

Spillway fix to bring record-low lake levels

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

HAYESVILLE, N.C. – In about three years, the Tennessee Valley Authority will be undertaking a major construction project to improve safety at Chatuge Dam, which will result in yearslong record-low water levels for Lake Chatuge. Representatives of TVA held a media event at the dam on Friday, March 28, to discuss next steps, which will consist of multiple opportunities for community members to provide feedback – both in person and online – on the various construction options being proposed.

TVA routinely examines the safety of its dams to ensure that each dam conforms “to the most modern standards,” said engineer Chris Saucier, TVA Senior Project Manager for Special Projects.

Keeping this in mind, a Dam Safety Modification Study commissioned in 2023 identified a key vulnerability in the spillway of Chatuge Dam that is “outside our risk tolerance.”

Crucially, spillways release upstream floodwaters that need to pass to the next downstream reservoir, and according to TVA, “if the spillway were to fail, there could be a variety of impacts to human life, property, essential services, communications and transportation routes.”

“The life loss associated with a spillway failure is dependent on a variety of factors, though the threat at the spillway is considerably less than that posed by the dam,” according to TVA. “TVA estimates several dozen people could lose their lives if the spillway were to fail.”

Importantly, this is not an emergency, as both the dam and spillway have been judged safe for normal operations in their current conditions. But the associated potential risk in a very rare flooding event is high enough that TVA has decided to be proactive in eliminating this spillway vulnerability.

TVA began construction of the “homogeneous earthen embankment” dam in 1941 and completed it in 1942. The aging spillway is original to

Workers conducting repairs last week as part of the temporary solution to the spillway vulnerability that has been identified at Chatuge Dam.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Shirley Miller Center re-opens after renovation

Band continues remarkable journey of improvement

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – Former First Lady of Georgia Shirley Miller has championed the cause of accessible education for all, no matter age or circumstance, due to her unwavering belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to improve their lives through literacy and learning.

Thanks to her efforts, the Shirley Miller Adult Education Center for Lifelong Learning opened at 38 Blalock Street in Blairsville in 1996 – before even the advent of North Georgia Technical College’s Blairsville campus.

Her late husband, Young Harris native and former Gov. Zell Miller, signed the legislation to bring the center into being, and it has served the community as a place of second chances ever since.

And now, the center has been gifted a new lease on life with its grand re-opening on Wednesday, March 26.

About a year and a half ago, the center closed for extensive renovations that, according to Instructional Coordinator Paula Ary, needed to be made to ensure the building

Shirley Miller offered words of encouragement to people looking for a second chance at learning and literacy during her namesake Adult Education Center grand re-opening last week.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

was up to safety standards. Classes moved to the main campus of North Georgia Tech in the meantime.

NGTC President John Wilkinson welcomed everyone in attendance to open the program last week, and Dean of Adult Education Shelby Ward shared clippings and photos from the original dedication when the building first opened.

“The center represents (Shirley’s) unwavering dedication to education and her lifelong dedication to improve literacy among adults in Georgia,” Ward said, revealing that more than 1,000 students have passed through the doors since that initial opening.

Free of charge, those students can earn their GEDs and take classes in essential skills such as computer literacy. They can also learn work-

TCHS Band Director Tim Skinner directing members of the school band in practice last week after returning home from another amazing LGPE performance.

Photo by Shelly Knight

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

For the second year in a row, the Towns County High School Concert Band has earned the highest possible scores – Straight Superior ratings – during the annual Large Group Performance Evaluation.

Akin to a state assessment, the Georgia Music Educators Association’s LGPE took place last month at the Forsyth County Arts & Learning Center in Cumming.

“Judges evaluate what we play based on standards that they have set,” said Band Director Tim Skinner, now in his second year leading Towns County students. “We play two and sometimes three songs.

We worked on our songs for about two and half months.

“Then, we are judged on our sight reading. They give us a song and we have six minutes to look at it – we can count, we can sing it, finger the parts, but we cannot play our instruments at all. Then we perform the song as if we’ve been playing it for a long time.”

