

Mattee...from Page 1

North Georgia Mountains from Athens, where she has spent the last seven years studying at the University of Georgia.

She has bachelor's degrees in biological sciences, applied biotechnology and entomology, and a master's degree in entomology.

Entomology is the study of insects, a discipline that fits perfectly within the realm of agricultural science, as one of the big roles of a county agent is insect identification.

But Mattee didn't start out wanting to be a "bug lady," as she puts it.

"Ever since I was 4 years old I wanted to be a vet," said Mattee. "That's why I went to UGA, and that's why I took all the science classes. And then I took my first medical entomology course, and that is what sparked the interest in it."

Through the course of her graduate studies, Mattee worked with the 4-H program as a volunteer District Project Achievement Judge in the area of entomology, and she spent a lot of time sharing her passion for and knowledge of insects.

"I would bring insects to outreaches, teach kids about insects, teach farmers about insects, and that's how I got my extension connections," said Mattee. "One of the extension agents from the Northeast District actually recommended I apply for this position, and I did, and that's how I ended up here."

Mattee began her job as the Union and Towns

extension agent on Jan. 4, with the understanding that her main roles were to be both a communicator and an educator.

"Primarily what I do is, I'm in the office, and somebody will call up and say, hey, I've got this insect, I don't know what it is - can you identify it for me? So they'll bring it in, I'll look at it," said Mattee. "Or they've got a plant disease, or they want to know what grass to plant to prevent erosion. Or they want to know what goat nutrients to feed."

"Just any kind of questions at all about anything to do with agriculture or natural resources. But also, I take a proactive measure as well as reactive by planning programs."

In January, Mattee oversaw a Vegetable Producers Meeting, and her next planned event will be the Northeast Georgia Corn Production Meeting, scheduled for Feb. 16 from 11 a.m. until 2 p.m. at the Experiment Station.

"Anybody who grows corn or is looking to grow corn can just show up, and lunch will be provided," said Mattee. "All they need to do is contact the office and tell us that they're interested so we can get a headcount."

"It will be for pesticide credit, too. Essentially, anybody with any kind of pesticide certificate, whether it's commercial applicators or private applicators, you need to attend a certain amount of certified events that will give

you credit for it to maintain it, so this counts for pesticide certificate credit."

Above all, Mattee is happy for the opportunity to work in Union and Towns counties, and she's learning new things every day in her role as ag agent.

"I'm really excited about it," said Mattee. "I was really nervous and I didn't know what to expect, but everybody has been just so welcoming. The one thing everybody has told me without exception is, we are so happy you're here."

Mickey Cummings of Union County, who retired last year after serving as an extension agent for 30 years, said that Mattee will be a tremendous asset to these communities.

"I think Melissa is an outstanding person, and I think she will be an outstanding extension agent as well," said Cummings. "She's very intelligent, she has a master's degree in entomology. She's exuberant, enthusiastic - all the things you need to be a county agent, she possesses all those qualities, and I think she's going to do a great job."

Mattee is looking forward to community suggestions for future programs, and said that residents of Towns and Union counties should feel free to contact her with their ideas.

Residents can contact Mattee in the Hiawassee office at (706) 896-2024, or in the Blairsville office at (706) 439-6030. She can also be reached through email at mmattee@uga.edu.

Arraignment...from Page 1

their charges by Superior Court Judge Martha Christian.

Charges against the six were presented by the office of Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley, in its capacity as representing the State of Georgia.

Union General Hospital CEO Mike Gowder was charged with three counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance and one count of conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance, and received a bond of \$50,000.

Dr. David Gowder, who was formerly a board member of UGH and director of the hospital's emergency room, and brother of Mike Gowder, was met with seven counts of unauthorized distribution and dispensation of a controlled substance and 36 counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance (Oxycodone, Hydrocodone, and Alprazolam (Xanax)), and was issued a \$10,000 bond after previously posting \$40,000 on prior charges.

Dr. James L. Heaton, a board member of UGH and a Blairsville physician, was charged with 41 counts of unauthorized distribution and dispensation of a controlled substance, and was granted bail in the amount of \$10,000.

