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Families turn out for fireworks at Fairgrounds

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Independence Day means many different things to people all across the land, among them being freedom, sacrifice, and the guarantee of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

And to Americans everywhere, the anniversary of the birth of this nation – now 246 years in the making – is a time to come together and honor that which came before.

That's why, on Monday, July 4, the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds held its annual patriotic fireworks extravaganza to celebrate and acknowledge the history of a country whose founders possessed the wisdom and foresight to create the boldest, brightest nation ever known.

Activities ran from 4 p.m. until nearly 10:30 that Monday, with gatherers from near and far enjoying unique arts and crafts booths, delicious foods from vendors, a live performance by beloved musical group Vintage Vixens playing all the classics, and more.

Of course, the marquee attraction of the evening was the beautiful annual display of fireworks to close out the action that really captured all the emotions behind the holiday.

"To me, the Fourth of July is a celebration of our country and all of our rights," said Shannon Baldwin-Nguyen, events coordinator at the Fairgrounds. "It is a really important day to stop and truly think about everything that we get to do, enjoy and be a part of every single day that we wake up."

"It is a great time to step away from politics and other

worldly and day-to-day distractions to also honor our veterans and be thankful that we are Americans."

Attendee Cole Cantrell traveled with his family from the Cumming area to see the show. He has been to many Fairgrounds events over the years, but this was his very first Fourth of July fireworks showcase in Hiawassee.

"I was very excited to try this event out because it is just about the only kind I have never been to yet (here), and the turnout has been awesome, so I cannot wait for next year's show," Cantrell said, referencing the hundreds of families in attendance.

"I love the Fourth of July because it makes me think of the land of the free, the sacrifices that our veterans have made for us, and it is just the

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As always, the annual Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds Fireworks display wowed crowds during the free patriotic Fourth of July celebration last week. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

'Freedom Cornhole' benefits first responders at GMF

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

On Sunday, July 3, the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds hosted the First Annual Georgia Mountain Freedom Cornhole Tournament as a family friendly prelude to the big Fourth of July celebrations.

But the occasion was about more than just having some summer fun with friends and family, as the event served an even greater purpose, that being to help raise funds for the local First Responder's Project to renovate their onsite cabin.

"The First Responders are housed here at the Fairgrounds during all of our events, and they need a nice place to stay, so we wanted to make the changes to the cabin for them so they would have a nice and comfortable place," said Fairgrounds Events Coordinator Shannon Baldwin-Nguyen.

"They work to do the work themselves, because of their astounding work ethic nature, of course, so we wanted to do this fundraiser to help enable them to do that – they certainly deserve it."

Made available for participants and spectators supporting the fundraiser were great food vendor items, live music, and arts and crafts, so everyone had a chance to relax and play some summer games all for a



The First Annual Georgia Mountain Freedom Cornhole Tournament on July 3 was another in a long string of awesome activities being made available for the public at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds. Photo by Jeremy Foster

great cause, with several people taking home some cool prizes as well.

Divisions for the games included juniors 12 and under, team doubles and singles.

The junior category saw the Top 3 winners earning gift baskets filled with festive toys, candy and more.

Doubles players earned a \$100 cash prize for Second

Place and \$200 cash prize for First Place, while competitors in the singles division earned a \$50 cash prize for Second Place and \$100 cash for First Place.

In all categories, Third Place winners received free three-day passes to the upcoming Georgia Mountain Fair, and on top of competition prizes, anyone could enter a special

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BOE talks divisive concepts, nutrition and school safety

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

At the July 5 regular meeting of the Towns County Board of Education, School Curriculum and Personnel Director Stephanie Moss presented the board with Georgia Legislative Updates requiring changes in and additions to school policy in several areas.

In her PowerPoint presentation, Moss covered recently passed Georgia legislation regarding unstructured break time, divisive concepts, material harmful to minors, and the establishment of a Parents' Bill of Rights.

The PowerPoint slides Moss used were developed by the school system's legal firm Harben, Hartley, and Hawkins, LLP, of Gainesville, to aid client school boards in understanding the new legislation and its impacts to local districts.

The impact in Towns County is that the system must update its existing unstructured break time policy and will have to generate new policies in the areas of divisive concepts complaint resolution, materials harmful to minors complaint resolution, and a Parents' Bill of Rights.

In a nutshell, aside from updates on the unstructured break time policy, the legisla-



Towns County Schools Curriculum Director Stephanie Moss presenting the latest updates from this year's legislative session, which featured the passing of laws that will affect every school district in the state. Photo by Mark Smith

tion spells out the definitions within each area and the procedures and timing the board must consider in developing new policy in the aforementioned areas.

The new legislation defines divisive concepts, for example, certain aspects of instruction regarding race and discrimination, then decrees the complaint resolution process each district must adhere to including timelines for the resolution of complaints about such concepts.

Board members unani-

mously agreed to table the discussion of new policy in order to give the board and school leadership time to consider the legislation and its impacts before deciding on the new policy and committing the new policy to paper.