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Special Election candidate qualifying is this week

Chase Elliott race car to feature in Memory Lane

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Candidate qualifying started Tuesday for the June 17 Hiawassee Special Election to fill the currently vacant mayoral seat and a council post that will be vacated later this week.

Special Election qualifying began on April 1 and will run through Thursday, April 3, from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. inside City Hall at 50 River Street, with an hour lunch break from 1-2 p.m. The qualifying fees are \$780 for Mayor and \$72 for Post 3 Councilmember.

Qualifying packets may be obtained at City Hall.

Among the requirements spelled out in the city charter, qualifiers must be 21 years of age on or before the date of election; must have been a resident of the city for 12 months immediately prior to the date of election; and be registered and qualified to vote in municipal elections.

As previously reported, since the former mayor resigned last June, mayoral duties have been conducted in a

Board terminated the former intergovernmental agreement to negotiate a new, amended contract, with the biggest change being that the agreement will now automatically terminate each year to allow greater flexibility to both parties in amending the arrangement.

The new contract has since been approved by the Elections Board and City Council and signed by Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, so this year’s elections are good to go.

As for the council seat up for grabs in June, that’s to fill the unexpired term of Councilman Chastain, who has publicly announced he will be stepping down from the council to run for mayor, as required by the state.

Chastain will vacate his Post 3 council seat as soon as he qualifies for mayor this week. For Hiawassee residents potentially interested in council qualifying, the remaining term for Post 3 runs through Dec. 31, 2027.

The last day to register

Members of the Memory Lane Classic Car Show Planning Committee met in recent weeks, led by GMF Manager Hilda Thomason.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Memory Lane Classic Car Show is set to return to the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds April 25 & 26 – this time with a very special addition.

NASCAR star Chase Elliott’s car will be present at the show thanks to the involvement of the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame. Based in Elliott’s North Georgia hometown of Dawsonville, the museum strives to preserve “the history of racing in our state.”


The development came about after Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason met with Chase’s mother Cindy and spoke with the family along with Dawson County

Chamber of Commerce President Mandy Power.

“I told them we’d love to have Chase to bring a car over here, so he is going to do that,” said Thomason, adding that the car will be located to the left of the front gate. “I’m excited that they want to be part of (the car show).”

Fans will be able to take

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**United Community Advisors**

Speech training pays off in annual speaking competition

By **Brittany Holbrooks**
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Annual Top of Georgia Speech Contest saw another successful group of presentations by talented area students at the Young Harris College Charles R. Clegg Fine Arts Building Auditorium on March 20.

Nine students ranging from sixth to 11th-graders participated in the competition, with their mentors praising their bravery and marked improvements in public speaking skills.

The contest serves as the culmination of weekly training sessions that teach students practical communication skills designed to last a lifetime. The training began Jan. 30 this year, consisting of “how to construct a speech and how to deliver it with conviction, poise and expertise.”

Young Harris College President Dr. John Wells opened the program as keynote speaker, referencing the courage that many of the youngsters mustered that evening.

“Know that you are not just skilled, you’re not just smart, but you’re courageous to be here in front of a crowd,” Wells said. “If you have fear of public speaking, it will soon

go away. The more you do it, the more comfortable you become.”

The students competed in separate Middle School and High School divisions, with the five middle schoolers starting out the night.

Eighth-grader Maan Singh of Towns County spoke on the evolution of AI; sixth-grader Zoey Falkner of Clay County introduced the audience to Pokémon and the franchise’s evolution; seventh-grader Caleb Taylor of Towns County revealed the grave toll and dangers of fentanyl; seventh-grader Jake Roberts of Towns County illustrated what life is like living with ADHD; and sixth-grader Eliana Sheffield of Union County brought everyone back in history to the glory days of the mighty Roman Empire.

It was Roberts, through the strategic use of props and personal experience, who won First Place in the Middle School division – an achievement he accomplished through no small amount of dedication.

