

Governor’s Honors finalists make TCHS history

By Ken Camp
Towns Co. High School
GHP Coordinator

Towns County juniors Gabriella Bowling and Jaden Crooks made Towns County High School history on March 21, becoming only the second and third students in the 54-year history of TCHS to be selected as representatives for the Georgia Governor’s Honors Program.

During June, they will reside at Georgia Southern University and study under expert mentors in the academic areas of their selection. Bowling will represent TCHS in communicative arts, while Crooks will study civil engineering.

Established in 1964 by Gov. Carl Sanders, GHP was born during a time of turmoil, as the U.S. lost the space race to Sputnik. With necessity being the mother of invention, identifying and developing young intellectual talent became a national priority at that time.

The Georgia program is now the oldest and largest program of its kind, considered among the nation’s best. Completely funded by the Governor’s Office at no cost to attendees, GHP allows students from all walks of life to find avenues of opportunity.

TCHS Science Teacher Ken Camp serves as GHP Coordinator for Towns County and advised the girls during the process.

“I am incredibly proud of them, but not surprised,” Camp said. “Both are highly intelligent, talented and disciplined. They belong. Traditionally, rural schools are underrepresented, so it’s important we’re changing that.”

State GHP Director Fran Dundore congratulated Camp on the historic nominations, noting the real progress the elite academic program has made in smaller communities like Towns County.

“Our team has been working for three years to ensure that students from across the state are identified and nominated,” Dundore said. “It is especially exciting when we see students from rural areas who are recognized for their talents and passions and are prepared at the local level to demonstrate that through each application round and become state finalists.”

Bowling and Crooks join current Towns County Middle School Teacher Kendall Floyd as the only finalists in TCHS history. Floyd, who attended the program in 2018 and aided the current finalists’ preparation, is thrilled with their success.

“GHP was an eye-opening experience for me that allowed me to see the world outside of TCHS,” Floyd said. “It definitely prepared me for college. I am so thankful that I had the opportunity and so excited for Gabby and Jaden.”

High School Principal Bryan Thomason expressed his joy as well, adding that the entire school system is “incredibly proud of these young ladies.”

“They embody the qualities of excellence, resilience and family that make up who we are at TCHS,” Thomason said.

Each autumn, the Governor’s Office requests nominees from Georgia’s 794 high schools. Areas of STEM nomination include sciences, mathematics, engineering, computer science and agriculture. Areas of humanities include communications, dance, music

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Congratulations to outstanding students Jaden Crooks and Gabby Bowling, who have made the entire community proud with their Governor’s Honors Program achievements.
Photo/Submitted

Clyde advocates for sensible approach to spillway issue

News Special

U.S. Rep. Andrew Clyde of Georgia’s 9th Congressional District visited Chatuge Dam last week with Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, Towns County EMA Director Marty Roberts

and staff of U.S. Rep. Chuck Edwards of North Carolina’s 11th Congressional District.

This delegation met with Tennessee Valley Authority officials to discuss the TVA’s proposed plans to address spillway safety concerns.

A recent TVA study identified a key vulnerability in the spillway of Chatuge Dam. While the conditions of the current spillway are not an emergency, the TVA is aiming to improve the safety of

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Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, TVA Special Projects Manager Chris Saucier and U.S. Rep. Andrew Clyde met at the Chatuge Dam on April 16 to talk about the impacts of the spillway fixes proposed to date.
Photo/Submitted

Chastain, Benton swear in among family and friends



Junior Chastain was honored to have his son Trey and grandson Trent – plus other family, friends and coworkers – attend his swearing-in last week. Chastain’s deceased father, seen here in the held photograph, was there in spirit.
Photo by Shelly Knight

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

On Wednesday, April 16, the City of Hiawassee made the recent qualifying results official by swearing in Jay Chastain Jr. as the new Mayor and Scott Benton as the new Post 3 Councilman.

The Council Chambers of City Hall filled with family members, officials and general well-wishers last Wednesday to witness City Clerk Bonnie Kendrick administer the oath of office first to Chastain, then

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Special Olympics bring communities together in joy



The Special Olympics event is a time when Towns and Union counties set aside school rivalries to jointly champion athletes from both communities.
Photo by Shelly Knight

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Many talented individuals from Towns County, Union County and this year Tate Academy of Blairsville participated in the annual cross-county Special Olympic Games on Thursday, April 17.

