

Blairsville business donates Gator to Hamilton Gardens

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Will Nelson of Nelson Tractor Company in Blairsville heard about the need of Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge, so he decided to help.

Specifically, the gardens needed a vehicle that could haul equipment down into and back up from the gardens, and a vehicle that could also be used to haul out debris regularly cleared by volunteers.

Frank Riley, executive director of the Chestatee-Chattahoochee RC&D Council, was out at Nelson Tractor, and through conversation found out that the tractor company had recently taken in a John Deere Gator on trade.

Nelson agreed to donate the Gator utility vehicle, which needed a little work, and Riley took it under his wing and completed the repairs.

The repairs ran about \$500, which came out of a larger \$5,000 grant procured by Riley through the RC&D to be used toward fixing up the gardens. The area of the gardens was originally kick started by the RC&D Council back in 1983, and Riley wanted to continue that stewardship.

Grace Howard, who is one of the driving forces behind the revamped Hamilton Gardens, said that she has been absolutely thrilled with the Gator donation and the grant money from Chest-Chat RC&D.

"It is a sweet machine," said Howard. "We haven't had a single false start with it, and we're so excited to have it up there and to be able to get around. It makes a huge difference."

The utility vehicle has been operational for about two weeks now, and Howard said that "it's already proven its worth."

"We're just really excited, it was a critical need," said Howard. "When we took over the gardens last February, we didn't own any equipment. And what we own now is what we have acquired."

"The Georgia Mountain Fair was great to help us and support us, but they can't keep supplying us with a utility vehicle. So, we just have been in a bind."

Of course, volunteers make the Hamilton Gardens go around, and Howard would like to send a special thank you to Henry Chambers, who has donated the use of his personal utility vehicle for months now in the gardens.

One of the big projects they are working on currently is tearing out the large bridge down in the gardens, which will eventually be completely replaced thanks to a generous donor.

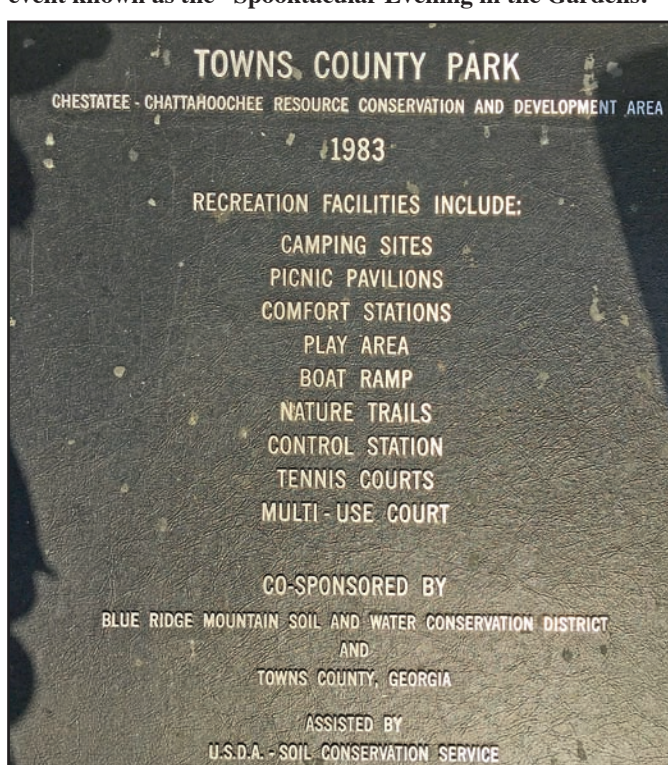
This year's big spring event will be called "A Blooming Affair at Hamilton Gardens," and will run every day from April 15 through May 20, with special events scheduled for the weekends in between.



Frank Riley with Chestatee-Chattahoochee RC&D Council, with Grace Howard of Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge and Will Nelson of Nelson Tractor Co. in Blairsville



The Hamilton Gardens during the Oct. 29, 2016, Halloween event known as the "Spooktacular Evening in the Gardens."