“Jake has shown the most growth,” said YHC Associate Director of Athletics Madison Urquiola, who mentored Roberts and other students. “When we brought them in here, he was a little nervous to even get on the stage; but

just him, tonight, getting up here – it’s absolutely night and day.”

Roberts not only defined ADHD but guided listeners through symptoms, treatments and even ways to handle the disorder in daily life, including “life hacks” he personally uses to navigate the challenges he faces.

Eliana Sheffield, with her striking green toga-like shawl and gold-plated belt, won Second Place, and Caleb Taylor, pleading for change toward a more hopeful future for the country, took home Third Place.

In the High School category, 10th-grader Seylah Brown of Clay County explored the purpose of all pain in God’s design; ninth-grader Grace Lacy of Union County was inspired by her own experience to discuss club foot; 10th-grader Adalyn Collins of Union County explained how universal health care would be a detriment to America; and 11th-grader Caleb Sheffield of Union County talked about the 911 system and the changes operators have seen since its beginning.

Collins’ compelling arguments against universal health care won her First Place among high schoolers. She reviewed data from other countries that have adopted the system – namely, Canada – painting a grim picture of how long wait times can spell death.

Not only that, but the religious freedoms enjoyed by citizens of the United States could be put in jeopardy, as people who are fundamentally against procedures such as abortions or assisted suicide would be forced to pay for their completion through taxes that fund them.

An increase in taxes to fund such a system might also cause financial drawbacks, and universal health care could restrict medical innovations due to a lack of private investments.

Caleb Sheffield earned Second Place by shining a light on the day-to-day lives of 911 dispatchers and how a challenging environment has



Nine talented students from Union and Towns counties in Georgia and Clay County, North Carolina, competed in the Top of Georgia Speech Contest last month. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

led to lifesaving strides in technology.

Taking home Third Place was Grace Lacy, walking through the history of club foot treatments and how the Ponseti Method made a difference in her life when she was just an infant.

It should be noted that

all students did an outstanding job educating the audience on their topics of choice, and organizers and mentors made it very clear how rewarding it was seeing them become confident young men and women.

Already, many of the 2025 Top of Georgia participants plan to return to next

year’s contest, a testament to the value of the program to local children.

The speech contest is open to sixth through 12th-grade public, private and home-schooled students living in Towns and Union counties in Georgia, and Clay County, North Carolina.

The Byron Herbert Reece Farm & Heritage Center’s 14th Season opens Monday, April 14th

The Byron Herbert Reece Farm & Heritage Center opens for the season Monday, April 14, 2025. We welcome you to the 14th season of Reece Farm.

Byron Herbert Reece said “I am a farmer first and a writer second” He was a subsistence farmer, along with his family, on his family’s Appalachian homestead. He wrote four volumes of poetry and two novels (available at the POP-UP shops during special events).

He received numerous awards for his writing.

The Reece Farm & Heritage Center is dedicated to preserving Reece’s legacy. Take a trip to the past and experience early 20th Century Appalachian Farm Life with the self-guided tour map. The farm offers something for all ages: exhibits detailing how things were accomplished, antique tools, trout fishing, and the best family picnic spots in Union County.

Reece farm is excited to host numerous NEW programs such as a fall music festival, family pumpkin patch,



Pavilion at the Byron Herbert Reece Farm & Heritage Center

DIY workshops and educational classes for all ages. Reece Farm is also gearing up for a busy wedding season complete with three ceremony sites, a reception pavilion and newly renovated bridal suite. Do not forget to check out Reece Farm Village- home to four cabins available to rent for solo trips, family stays, adventure weekends and romantic get-aways. Available to rent through VRBO.

The Reece Farm & Heritage Center is located on the Byron Herbert Reece Memorial Highway, 8552 Gainesville Hwy., Blairsville GA 706-745-

2034, www.reecefarmevents.com; FB: Reece Heritage Farm. With extended hours this year, Exhibits are open Monday-Saturday 8 AM -5 PM.