Athletes of all ages competed in track and field events, including wheelchair races, amid beautiful weather and joyous camaraderie inside Frank McClure Memorial Stadium of Towns County Schools.

The event began with a celebration of outgoing Special Olympics Committee Chair Amy Gibby-Rosser, the Director for Towns County Family Connection.

Gibby-Rosser, who will be retiring this year, was de-

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School Board discusses FY26 budget considerations




The Towns County School Board usually meets the first Monday of each month inside the High School Media Center, but the April meeting was rescheduled to the second Tuesday to accommodate Spring Break.
Photo by Shelly Knight

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Towns County School Board met Monday, April 14, a week later than usual due to Spring Break. Before regular business, however, board members held a public hearing to discuss preliminary budget considerations for the next fiscal year.

Some key items remain in question for the next few

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Governor’s Honors...from Page 1

performance, social studies, visual arts and theater.

After nominations, there are rigorous applications and interviews. Students who are selected will work on an intensive mentor-guided research project. To survive selection, finalists must show authenticity, passion and motivation.

The selection panel looks for the ag mechanics student that rebuilds diesel engines or the junior biologist shadowing their local physician. Having a 4.0 GPA is not enough. Becoming a GHP finalist is among the highest high school honors attainable, perhaps rivaled only by a valedictorianship or an Eagle Scout badge.

Camp has mentored 10 students to GHP finalist status, offering his belief that selection to the program was a deciding college admissions factor for all the former students he has coached.

“A couple went to Ivy Leagues; one had early medical school admission,” Camp said. “It was life-changing for all of them, in terms of getting into competitive schools and winning scholarships.”

Crooks and Bowling made strong impressions on interviewers and excelled in on-site tasks meant to gauge their ability to work collaboratively and solve problems under pressure, with Crooks sharing her aquaponic schematics with interviewers.

“They liked that I focused on helping people solve practical problems, rather than engineering for the sake of theory,” Crooks said.

She also had to work with other interviewees to design a hypothetical water delivery system for survivors of a zombie apocalypse. Finally, she completed a timed AutoCAD design challenge.

“It was intense, but I had a pretty good feeling overall,” Crooks said. “I was able to mediate the project design and get our group together on a plausible idea. Based on feedback, I thought I had a good day.”

Bowling read a massive tome of literature in preparation for an entirely different set of nominative tasks. She plans to pursue medicine, so her nomination is not a direct career path. However, literature has obvious augmentative benefits to Bowling.

“Patient care is everything; literature and communications keep you cognizant of the human condition,” Bowling said. “You have to treat people well and understand them.”

She realizes that influences gained from novels, music, journals and other media will strongly influence her bedside manner and inherent thoughts about her profession. Bowling has watched the frustrations and pain her father

has endured in getting medical care from the VA hospital.

“I like authors like Mary Roach who bring the experiences of doctors and researchers to readers in accessible ways,” Bowling said. “In Mary Shelley’s ‘Frankenstein,’ we see that humanity should outweigh cold science.

“GHP made me look at literature in new ways. Communication is important to every aspect of life. Even if my career is in medicine, I also see the value of continuing to write to convey my career experiences.”

She also credits Tim Skinner’s band program in recognizing the peripheral values of communicative arts.

“Music has taught me to work carefully in collaboration with peers to create something bigger than ourselves,” Bowling said.

For her part, Crooks said that, before this journey, she had a hard time pursuing long-term plans if success wasn’t guaranteed.

“I had to have faith in my abilities without knowing the outcome,” Crooks said. “I discovered that it is worthwhile pursuing things I love for their own value. Environmental engineering may not be a popular interest for teens, but it has value to me.”

Camp agreed, commending the GHP finalist on acquiring further confirmation through experience that she likes engineering.

“She worked through a lot of frustrations and uncertainties,” Camp said. “She had to fail to learn how to succeed at certain points. She had to learn AutoCAD independently and consult a construction engineer for advice. She made the theoretical become reality, but she had to dig deep.”

