheriff Mack Mason said that, other than a few cars in ditches, there were no big accidents over the weekend, and wrecker services were reportedly less busy than anticipated.

The Union County Road Department and the Georgia Department of Transportation worked around the clock Friday, Saturday, Sunday and into Monday, spreading a special salt and gravel mixture to combat the slick, icy patches that developed on roads throughout the county.

Union County was spared huge amounts of snow, though what did come in stuck to the roads and stayed there Saturday and into Sunday, until temperatures finally warmed above freezing.

"We took a big hit for a little amount of snow," said Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris. "It's amazing how much damage about an hour and a half snow did. We kept missing all the big predicted snows, and we thought we'd gotten through it."

But the snows did come Friday night, around 7 p.m., and fell heavily for about an

hour and a half before tapering off. Temperatures also fell dramatically Friday evening, and the combination of wet roads from all the rain Friday during the day and the snow on top of the roads made for dangerous driving conditions.

"There was moisture on the road from the rain, and we didn't think the highway could cover up as quick as it

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David Land with the Union County Road Department stops in to headquarters early Saturday morning to refill his truck with the salt/gravel mixture used to treat icy roads

Weather closes schools 3 days

By Shawn Jarrard
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Staff Writer

Union County Schools closed Wednesday, Thursday and Friday last week due to inclement weather, and opened this week Monday with a two-hour delay due to refreezing of precipitation that occurred Sunday evening into Monday morning.

Deciding to close schools is never an easy decision, especially given that weather models can be erratic and seem like guesswork.

"The thing that I think every superintendent really hinges their decision on is, we want to be sure the kids get here safely," said Union County Schools Superintendent Gary Steppe, the man who makes the school closing decision here. "That's the number one thing that takes precedence over everything else."

"What we always talk about, and I tell these other superintendents, a lot of them are young superintendents, but I say, if you're going to make an error in judgment, just make it on the side of safety."

For Steppe, who



Union County Schools closed Wednesday, Thursday and Friday last week due to inclement weather

has been making school closing decisions for more than 30 years in his various administrative roles, closing schools Wednesday was all about the ground being cold and getting students to and from school safely.

"If I decide to close at 9 a.m., then I call (Transportation Director) Stanley Garrett, and

then he sends out word for his bus drivers, and it takes them about 30 minutes to get in," said Steppe. "So, it'd be 9:45 to 10 a.m. before we could get kids loading on the buses to go home."

"We were just a little nervous about the ground already being frozen, because

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Union County primary, elementary and middle schools earn Title I Reward status

By Shawn Jarrard
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Three schools in the Union County School System have been awarded honors as Title I Reward Schools, as reported to the Union County Board of Education in the monthly board meeting on Tuesday, Jan. 19.

The Georgia Department of Education announced the 2015-2016 list of Title I Reward Schools back in December, and the Union County Elementary School and Union County Middle School all made the cut for the category of "Highest-Performing School" among Title I Reward Schools.

According to the

GADOE, "a highest-performing school is among the 5 percent of the state's Title I schools with the absolute highest performance, over three years, for the 'all students' group on the statewide assessments."

Title I schools are schools with high percentages of children from low-income families, and the designation of "Highest-Performing School" for these three Union County schools shows that students in Union County buck the national trend of low-income families equating to low education.

The Union County School System gets money from the federal government through the state for its Title I schools, and while both Union County High School and Woody Gap School qualify

as Title I schools, designating them as such would spread the money too thin between the schools, according to Union County Schools Superintendent Gary Steppe.

Only 81 schools in the state of Georgia received the same award, and Union County Schools received three of the seven awarded in the Pioneer RESA.

Also in the meeting, Union County Sheriff Mack Mason attended to receive a report on how his School Resource Officers were doing in the system, and he was pleased with the report.

The board then approved a grant from the Council on Alcohol and Drugs, Inc. in the amount of \$18,216 for Georgia Family Connection, which is housed within the school



Gary Steppe

system.

Another contract approved by the board allowed for Union County Schools to be compensated moving

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EMA meetings inform the public, first responders

By Shawn Jarrard
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Staff Writer

Last week, Union County's first responders met for a series of meetings covering two winter storms that caused Gov. Nathan Deal to declare states of emergency for multiple counties across middle and north Georgia not once, but twice.

The meetings took place in the county's Emergency Management Agency headquarters at Union County Fire Station No. 1, and both EMA Director Charles Worden and Union County Fire Chief David Dyer, who is also Deputy EMA Director, were on hand to strategize with those in attendance.



Chief David Dyer

From Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, from concerned members of the community to Windstream, the sheriff's office, Blairsville Police, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the school system and more, seemingly

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Animal Control gets new trucks with help from drug money

By Shawn Jarrard
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Union County Animal Control recently acquired two brand new Ford F-150 trucks at no cost to county taxpayers.

"There's nothing better than having a new vehicle that fits all your needs," said Sgt. Mike Lerman of the Union County Sheriff's Office. "These are four-wheel drive, they have caps on the backs so that we can transport the pets without any exposure to the elements."

The trucks came to Animal Control through some smart planning by the Union County Sheriff's Office.

To give a little



Deputy Jeff McConnell, K-9 Deputy Lacey, Sheriff Mack Mason and Sgt. Mike Lerman with new Animal Control trucks

He quickly realized he

had plenty of work of him - the Animal Control facility was in dire need of new equipment, such as

traps and kennels, important departmental paperwork was either missing or misplaced, and the vehicles at his disposal were in rough shape.

After seeing the large Animal Control call volume, Union County Sheriff Mack Mason decided to assign Deputy Jeff McConnell as an Animal Control officer to work with Sgt. Lerman.

McConnell drove a 2005 F-250, which had a long repair record and was an unreliable vehicle, and Sgt. Lerman drove a high-mileage 1997 Ford Bronco as his service car.

Sheriff Mason and Sgt. Lerman knew that these

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Ueltzen honored by SAR



Sid Turner of the SAR presents firefighter David Ueltzen with the Fire Safety Commendation Award

By Shawn Jarrard
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Union County Firefighter David Ueltzen received a Fire Safety Commendation Award in the monthly meeting of the Union County Sole

Commissioner on Jan. 21.

The award, which was presented by Sid Turner on behalf of the Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution, also came with a medal to be worn on Ueltzen's uniform.

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'Blue and Gold Farm' near for FFA

By Todd Forrest
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Construction is underway on Union County School's Blue and Gold Farm and Agricultural Center, with late May as the target date for completion.

The new building is located on 50 acres off the Gainesville Hwy, approximately one-half mile north of Owltown Market at the Lovell Road intersection.

The school has been using the barn behind the

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Construction on the new Union County Schools Ag Center began in November, and should be done by the end of the school year

Commissioner proclaims 'Cindy Williams Day'

By Shawn Jarrard
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Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris wanted to do something special to commemorate the decade of hard work and care undertaken by Cindy Williams at the helm of the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce.

Williams resigned from her position as chamber president and CEO here at the start of the year.

She did so after careful consideration, which resulted

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Commissioner Lamar Paris presents Cindy Williams with her special proclamation at the January county meeting, with her parents, Larry and Jennie Williams

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SPORTS
BASKETBALL
Tues Jan 26 vs. Riverside 6 PM Boys
Fri Jan 29 @ Rabun Co 7 & 8:30 PM
Sat. Jan 30 vs. Washington Wilkes
2 & 3:30 PM