Back again this year, we will have Wolf Creek stocked with trout, all GA fishing rules and licensing must be followed. Follow the “Trout Fishing” signs.

Reece Farm’s first music performer for the Spring Music Series will be Curtis and Kim Jones on Friday, April 11 from 1-3 PM.

Please check for upcoming events at www.reecefarmevents.com.



Retired physician Gerald Chotiner has been spearheading the Top of Georgia Speech Contest for several years in close coordination with professionals from Young Harris College.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Adult Education...from Page 1



Area stakeholders celebrated the completion of renovations at the Shirley Miller Adult Education Center last week with a ribbon-cutting ceremony by the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

place literacy, and there are opportunities for integrated educational training, making graduates more likely to find jobs.

Shirley Miller herself was present, and even before being invited to speak, she was eager to explore the facility – especially the computer room, which she poked her head in first. Overall, she was in awe at how “beautiful” it was following the remodeling.

At the podium, Shirley confessed that her lifelong advocacy of literacy and learning was a “labor of love.” Though she could tell “many stories” of her time on and off the campaign trail, she offered some

insight into the establishment of the Adult Education Certified Literate Community Program.

Zell Miller launched the program in 1990 to combat low adult literacy rates in the state, thus kickstarting the construction of the Center for Lifelong Learning in Union County in the mid-1990s.

“You folks are all ‘now’ people, and I like to think that I’m a ‘now’ person – a ‘today’ person, a ‘tomorrow’ person, a ‘this month’ person,” Shirley said. “And I just want to let you know that I’ll do my best to spread the word in our community here about what happens in this

building.

“I appreciate so much you letting me be a part of this re-dedication today.”

People interested in signing up for adult education may call 706-439-6342 to set up times to take classes; it’s possible to work around schedules. Normal operating hours are Monday through Thursdays, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., and Tuesday and Thursday nights from 4-7 p.m.

“Sometimes, the hardest step that some of our students will ever make is through those doors,” Ward said. “To get the courage to step back into a classroom is 90% of the battle.”

Chase Elliott Car...from Page 1

pictures with and of the car as well as purchase merchandise.

Already, dozens of cars have registered to take part in the show, which will feature everything from rat rods to vintage classics, though during the course of a planning meeting on March 20 at Anderson Music Hall, it was estimated that nearly a dozen more are expected to join up.

Additionally, some 15 vendors are due to set up shop at the show, and there were talks of involving local car clubs such as the Blairsville Cruisers.

A kickoff party will take place on Thursday, April 24, at Eller Holler, to include live entertainment courtesy of the Nathan Morgan Band. Cater-

ing will be provided by The Happy Hawg, and participants have the option of purchasing tables to seat six people for \$250.

The show itself will stretch across April 25 and 26, with admission costing \$10 for adults and kids 12 and under getting in free. For \$30, participants can enter their vehicle in the show for a chance to win one of more than 10 awards that come with physical trophies.

As with many other events at the Fairgrounds, the car show coincides with a hard-ticket concert. Friday, April 25, Justin Moore will be performing at the Music Hall, with Matt Rogers as a special guest. Tickets are \$60 plus

handling.

Moore is known for hits such as “This is My Dirt,” “Small Town USA” and “Lettin’ the Night Roll.” Rogers has performed alongside the likes of country giants Chris Stapleton, the Brothers Osborne and Chris Janson.

Along with ensuring smooth sailing for the big weekend, the planning meeting saw several potential ideas for next year’s show tossed around. For example, there’s a possibility that an extra evening might be added in 2026, meant to entail a “family night” with games or events.

For more information, visit <https://www.georgiamountainfairgrounds.com/>.

Spillway Fix...from Page 1

the dam, “and the joints in the concrete slab and underdrain system of the spillway have deteriorated over the years.”

“There is a relatively high likelihood that the spillway could be damaged if used for an extended period and under extreme rainfall events,” according to TVA. “However, this damage does not correspond to an uncontrolled release of water.