Bowling and Crooks both recall recent history with a begrudging fondness. In November, both submitted complex video portfolios with numerous pieces of talent-based evidence. In February, each rejoiced as they received an invitation to interview in Statesboro.

For the six weeks after, Camp and TCHS CTAE Director Brooke Whitt, Stephanie and Richard McConnell, and Sarah Ewing regularly grilled the nominees with tough questions. They prepared for zingers, such as, “Why should you be the nominee for X over hundreds of other talented applicants?” and philosophical subject-specific questions.

“We hit them over and over with interrogations, trying to trip them up and get a silent pause where they had to think,” said Camp, knowing that those could be their undoing on interview day.

Bowling said preparing for something so competitive

forced her to articulate the importance of why she wanted to pursue her path, because “it wasn’t good enough just to have credentials.”

Camp laid out the daunting facts ahead of time for nominees.

“There are 137,000 juniors in Georgia – 4,500 will become nominees,” Camp said. “From there, 1,500 are invited to interview. In the end, less than 700 make it. Your odds are 1 in 7.”

Faced with these figures, it is sometimes hard for successful students to understand that just being nominated is a distinct honor.

“Your faculty had to believe you were the most talented student in your subject discipline,” Camp said. “Most nominees don’t make it, but they don’t fail. They get their first taste of having to adapt to the reality that talent must work hard. The only guarantee is that you will not make it if you don’t give it everything.”

Whitt wholeheartedly agrees that simply being nominated to interview is an honor.

“The preparation is extended and rigorous,” Whitt said. “The state-level competition is fierce. Students selected as finalists have truly proven themselves. It’s an extraordinary opportunity for extraordinary students.”

In the end, it all paid off. In June, two rising TCHS seniors will embark on a program that will forever change them, strengthen them and define the path through their educational careers.

At GSU, Crooks is looking to continue her aquaponics engineering project while picking up as many engineering concepts and connections as she can from her mentor.

“This all started with the engineering nomination,” Crooks said. “I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do at first. I wanted to solve a problem for someone I cared about.”

Bowling wants to use the opportunity to help GHP promote itself to rural systems.

“I wasn’t aware of GHP before my school introduced it to me,” Bowling said. “I think it’s important that other rural students gain awareness.

“I want to document active participants’ experiences in GHP. I’d like to write journal articles on students pursuing STEM projects or pioneer a medical journalism course. A documentary could bring light to others from small communities.”

Added Bowling, “I see GHP as the ultimate investment of taxpayer dollars. As finalists, we have been sent to bring innovative ideas to our respective fields. Jaden and I are undoubtedly grateful for the new experiences and opportunities and where they will lead us.”

US Rep. Clyde...from Page 1

the spillway to reduce the risk of the dam’s long-term operations.

The TVA study has judged the spillway at Chatuge Dam exhibits some of the vulnerabilities that led to the damage and failure of the Oroville Dam spillway in California. To address the issue, the agency announced four potential alternatives for a long-term solution.

“My top priority is reaching a sensible approach to a long-term solution that benefits both the structural integrity of Chatuge Dam and the well-being of local communities,” Clyde said. “Residents, local officials, and small business owners throughout Towns County have shared serious concerns about the potential disastrous economic consequences of the Tennessee Valley Authority’s current proposals for dam modification.

“Given Chatuge Lake attracts incredible tourism and seasonal activity, potential drawdown plans present tremendous challenges to the economic lifeblood of Towns County.

“My office and I remain highly engaged in this matter, and I look forward to working with local officials, stakeholders, and the TVA to reach the best solution that effectively balances the safety of spillway operations and the continued economic prosperity of our North Georgia community.”

Commissioner Bradshaw said he was “extremely grateful” to Congressman Clyde for responding to the concerns of Towns County constituents and joining with him to discuss TVA’s proposals for dam modification.

“The potential impact of a long-term drawdown of Lake Chatuge would be disastrous to the livelihood of our community,” Bradshaw said. “I would like to thank everyone in the county for their support.