In other school news, Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong said the federal government is no longer going to subsidize free meals for all students, as that pandemic-related program has ended. Consequently, the schools will again

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Butternut Creek Fest a true arts & crafts show, July 16-17



A view from a past Butternut Creek Festival in Meeks Park, featuring plenty of shade to stave off the summer heat. Photo/Submitted

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – The annual Butternut Creek Festival at Meeks Park, which will be held on Saturday and Sunday, July 16-17, is an arts & crafts festival of the highest caliber.

"This is what we call a juried craft show," said Helena Grossman, who serves as secretary of the High Country Artisans, Inc., a 501(c)(3) non-profit that has organized the

festival since 1997.

That means that an applicant must submit pictures of their work, their shop, and them making their craft to a panel of artisans and artists as a prerequisite to participation in the festival. The panel then votes on each vendor by secret ballot, Grossman said.

So, the vendors that are allowed to have a booth at the Butternut Creek Festival are genuine artists and craftsmen, and they come from far and wide.

What makes this festival even more unique is that there is no admission fee, no parking fee, no shuttle fee and no entertainment fee. That's because the people who organize the festival are all volunteers, and the services are all paid for by various Union County departments.

Still, the High Country Artisans are able to fulfill their purpose for having the festival, which is to support art programs in Union County.

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Council revisits 'Home Rule,' awards sidewalk projects

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Hiawassee's July 5 City Council meeting featured about five minutes but lasted quite a few updates and pieces of good news for the city.

The recently passed Home Rule Ordinance was reintroduced with a first reading; the city is having to re-do the process – a City Charter amendment – because of a publication error by the Towns County Herald.

As previously reported, the change will enable the council to adopt an ordinance in one meeting rather than over

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Rachel Brineman-Toller of Savannah is currently undergoing a medical investigation with Dr. Samuel Le Church, and she was a special guest in the July 5 Hiawassee City Council meeting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

TCSO drug investigation leads to methamphetamine sale charge

News Special
Towns County Herald



The Towns County Sheriff's Office Drug Suppression and Investigation Unit arrested Cody Crane, 34, of Hiawassee, on July 5.

After a six-month investigation, Crane was arrested and charged with the sale of methamphetamine.

Sheriff Ken Henderson is pleased with the hard work and long hours of his officers in bringing this investigation to a successful conclusion.



Cody Crane

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Grace Rock Band on the Square

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Mountain Beautification and Revitalization Association

The Mountain Beautification & Revitalization Association (MBRA) was formed earlier this year as a 501(c)3 organization whose members and volunteers do projects in Towns, Union and Clay counties.

Here are two more successful project completions that volunteers from MBRA have accomplished. One was repairing the walkway in Cupid Falls Park, Young Harris, and the second was priming picnic tables for Blairsville.

MBRA was notified that the elevated walkway that parallels Thomas Town Rd. inside Cupid Falls Park had suffered some damage and asked if we could repair it. Jesse Cook and Gordy Jones found that one section had partially collapsed. They pulled up some deck boards and found that the framework holding up the walkway was only connected to the posts by two (2) deck screws, that weren't enough for proper support and had broken. They jacked up the walkway, secured a block under it, and then added metal joist hangers and corner braces to both sides of that section and replaced the deck boards. You can see from the picture attached what it looked like before the repair. The work took about 2 hours and they didn't have to purchase any materials. They advised Mayor Gibby that if all the sections were built the same way, it was only a matter of time before another section failed.

MBRA was contacted

by Charlotte Randall, Executive Director of Habitat for Humanity in Blairsville. She wanted to know if MBRA could do some painting work on nine picnic tables that were acquired jointly by Habitat of Humanity, Rotary of Union County, Blairsville's Downtown Development Authority (DDA) and Lowes. The tables have been placed in a small (~1 acre) nicely treed area behind the Blairsville City Hall, and east of Arby's. A Blairsville DDA member donated the paint, and MBRA volunteers primed all 9 tables so that the DDA could host an event to decorate the tables with artwork on July 16.

Volunteers included David and Patty Greenwell, Joanne Coleman, Gerry Gutenstein, Michael Courey, and Gordy Jones.



This shows small little screws unattached and no braces, causing the Cupid Falls elevated walkway to collapse.

MBRA welcomes any volunteers to further their good work in the community. If interested please contact Gordy Jones at MBRA8054@gmail.com.



L-R: Gordy Jones, Joanne Coleman, Patty Greenwell, Gerry Gutenstein, and Michael Courey; David Greenwell taking the photo.

Council Meeting...from Page 1A

two meetings, which will allow the city to move forward more quickly on items that have broad support among council members and the public.

There are, however, stipulations to the "two readings, one meeting" change.

The entire council must be present, and agreement must be unanimous. For example, the ordinance banning cryptocurrency mining in Towns County was something that could have benefitted. Had the Home Rule Ordinance been in place and each council member present, it would have nixed the one-month wait to enact.