Gail Gowder, the wife of Mike Gowder, has been

charged with two counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance, and received a \$20,000 bail.

Jamie Harkins, the niece of Mike and David Gowder, was charged with two counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance and one count of conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance. She received a bail in the amount of \$3,000.

Virginia Lou Harkins, nurse practitioner and director of Appalachian Home Health, sister of Mike and David Gowder and mother of Jamie Harkins, was charged with two counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance and one count of conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance, and was issued a \$10,000 bail.

According to court documents, special conditions of bail, among others, included: surrendering of the DEA Registration Number that allows physicians to issue prescriptions, if applicable. The defendants cannot be employed in a facility issuing narcotic prescription medication, and they must inform any future employer of pending charges.

The defendants shall not enter the grounds of Appalachian Home Health, Union General Hospital or its affiliates unless in an

emergency situation, nor can they contact any employee directly or indirectly. However, the court will allow Dr. Heaton to read and analyze sleep studies to maintain employment.

The defendants are also not to have contact with witnesses or co-defendants, with the exception of Mike and Gail Gowder, who are husband and wife, though they may not discuss any criminal investigation.

There was also a special condition that prevented the defendants from leaving the custody of the jail until 8 p.m. on Saturday, Feb. 6.

Christian was the acting judge after Union County Magistrate Judge Johnnie Garmon recused himself from the case due to conflict of interest and/or perceived prejudice.

With TV news crews, agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration and families of the accused in attendance, the four defendants without legal representation presented faced Judge Christian and Langley before the court went into recess, where Dr. David Gowder and Dr. Heaton met with their defense attorneys and waived their rights to first appearances.

Bail was agreed upon by all parties behind closed doors and the public side to the hearing was concluded.

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usually try to time elections with the election period. I don't think it will be as costly this time, because we bought the equipment and other things for future use."

Next, Stephen Smith gave another report on city beautification.

"We had the city cleanup and there were a lot of streets in the city. We didn't have many volunteers so we weren't able to clean up all the streets that we wanted to, but I met with Mr. (Bill) Kendall again and the Department of Transportation, and you'll notice yesterday that they cleaned up from this side of the town going west all the way to the Ridges," he said.

"The week of April 16 is going to be a county-wide cleanup, and it's not just one street, it's everybody's streets. We want everything to look great," he added.

Additionally, he illustrated a way in which some taxpayer money was being wasted on reflective road markers.

"Yesterday while I was out exercising, I came upon over 100 of these road reflectors just on my route from McDonald's to the boat ramp. These things

cost taxpayers \$7 apiece. That includes the labor to put them down. They're good if you live in Florida or a place where you don't have snow plows. They're real good, because your light reflects off them and they provide for safe passage. No fault to our local guys who are scraping the roads, we've got to have that done, but these guys are victims of that. It's just a waste," he said.

He estimated that the money would be better spent on new highway paint on a more regular basis. "The paint would probably do a better job in the long run," he said.

Liz Ordiales gave an update on the city business coalition she is in the process of forming.

"We have 143 businesses that we have licenses for. So as I'm building my spreadsheet, there are a lot of businesses that don't seem to have licenses. So I go between the bridges, for our city limits, and there's an additional 91 businesses that are not on this list. So I think that constitutes more participation, which is what I was looking for, is to be able to be all inclusive," she said.

"So even if we narrowed

it down to 80 businesses that are not on here, that's about \$8,000 that we're not getting. That could help certainly with some of the projects that we're talking about," she added.

Callie Moore of the Hiawassee River Watershed Coalition gave a presentation on water quality in Lake Chatuge and surrounding areas. Lake Chatuge's water quality is rated as "poor," but upcoming advancements in the technology of the water treatment plant seek to upgrade the water quality.

The HRWC's plans for the Lake Chatuge watershed include to complete a shoreline stabilization and education project at Lloyd's Landing, in partnership with the Rotary Club, to seek funding for installing designed storm water best management practices, to continue educating residents about the water quality concerns in Lake Chatuge, and to host the Chatuge Shoreline Cleanup.

At the end of the meeting, Stephen Smith announced his resignation from the council. He cited personal and family reasons and said that he was certain the remaining members of the council would work together for the benefit of the city.