“I highly encourage residents to provide input during TVA’s public commenting period. TVA will be hosting a series of public meetings and accepting public comments starting April 22 through May 28.”

Upcoming virtual public meetings will take place on May 6 and May 15 from 5:30-6:30 p.m. A link to join the meetings will be available

School Board...from Page 1

years, such as the possible demise of the U.S. Department of Education due to current Washington politics and the potential for lower sales and property tax revenues if the proposed work on the Chatuge Dam commences with a dramatic, multi-year lake draw-down.

“This is the first of two budget hearings that we will have,” said School Finance Director Myra Underwood. “We are required to have two hearings before we propose the final budget. The next budget hearing will be May the 5th at 5:30 p.m.

“Today, we are just going to go over some increases and decreases that we’ve anticipated and talk about any concerns or questions. We are currently looking at increasing the budget by \$1.1 million, and about \$325,000 comes from the salary increases of teachers and non-certified employees.

“Teacher retirement costs are also increasing. Our portion is 20.78%, and the state is increasing that to 21.91% – that is about \$175,000 in increases.

Downtown Dev. Authority announces 2025 First Friday Schedule and calls for Vendors



The Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority (DDA) announced First Fridays in 2025 will run May 2, June 6, August 1, September 5 and October 3. Each event runs from 5-9 p.m. and features live music and artisans crafts and products.

Vendors can find the booth application at <https://www.downtownhiawassee.com/night-market/>. The goods must be made by the vendors -- no resales or non-artisan products will be approved for sale at the night markets.

The Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority was formed by the Hiawassee City Council in 2019 and was established for the purpose of furthering the economic development of our lake and mountain paradise while preserving Hiawassee’s history and serving its citizens and visitors alike.

al grants right now, but I don’t know what might happen with the Department of Education, and that equals about \$1 million; if we don’t get that money, we’d have to budget for that, too.”

Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong said he wanted to talk about SPLOST money “and the work we will be doing this summer.”

“We’re redoing all the flooring in the classrooms and the hallways of the elementary, and we’re doing just the hallways in the high school, and that came in at about \$700,000,” Berrong said. “We got the quote back for the air conditioning in the gym, and that came in at about \$400,000, which I was surprised that it came in lower than expected.

“We are going to build that barn for the ag building also this summer, and it’s going to be around \$300,000. In total we will be spending \$1.5 million in projects.”

Other business included some resignations and retirements. Notably, Patti Dayton is retiring after spending over 30 years teaching in the district. Another noteworthy change is the appointment of Brian Hunnicutt to Half-Time Assistant Principal at the High School next year.

The respective school principals announced those selected for Teacher of the Year.

At the elementary level, it is Candice Thompson; at the middle school level, Stephanie Youngblood was selected; and at the high school level is Luke Kough. Congratulations to these hardworking and dedicated educators.

The School Board will meet next on May 5, with a public budget meeting at 5:30 p.m., a work session at 6 p.m. and regular meeting business at 6:45 p.m. The public is welcome to attend.

Special Olympics...from Page 1



Participants taking to the track for one of several athletic events celebrated by the Towns-Union Special Olympics at host Towns County Schools last week. Photo by Shelly Knight

scribed by her colleagues as the rock of Special Olympics for 25 years. And last week, the audience gave her a round of applause for her enormous contributions to the children and families to whom she has dedicated her career.

Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong reluctantly missed his first Special Olympics in 10 years but made sure to send words of heartfelt appreciation for Gibby-Rosser.

“Amy’s leadership has led to enriching the lives of countless athletes,” Berrong said. “Her commitment to creating inclusive opportunities has left a lasting impact not only on the participants, but on the entire community.”

“Every athlete she has encouraged and every barrier she has helped break down has touched us all. Through her dedication she has created an environment where athletes feel celebrated, supported and capable of achieving their personal best.”

What started with a small committee about 25 years ago has continued to achieve success to this day, with involvement by Union and Towns school systems, plus Avita Community Partners for adult participants, and this year, the nonprofit private school Tate Academy has joined the mix.

“We meet together and plan the event; we love this event,” Gibby-Rosser said. “In the spring we have track and field events, soccer, and today, the Young Harris Soccer Team is here helping us as well.”