This plaque sits outside Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge, a permanent reminder of the Chest-Chat RC&D Council's long history within Towns County.

The "Blooming Affair" will take advantage of the rhododendrons that should be in full bloom during that time, and preparing for the event has been a long-running work in progress.

"We've been working up there since the first of the year, primarily removing deadfall and debris," said Howard. "Our landscaping crew has been up there taking out a lot of deadwood, and we lost plants this year because of the drought. We're working all the time."

Howard would like to extend an invitation to all

would-be volunteers, adding that the nonprofit is always looking for volunteers.

Those interested in volunteering can reach the Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge at (706) 790-0011.

Admission to the gardens is free, and Howard hopes that all Towns County residents visit the gardens this spring.

"We're going to have a spectacular bloom season, and we invite everyone to come and enjoy the gardens," said Howard.

Kendall...from Page 1A

shoreline in National Forest ownership, the vast majority of Chatuge's shoreline is owned and managed by private individuals.

Not surprisingly, Chatuge was the first of the upper Hiwassee lakes to experience negative impacts from use and development of the shoreline and watershed.

During the 1990s, the Ecological Health Rating that the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) once assigned to its reservoirs declined from "Good" to "Poor." A major cause of this decline was an increase in nutrients from fertilizers and animal wastes flowing into the lake from a wide variety of sources. These excess nutrients caused algae concentrations to climb.

After years of monitoring and study, the Hiwassee River Watershed Coalition (HRWC) published the Lake Chatuge Watershed Action Plan in 2007, outlining 18 broad objectives for improving water quality and the overall health of the lake, and detailing specific recommendations for meeting the objectives.

Ten years later, 56 percent less phosphorus is entering Lake Chatuge every year, and nearly 60 percent less nitrogen.

Many volunteers have dedicated hundreds of hours, private landowners have voluntarily made improvements on their own properties, and TVA, HRWC and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources assisted with funding and technical support.

However, the majority of the credit for this effort goes

to former Towns County Sole Commissioner Bill Kendall and the City of Hiwassee, led by Mayor Barbara Mathis.

Because of the vast list of accomplishments by both the county and the city that culminated with the installation of nutrient reduction technology at the Hiwassee Wastewater Treatment Plant in 2016, the HRWC board made the unprecedented decision to present two Holman Water Quality Stewardship Awards this year.

For different actions in support of the same goal of protecting water quality and improving the overall health of Lake Chatuge, Mr. Kendall and Mayor Mathis, on behalf of the city, will each be honored.

The Holman Award, created by David Goldhagen of Goldhagen Art Glass on the shores of Lake Chatuge, is presented annually by the Hiwassee River Watershed Coalition to the person or group who has done the most to sustain good water quality

in rivers, lakes and streams in the upper Hiwassee River watershed.

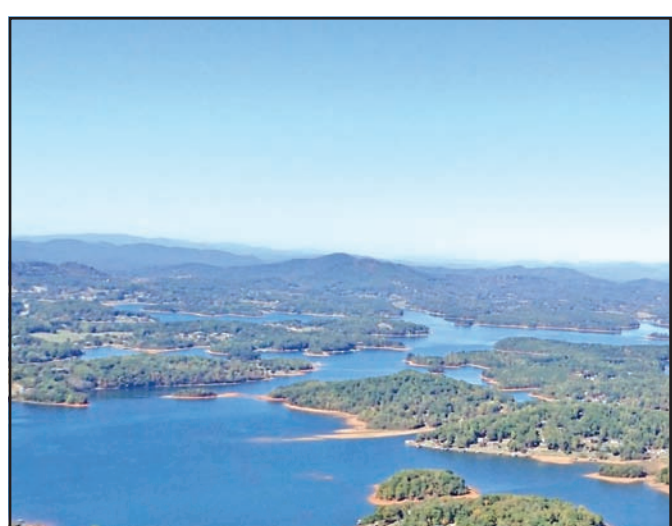
The Watershed Gala will be held in the grand ballroom of Brasstown Valley Resort. The evening will begin at 5:30 p.m. with a silent auction, raffle and cash bar. The plated meal will be served starting at 6:30 p.m.

