

Christmas in Union County a community affair



By Shawn Jarrard
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Christmastime is rapidly approaching, and area residents will have plenty of opportunities to express their yuletide spirits with community activities that start on Dec. 1.

"In December, we have a lot of activities planned," said Darren Harper, who is program manager of the Blairsville Downtown Development Authority and also sits on board of the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce. "It's a lot of different groups planning them – the Union County Historical Society, Union County Farmers Market, the DDA and the chamber.

"The holidays up here tend to be pretty laid back. We try really hard to get all of our events at the first of the month, which gives people time to do what they normally do during the holiday season – do their shopping, hang with family, and just enjoy the wintertime up here."

Kicking Christmas festivities off is the annual

Tour of Trees, held 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day from Dec. 1 through Dec. 31 at the Union County Community Center, which is where the chamber of commerce is headquartered.

"Different businesses and organizations have sponsored trees and wreaths, and they'll have them on display at the chamber," said Harper. "They're also going to have a gingerbread house display up there, so it'll be kind of festive, fun for the kids, and that's free admission."

Then, on Friday, Dec. 4, residents will be able to take part in the wildly popular Christmas Concert at the Courthouse, which is the last concert of the year sponsored by the Historical Society's Concert at the Courthouse series.

"It's the North Georgia Symphony, and that one's always packed, so people need to get there really early if they want a seat," said Harper. "It starts at 7 p.m., but I would suggest people get there at 6 p.m.

"And the DDA will be handing out gift bags that have

all kinds of coupons and deals from local merchants, like restaurants and things of that nature. We're trying to keep as much Christmas money in town as possible."

Following Black Friday, Nov. 27, is Small Business Saturday on Nov. 28.

"It's sponsored by the chamber and American Express," said Harper. "There are quite a few participants this year. You'll see all kinds of things on the DDA Facebook page, on the chamber's Facebook page and website, just telling what businesses are involved. Again, it's all about keeping money in the county."

Another way to shop locally is to visit the Farmers Market for its Kris Kringle Mountain Market, which runs Friday, Dec. 4, from 4 p.m. until 8 p.m., and Saturday, Dec. 5, from 10 a.m. until 3 p.m.

"They'll have about 85 different vendors selling everything from produce, crafts, food," said Harper. "On that Friday you can bring the kids down and see Santa, there's live music, there's a

bonfire with s'mores. And then on Saturday, they have all that plus they have a little mini train that they run around the parking lot for kids, like they use at the Green Bean Festival."

Also that Saturday, Dec. 5, the Historical Society will host an open house at the Butt-Mock House from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m., where folks can marvel at 1800s life in the mountains and admire the full-size Nativity scene on display in front of the house.

Then at 3 p.m. that Saturday, the Historical Society will hold its own open house until 5 p.m., with a Christmas parade starting at 4 p.m. that will lead into the annual tree-lighting on the Blairsville Square.

Dec. 3 through Dec. 5 is the chamber's Jingle Bell Buys, featuring amazing deals at local businesses to celebrate Christmastime and local shopping. Coupons for Jingle Bell Buys, all worth 50 percent off or by one get one, are available at visitblairsvillega.com.

"Saturday, Dec. 12, is Holly Jolly Christmas, from 3 p.m. until 6 p.m., and that's music, children's activities, refreshments and photo ops with Mr. and Mrs. Claus, and it's free admission at the Community Center," said Harper.

Also on Dec. 12 is the annual Christmas Tree Lighting at Vogel State Park, which will run from 4:30 p.m. until 8 p.m.

"Join us for the 12th Annual Tree Lighting of a 35-foot live Blue Spruce," according to the event description on the website for Georgia's state parks. "There will be caroling, hayrides, Santa Claus visit, bonfires and refreshments. Please bring an unwrapped gift for a child 0-12 years of age, no toy guns or

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the past – I've been in office 10 years, so over the last 10 years," said Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley following the meeting. "I don't remember if we've ever had a budget over \$4 million. We can't do it without good, competent employees who manage their departments very wisely, and who use their amount of budget money each year only when they need it."

Mayor Conley also credits good time management within each city department, i.e. keeping overtime to a minimum, with helping to maintain virtually the same budget for a decade.

He also pointed out that

the city's infrastructure remains up-to-date, such as technology that alerts the city to costly water leaks much sooner than in previous years.

Plus, the city has had very little turnover at the top for many years, and that constant leadership has helped to maximize the efficiency of departments within the city.

"As long as I can remember, and I've been around since 1996 – I was elected to city council in 1995 and started serving in 1996, and we pretty much had the same people on board in all the departments, with the exceptions of the wastewater treatment plant and the airport," said Mayor

Conley.

The city receives funding from the Local Option Sales Tax, and was taking part in SPLOST referendums as early as 2010.

"That's helped a great deal," said Mayor Conley. "Those dollars you have to designate for those projects what you're going to spend that money on in advance, and of course, that's really helped us when we've needed to spend that money on a project that we designated, water and wastewater, and streets.

"It's really helped on those projects, therefore, if we're not having to take money out of the General Fund to do projects with or to help repair facilities with, then that

really is a savings to us. That SPLOST money is actually just an extra 1 cent that, if we didn't have that, it would hurt us tremendously."

Also in the meeting, the council voted unanimously to purchase the tag reader system that's been in trial runs with the City of Blairsville Police Department, which cost \$20,620 for the initial purchase, with a \$1,500 annual fee beginning November of 2016.

City council also voted unanimously to purchase and install two Veterans Parking Only signs in front of the Nantahala Bank area in public parking spaces, in order to show the city's appreciation of Veterans.

lawn chair."

There will be a \$5 parking fee for those attending the tree lighting at Vogel.