“The likelihood of a failure of the spillway causing an uncontrolled release of water from the reservoir is very low. Again, the dam and spillway are judged safe for operation.”

In evaluating the Chatuge spillway, TVA implemented industry lessons learned from damage to the Oroville Dam spillway in California in 2017, which saw many of the spillway’s concrete slabs being washed away due to a deteriorated joint letting water rush under the spillway.

Oroville Dam operators had to stop using the spillway,

divert water over an auxiliary spillway – by comparison, Chatuge Dam has just a single spillway – “and evacuate a community downstream,” said Saucier, adding that the failure prompted the entire industry to re-examine spillways.

“The Oroville Dam incident demonstrated to the dam safety profession that a particular potential failure mechanism was much more dangerous than previously thought,” TVA said, noting that the spillway at Chatuge Dam “exhibits some vulnerability to this potential failure mechanism.”

A temporary solution is already being implemented to maintain joints in the spillway chute, but to eliminate the possibility of what happened in Oroville occurring here, TVA has come up with four design concepts to completely solve the issue, each with its own construction timeline.

All four concepts would require the lake to be drawn down to 10 feet below winter pool levels, to 1,908 feet in

elevation – a record low, and nearly 20 feet below full summer pool. A drawdown that low would not impact water treatment facilities in the lake, Saucier said.

Drawing down the lake will be necessary, however, to ensure the safety of both the dam and the people working on the spillway during construction.

TVA has said that the drawdown periods it is releasing for these concepts correspond with “reasonable upper-bound” estimates given what is known today, three years out from construction and with designs developed “only to relatively crude, concept levels.”

This means lake levels could return to normal sooner than estimated because, “as the project progresses, we will know more and will refine those estimates.”

The first construction option, known as Alternative B, would take upwards of eight years to complete, with the reservoir to be drawn down for the duration of the project. This option would consist of rehabilitating the spillway

with total joint reconstruction. Alternative C is projected to take up to six years, with drawdown over the entire length of construction. For this alternative, TVA would be rehabilitating the spillway by constructing a new concrete lining inside the existing footprint.

Alternative D, which consists of building a brand-new, higher capacity spillway and abandoning the old spillway as a closed-off structure, is expected to take six years to complete, with a lake drawdown of up to four years.

Finally, Alternative E would introduce a hybrid design with construction of a new spillway and a rehab of the existing spillway to act in an auxiliary capacity “for very rare storms.” This option would potentially take up to seven years to complete, with a drawdown of up to five years.

Regardless of design selected, TVA will be taking the opportunity to implement other “non-essential” improvements at the dam, like upgrading components of the dam itself to improve drainage. Such enhancements would be secondary and not intended to address any deficiency with the dam.

Currently, all construction alternatives B through E are viable in terms of solving the existing spillway vulnerability for decades down the line, Saucier said: “As an agency, we don’t have a preference.”

TVA has not listed an official “Alternative A,” because this alternative is what the federal agency is doing now to temporarily mitigate the vulnerability. As this does not bring the risk down as much as TVA would like, “it is not a preferred alternative,” Saucier said.

Instead, Alternative A is being treated as a “baseline case” against which all proposed alternatives can be compared during the study period to inform the ultimate decision.

“We truly can never say ‘never,’ but I think it is very unlikely that we could accept Alternative A,” Saucier said. “It is a series of ongoing Band-Aids for something which we feel needs to be made healthy once and for all.”

TVA is aware that lowering Chatuge for such extended periods will be unpopular with



TVA engineer Chris Saucier led an informational meeting about the spillway project for area media members on Friday, March 28.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

many residents, visitors and businesses that rely on the lake for recreation and tourism, but the agency is stressing the importance of ensuring the dam continues to operate safely “for generations to come.”

To that end, TVA is making the public aware of upcoming dates to discuss the Chatuge Dam Modification Study, as community feedback will let TVA integrate lake-goers’ wishes as it sorts out “the best path forward.”