“In the fall we compete in basketball and volleyball. There are about 150 athletes that take part in the games. It

is such a great day. It is a time for everybody to come together and participate as one and be unified.

“It’s about having a great time supporting everybody. I have a heart for everything this represents – inclusivity, diversity, everybody being united for something – it’s what I’m all about.”

Teacher Andrea Antepencko of Union County High School said she does this to see that “everybody can win in the classroom and in life.”

“I teach in a class where we do all subjects, but we incorporate that with community-based instruction,” Antepencko said. “Every day we practice what we’re doing in the classroom.”

“For example, we went to Meeks Park; we had learned about symmetry in math, so we looked for symmetry in nature. We went to Tractor Supply and do what the manager asks us to do. We teach life skills – we try to hit it all.”

Union County Schools Special Education Services Director Christal Chastain said that, as long as she can remember, Union and Towns counties have gotten together on Special Olympics.

“We have lots of sponsors from the community,” Chastain said. “We’re very thankful. They provide dinner for the athletes, and they provide lunch and snacks during the day. They even give us medals. The kids look forward to it every year.”

Towns County Elementary School Principal Crystal Beach also enjoyed the day, noting that the event “is always one of the highlights of the year.”

“Seeing our athletes out

here and all the folks across our region that come out to celebrate them – it’s just a really special day for everybody involved,” Beach said. “The classes are out here cheering the kids on. The smiles say it all.”

McConnell Baptist Church Associate Pastor Steve Awtrey attended the Special Olympics with other church volunteers to provide lunch for all the athletes.

“I’ve been mentoring at the school for the last six years,” Awtrey said. “I’ve helped out with special needs ministries in my church, and I love this event because we get to come into the community and serve these families and cheer them on.”

“To me, it’s just a great event where we all come together and watch the kids compete. Everybody has a good time, and it’s a great way to get to know other people from the community.”

“You’ve got Towns County and Union County coming together, and instead of competing in sports, we’re all here just to cheer on these kids. I love this.”

Towns County Special Education Director Dr. Victoria Stroud concurred, declaring that she and everyone involved “love these kids.”

“They are truly amazing,” Stroud said. “They just all have such unique abilities. I love getting to come out here and chat with them here and being able to watch them shine.”

“As director, I don’t always get that chance. I try to encourage them and let them know that today is about having fun and trying their hardest. The kids have a blast.”

Mountain Shelter Humane Society Thrift Store to host Vaccine and Microchip Clinic on Saturday, May 3



Mountain Shelter Humane Society and Nottely Oaks Animal Hospital are inviting pet owners to take advantage of a valuable opportunity to protect their furry family members. On Saturday, May 3, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., the Mountain Shelter Thrift Store will host a FREE and Low-Cost Vaccine and Microchip Clinic aimed at promoting pet health and safety in our mountain communities. This special event offers an easy and affordable way for pet owners to update their ani-

mals’ vaccinations and ensure they have a permanent form of identification through microchipping.

“We have worked with our community to install four microchip scanning stations throughout Union and Towns Counties. It’s important for pet owners to have their pets microchipped. Without microchips lost pets aren’t always reunited with their families,” said Rob Medwed, Board President of Mountain Shelter Humane Society. “A simple microchip can make all the difference in bringing a lost pet back home.”

Vaccinations and microchipping are essential tools in keeping pets healthy and

safe. The May 3rd clinic will provide free microchips for dogs and cats, FREE rabies vaccines for dogs and cats and free DHPP vaccines for dogs. Additional vaccines are available at low cost. No appointments are necessary, and walk-ins will be welcomed throughout the event. Mountain Shelter Humane Society and Nottely Oaks Animal Hospital encourage all residents to take part in this effort to support responsible pet ownership and do all they can to protect their pets and keep them safe.

For more information, visit <https://www.mtnshelter.org/events/microchip-clinic-event> or call (706) 781-3843, Ext. 2.

Swearing In...from Page 1



Kelly Benton held the Bible for her husband Scott Benton while City Clerk Bonnie Kendrick swore him into the Post 3 seat on the Hiwassee City Council April 16. Photo by Shelly Knight

to Benton.