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Union General Hospital.

"He has the community at heart - Lewis will roll up his sleeves and do whatever it takes to help us to navigate through this," said Board Vice Chair Jim Williams.

Furthermore, the board placed Gowder on paid administrative leave "pending the results of an internal review and investigation, including the review and consideration of the law enforcement activities," according to Williams.

"I think the board in its entirety feels very strongly that the community understands that the board is actively involved in the oversight of what's happening today," said Williams. "Patsy and I both are onsite, and will be on a daily basis for the foreseeable future to support Lewis, as well as to let our employees know that we're going to continue to operate our facility at the high level that it has been operated in the past. The community can depend on our almost 1,000 employees system-wide to do the job that our community expects them to do."

Williams has been out at the hospital with Patsy Efrid, who chairs the Union General, Inc. Board of Directors, and the two have been working to highlight the positive aspects of the hospital over the negativity of the current situation.

"We have one of the Top 100 community hospitals in the country, and we don't want the community to lose sight of that," said Williams. "It's not due necessarily to the board - it's due to the people that are in there every day, the physicians and the employees, that come to work every day."

Union General Hospital offers a remarkable breadth of medical services to multiple communities, and the list of ancillary businesses is impressive: Union County Nursing Home, Union County Dialysis Center, Chatuge Regional Hospital, Chatuge Regional Nursing Home, Glenda Gooch House, Blue Mountain Family Practice, Hayesville Family Practice and the Clinic at Walmart in Blairsville.

"Five years ago, 10 years ago, people would have to



Patsy Efrid, Chairman and Jim Williams, Vice-Chairman of the Union General Hospital Board of Directors

travel across the mountain for dialysis or for cancer treatment - now, they go across the street," said Williams, adding that the hospital has also recently installed a new state-of-the-art cardiopulmonary rehab center. "We have some incredible physicians and support team here locally to take care of the needs of our community health wise."

Since the arrests, Williams and Efrid, along with the rest of the hospital staff, have been cooperating fully with authorities, including helping the sheriff's office and the DEA to gather files and records from the hospital.

"The board and our staff are fully cooperating with law enforcement concerning the ongoing investigation, and we will continue to do so," said Williams. "Also, the board is being very proactive in our internal investigation concerning the governance of the hospital, as well as day-to-day operations."

This internal investigation is being conducted at the board level, with legal counsel from Morris, Manning & Martin LLP out of Atlanta.

"Our purview currently is that this is an isolated situation of somebody that is in a senior level management position, that has acted on their own, and that we have no reason at this point to think that any of our staff was involved directly and such, but we are taking measures to investigate that to be sure that we're aware of all circumstances," said Williams.

Dr. Heaton was voted onto the Union General Hospital Board of Directors last fall, and the board made a

decision last week concerning his board seat following his arrest.

"We voted to suspend his privileges from the board pending further investigation, and that's where we stand as of today," said Williams.

For now, transparency is of great concern to the hospital and its board.

"Jim and I went to Chatuge and met with their physicians and the managers over there, and just tried to brief them on what we knew was going on and what we were doing," said Efrid. "They knew Lewis Kelley because he had been over there as administrator before. We are just trying to get to everybody to let them know that we are as transparent as we know how to be, and when we know something, you will know something."

As for what's next, Williams and Efrid said that they and the rest of the board are taking things a step at a time, adding that everyone should have faith in their award-winning hospital and local health care.

"Our facility is profitable and has been for many, many years," said Williams. "We have virtually no debt, and we have significant cash reserves on hand. There are very few hospitals in the state or in the country that can make that statement."

"So we want to reassure the public that our health care at Union General, Inc. and Chatuge Regional, Inc. are very healthy financially, and that we will do whatever we can to maintain that, as well as the high level of service that people have learned to become dependent on."

UGA releases 2014 Farmgate Value Report: Beef's up, cotton's down and chicken's still on top

Here are some facts about Georgia's agricultural industry which drives the state's economy. Led by increases in forestry and livestock values, Georgia's agricultural output increased by \$484 million in 2014, making agriculture, once again, the largest industry in the state with a value of \$14.1 billion.