On April 21, TVA will be issuing a Notice of Intent to take action on the project by posting it to the Federal Register, after which the public will be able to comment on it between April 22 and May 28.

During that period, TVA will be hosting a May 8 public meeting in Hiwassee to allow attendees to learn more, ask questions and provide feedback on the study. Similarly, TVA will host a public meeting in Hayesville, North Carolina, on May 13, with a virtual meeting set for May 15.

“This study is intending to say, ‘Well, public, what are the things you want us to look at that are your concerns,’ and make sure we get (those concerns) in our decision,” Saucier said. “That’s what we’re really asking for.”

For more information and to sign up for alerts, people may visit <https://www.tva.com/newsroom/regional-mountain-dams-safety-initiative/>.

Once the project is posted to the Federal Register, people may visit [tva.com/nepa](https://www.tva.com/nepa) through May 28.

After several rounds of public feedback on the modification study, TVA will commit to a detailed design phase of the concept selected to engineer plans and specifications, with construction mobilization estimated to be about three years away from today.

TVA has said that it is “premature to speculate about the potential costs” of the project, but that separate funding will ensure that electricity rates are not impacted.

“Each year, TVA invests a portion of its funds into major construction projects,” according to TVA. “These projects are a part of routine planning and do not require any changes to the existing rate structure agreed between TVA and your local power company.”

Speaking to long-term impacts of drawing down the lake for extended periods, citing similar drawdowns elsewhere, Saucier said, “We haven’t really seen any,” noting that most impacts had to do with floating docks needing to be extended and accommodating new vegetation growth.

He said the impacts regarding the issue of the invasive parrot-feather weed, which has been treated extensively since last year in Lake Chatuge, would be studied.

TCHS Band...from Page 1

and they evaluate us.

“All schools take LPGE, but we are without a doubt the smallest school wherever we go. We have 18 players, and the next smallest band had 40 players.”

“One of the managers there came by and said our second song was the best song they had heard all day. The kids did a great job. They really excelled.”

Towns County’s student musicians have long been a talented bunch, but they are seeing new heights of achievement under the direction of Skinner, who last year helped the band achieve its first

Straight Superior scores in 14 years.

According to student Max Baron, Skinner has totally changed the culture of the band to “set a new standard for us and (push) us beyond even what we thought we could do.”

Another student, Aubree Snelling, said her abilities behind the tenor saxophone have really taken off thanks to Skinner’s contributions, and classmate Zoe Harris confirmed that the group is now enjoying experiencing “all these different, absolutely beautiful melodies and harmonies.”

“We’ve learned a lot

of leadership, and we’ve become a lot more rigorous in what we do in our classroom space,” added Bella Rose Childs. “We’ve definitely improved in our musicality and gone up in grade levels. We are able to play much harder music.”

The bar has been set high, as noted by Baron, who said superior ratings are now “the new standard.” And with morale at an all-time high under Skinner’s direction, the kids who will be returning to the program next year are already looking forward to their 2026 evaluations.

Go Indians!

Special Election...from Page 1

to vote for the June 17 Special Election is May 19.

Early voting will run May 27 to June 13 inside the Towns County Elections and Voter Registration Office at 67 Lakeview Drive, Suite A, in Hiwassee. Early voting hours will be 9 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., with Saturday voting to be held May 31 and June 7, same location and hours.

Regular absentee ballots

by mail can be requested now through June 6 at the Elections Office.

The Special Election will be in addition to the Municipal General Election on Nov. 4, which will see the regularly scheduled elections of mayor as well as Council Posts 1 and 2, currently held by Amy Barrett and Patsy Owens, for four-year terms running Jan. 1, 2026, through Dec. 31, 2029.

Qualifying for the Nov. 4 Municipal General Election will take place Aug. 20-22 at Hiwassee City Hall.

The State of Georgia is also running a Special Election this year for Public Service Commission Districts 2 and 3. The qualifying period, primary and election in these state races coincide with the same dates as the upcoming Hiwassee elections.