Both men were swearing in to fill the remaining terms of their respective offices, Chastain until the end of this year, and Benton through 2027.

A longtime councilman, Chastain had been leading the city as Mayor Pro Tempore since June of 2024, though he resigned from his council seat – since filled by Benton – earlier this month to qualify unopposed for the office of mayor.

“This is something I have been shooting for for a very long time,” Chastain said. “I feel that I can truly be an asset to the community. I love this place. I’ve been here for 56 years, and there’s no other place that I can ever picture myself being.”

“I’ve been a paramedic here since 1987 and been on the council since 2005. So, I look forward to serving as mayor as we move forward. The city is going to grow. It’s coming. But in order for us to grow, we have to have a stronger infrastructure, which is suffering at this point. My main objective is to get the infrastructure up to par where we can have growth.”

“Hiwassee is very unique and is in a league of its own. We’re two miles from one city limit to another city limit. A lot of the buildable land has already been developed. There’s not room for a whole lot more growth, but it is about how we manage what is already here.”

“I want to fill all these vacant shops – I want to fill the vacant buildings up. I want to see this place thrive.”

An enormous challenge facing the new mayor is the proposed spillway repair at Chatuge Dam, which is a long way from being finalized but could result in a multiyear, record-low drawdown of Lake Chatuge after the Tennessee Valley Authority begins construction in about three years.

“The TVA is causing me to lose sleep at night – not only economically, but because we supply water for the county, the city and part of Clay County, (North Carolina),” Chastain said. “What has not been understood is the effect of putting the lake down so far is going to ruin the shape of the water.”

“When I say the shape, I mean the purification of the water; there’s mud, bacteria, red clay. It’s going to take double to triple the amount of chemical, and we’re going to have to backwash numerous times in order to produce the

clean water we need.

“I’ve got my engineers talking to TVA because they need to know the impact this is going to have on our water plants. The work on the dam has to be done, but we’re going to have to find some alternative funding to be able to buy the extra chemicals we’re going to need.”

“There’s a possibility that we will have to drop our intake down into the riverbed to get water out of the lake. That’s going to cost money. The way it’s looking now, we’re almost going to be in the silt to pull the water out to treat it at 10 feet under winter levels.”

It’s an enormous concern that all City Council members will have to deal with, including the newest addition, local developer Scott Benton, who likewise qualified unopposed this month and is excited to be coming aboard in his new capacity with the city.

“After being on the (Hiwassee) Downtown Development Authority, I was able to work with each arm of the government, and I’ve seen a lot of growth with communication and a unified vision for the city,” Benton said. “I enjoyed being on the DDA, it was very rewarding, but I just felt City Council would be a better fit for me.”

“I’m seeing that some trust is being rebuilt between all branches of government, and it’s refreshing to see. We’ve got a lot of projects that are pretty important to the city with the lake and the infrastructure, so with my background and experience in large-scale development, I think I can be an asset in those areas.”

Towns County Fire & Rescue is seeking new volunteers



If so come join us at Towns County Fire and Rescue.

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ways been in some sort of service. I was a Boy Scout leader for years, and we are currently members of the Lions Club. This is a natural progression for me.

“I think the vision for the city is based on what the citizens want: revitalizing what we have here instead of rebuilding, growth but controlled growth, building a strong base of funds that we can repair the infrastructure with because that’s our biggest need right now.”

“And it would be nice to see some continuity as you go down Main Street, whether it’s planters along the side of the road that go all the way through town or something else, just things that show that this is a unified town.”

“Hopefully, we can get a little walking area around the square up here. And the new restaurant that’s coming in (to the Paris Business Center) – that’s going to be really, really nice, and we will probably have a rooftop venue there.”

“Anyhow, I think it’s about getting behind local businesses, building volunteer bases with them and their employees, and bringing the community together. It’s important to have the local government support that and for us to have the same vision.”

Chastain and Benton will also be sworn in publicly during the April 28 work session that is set to begin at 6 p.m. inside City Hall. That evening’s meeting will feature a TVA representative for a discussion of the city’s water treatment concerns. The public is encouraged to attend.

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