After the Holman Water Quality Stewardship Awards are presented, several select items will be auctioned live by local auctioneer and entertainer Tim Ryan.

Reservations are \$45 each or \$400 for a reserved table for 10, and must be made by Friday, Feb. 17. Reservations may be secured by mailing a check to HRWC, PO Box 889, Murphy, NC 28906, or by reserving a place online at: www.hrwc.net/events/watershed-gala/.

Corporate sponsors of the 2017 Watershed Gala include Tennessee Valley Authority and Brasstown Valley Resort.

More information about the Holman Award and eight previous winners is located on the HRWC web site: www.hrwc.net/events/watershed-gala/holman-award/.



Barrett...from Page 1A

hiking, Barrett was unable to finish the through-hike, but has since completed segments of the trail in the New England states as well as hiked from Georgia to Virginia.

Over the last year, Barrett has immersed himself in hiker culture and familiarized himself with various towns along the trail that provide hiker-friendly lodging, businesses and transportation to and from the trailheads.

"When I first started off last February at the base of Springer Mountain, I hiked about 12 miles to my first shelter," said Barrett. "When I got there, there were about 30 people there. It takes more or less five to eight days, depending on how fast the hikers are, for people who start the trail to get here."

"Last year, about 3,500 people started a through-hike of the Appalachian Trail. We will have thousands of people coming through here from the Appalachian Trail during February, March and April."

Many of the towns along the trail reap the benefits of having a generous number of hikers come through each year, and some businesses even specialize in Appalachian Trail necessities. Because of these endeavors, such towns are known among hikers as welcoming places to stop for supplies and food, resulting in increased commerce.

However, according to Barrett, Towns County is currently one of the least amicable areas in the region for those making the long trek across the Appalachian Trail, and because of this, many hikers will wait until Franklin, North Carolina, to purchase supplies.

"There is a subculture on the Appalachian Trail,"



Mover and Shaker Bill Hall with a question for Barrett. In the Feb. 3 meeting, Barrett urged locals to embrace hiking culture.

said Barrett. "Towns along the Appalachian Trail get reputations. They're either a trail friendly town or a non-trail friendly town. Hiwassee is kind of lukewarm."

"Last year, a guy who was hiking through shared reviews of the different towns, and when he got to Hiwassee he said, 'Ah, it's seen its better days. I wouldn't advise stopping there.'"

"We have different hotels and restaurants, but we don't have many places that are necessarily hiker friendly."

Barrett and his wife, Linda, often pick up hikers coming off the trail, something he encouraged locals to do. Barrett said that more often than not, these hikers are normal people, do not pose a threat and should be embraced, for not only will they purchase goods in the area, but will bring future business as well.

"Let me give you a profile for people who are hiking the Appalachian Trail," said Barrett. "Last year, the average age was 30.5 years old. Over 90 percent of these people are college educated."

"You've got people who are hiking the Appalachian Trail that are retired, people who are suffering a loss and

are searching for something, you have students that are taking time off, you have recent graduates who don't have a job and who are looking."

According to Barrett, hikers also could bring growth into the community due to the amount of college graduates and retirees that hike the trail each year. Many of the graduates are looking for job opportunities and places to live, as are the retirees.

"We're missing an opportunity here," said Barrett. "These people come back. These are professional people. They will come back, they'll buy real estate, they'll move here."

"We're missing a great opportunity because we aren't catering to potential revenue streams that are coming right through town."

Barrett added that the best way to get Hiwassee and Towns County back on the map for Appalachian Trail hikers is to be generous and encouraging to those who wander through from time to time because, on the trail, word travels fast.

Barrett will be jumping back on the trail soon, hiking from Virginia into Pennsylvania.