According to the most recent University of Georgia Farmgate Value Report, published earlier, the value of Georgia's livestock and aquaculture industries increased by almost 36 percent from 2013. The significant increase in beef prices in 2014 combined with anticipated high prices have led Georgia farmers to increase their herds. In one year the value of the state's beef cattle production rose by \$443,394,105 to \$1,089 billion, making it the second most valuable commodity group in the state.

Coordinated by the UGA Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development (CAED), the Farmgate Value Report is one of the most comprehensive annual studies of its kind. Eighty-six Georgia commodities are evaluated. UGA Cooperative Extension agents, who work closely with farmers in every county, collect data that other surveys can't, said Kent Wolfe, director of the center and an Ag economist with the UGA College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences. "It's an on-the-ground survey of what Georgia farmers are growing," he said. "It's really the only study of its depth in the nation. We collect more data than the federal agencies and on more commodities than they are able to survey." Whereas larger surveys may not count emerg-

Executive Director of RC&D



Frank Riley

ing or niche commodities, like southern peas for example, the UGA Farmgate Value Report does. Southern peas, like black-eyed peas, are a \$5-million-a-year-business in Georgia. "We can look at the economic impact of those commodities on the state and county level," Wolfe said. "Besides providing agriculture's economic contribution, it provides a picture of how many people are involved in agriculture across the state and in the county, as well as the impact that their businesses have." The detail also makes the report invaluable for spotting emerging trends, whether it's an uptick in commercial okra production or a surging beef market. "It gives Georgia a unique tool that other states don't have," Wolfe said. The UGA CAED offers the report free to the public. Here are some facts from 2014's report:

Madison County had the highest overall farm gate value in 2014 (\$521,421,196) with more than half generated by poultry and eggs.

Georgia's most valuable vegetable crop in 2014 was grown in Colquitt County, with \$155 million in vegetable production.

Crisp County may be home to the "watermelon capital of the world," but in 2014 Tift County was No. 1 in Georgia, generating a farm gate value of \$18.4 million.

Georgia's most valuable vegetable crop in 2014 was onions with a value of \$138.25 million.

Ornamental greenhouse plants accounted for \$265.4 million in Georgia in 2014.

Dooly County topped the

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grandchildren by my natural children. I have lost count of my adopted grandchildren. I'm very active in my church and missionary work, and I'm very active with family things.

I'm not going anywhere. I still live in Hiawassee and I still love Hiawassee. It's my home. And if I can be of assistance in the community and the city, I'm happy to help," he said.

As far as the future of the City Council, Smith said that he has high hopes and best wishes for the members still serving.

"I think the four other council members are all very qualified. They are well intentioned in what they want to do and I trust they'll work together as a team to accomplish the best things for the city. I think it's very healthy to have new people come on, and so we have three new energetic people, and I think they'll do a good job. And if they call me for an opinion or

whatever I'll be happy to share it as a citizen," he said.

The loss of a council member poses a challenge to the City Council. City Manager Rick Stancil explained that to replace Smith will be no easy task.

"When somebody resigns after they've been sworn in, and it's not within three months of the next election, then you've got to have a special election, so we're looking at a special election," he said.

Stancil said that the city will have to navigate state code and city charter, which could lead to complications prolonging the election of a new member to Smith's seat. Issues such as the call for the election and the timing of the election must be approved through the Secretary of State office.

"A special election's a big deal, because when you get into elections, you open the door for talking about qualifications and people registering to vote, so

there's hundreds of questions that have got to be answered beforehand. Usually what you try to do is time it, so we've got county elections coming up, and we may try to hold it at the same time as they're doing theirs. The problem is it's got to be a separate election at City Hall that we conduct, similar to what we did at the last election, so you've got a timing issue, and then the expense of doing that election," he said.

Because of these potential complications, Stancil was hesitant to give a time frame as to when a new city council member might be elected to take the vacant seat.

"When you get into state law, you've got to give people notice. There are periods where things have to take place to set up the election, and I really truly at this moment can't tell you that we can do it even by May. It's not something that we can do in a month or two months, because we have to follow the state election law," he said.

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