"I didn't want to wait a month and risk somebody coming in," explained Mayor Liz Ordiales, saying she was aware that the council shared the opinion that crypto mining is harmful for both the community and the environment.

Of course, this Home Rule only applies to smaller decisions. Should an ordinance declaring price increases or major construction come up, the usual process of reading in one session and adopting in a subsequent meeting would still apply.

In financial news, the council decided unanimously to pursue an Accounting Service Contract with Gainesville-based Certified Business Accountant Walker, Pierce, & Tuck. The engagement accounts for three fiscal years,

with the cost coming out to approximately \$25,905 per year.

"That's almost pretty much what we pay now," Ordiales said, adding that many other options had been explored before making the new, current choice.

Recent talks of sidewalk repairs and updates have come to fruition, with Appalachian Concrete Service agreeing to tackle the project for about \$33,500. The total will be covered with a Local Maintenance and Improvement Grant primarily.

According to the Georgia Department of Transportation, LMIG provides local governments "greater flexibility and quicker project delivery while allowing (GDOT) to effectively administer the program with a reduced workforce and new funding match requirements."

In other words, LMIG grants give cities the ability to finish projects quicker with state-based funding for support.

The total cost of repairs will also require a difference of SPLOST funds. Councilwoman Nancy Noblet abstained from voting since her son, Jackson Noblet, owns the business, but the choice was otherwise approved unanimously.

On that note, Ordiales mentioned contacting District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch for a grant that would help with the \$101,190 project for sidewalk

work from Hiawassee Brew to Ross Lloyd Road, along with similar work on the sidewalk running from South State Bank to just past the Shook House. For these stretches, Colwell Construction will be handling the repairs.

Gooch agreed to assist in the funding request, and the grant will cover 70% of costs, or \$70,835 of the total. The other 30%, as with the area covered by Appalachian Concrete Service, will be handled with SPLOST funds.

"Hopefully we can get both of these done this month," Ordiales said.

The July 5 meeting was also an opportunity to introduce special guest Rachel Brineman-Toller, who is undergoing an internship with local Family Medicine practitioner Dr. Samuel Le Church. Brineman-Toller was interested in attending the meeting to hear more about the community, but she also had an important matter of discussion to speak with the mayor about later.

"We're going to get together to talk about medical stuff in Hiawassee this week," noted Ordiales.

The Hiawassee City Council and Mayor Ordiales meet for work sessions each Monday before the week of regular meetings, the latter of which occur the first Tuesday of every month at 6 p.m. inside City Hall at 50 River Street.

Butternut Creek Fest...from Page 1A

"We try and give as much as we can back to the community to support art programs," Grossman said. "The biggest winners of those donations are actually the school children."

"We support the art programs in the Woody Gap School, the (Union County) High School, the Elementary School and the Middle School, and each of them receives \$1,500 from us."

Grossman said they have no plans to expand the event because they want to keep it under the trees and by the creek at Meeks Park, where it's relatively cool.

Consequently, she said they turn away about half of the applicants because there isn't room for all that apply, though the High Country Arti-

sans do allow for new vendors every year.

The Butternut Creek Festival has been the recipient of the Top 20 Events Award every year, which is a prestigious award given by the Southeast Tourism Society, Grossman said, adding that it must be applied for each year.

There are 82 vendors scheduled for the festival this year, along with four nonprofit organizations. The Union County Recreation Department is responsible for scheduling the food vendors, and Country River Band coordinates all of the entertainment.

Grossman said there will be shuttles operating from the festival area all the way to the upper baseball fields. Once the lower parking areas fill up, visitors will

be directed to the upper ball fields to park.

The event will go on rain or shine from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Sunday. However, Grossman said the vendors are usually ready for business around 8:30 or 9 a.m. for especially early birds.

"Come out and have a good time. We appreciate the support," Grossman said, adding that the show should bring somewhere between 12,000 and 15,000 people into Blairsville this weekend.

Given the turnout for other events this year in Blairsville, that may be a conservative estimate, so head on out Saturday and Sunday to enjoy all that the Butternut Creek Festival has to offer in 2022.

Avoid the back to school rush: Get your children's Immunizations and Health Screenings early



District 2 Public Health encourages you to plan early for back-to-school immunizations and health screenings. Ensure your children are ready to begin the upcoming school year by getting them up-to-date on their school health requirements. Beat the rush, and get your children in today for their routine vaccines and health screenings!

"Certain age groups have specific requirements for their back to school immunizations," says Leyna Mash-

burn, District 2 Immunization Coordinator. "It is important to check with your medical provider early to determine what, if any, vaccines are needed for your child."

Last year, the state of Georgia added a new meningitis vaccine requirement for 11th graders. If you are unsure of Georgia's school requirements, now is the time to check with your children's doctor, school, or the local health department to determine what is needed.

Some health departments will partner with local schools and organizations for back-to-school events in July and August. Even in counties having these special events, you may

still visit your local health department during regular business hours for routine immunizations and health screens.

For those who are uninsured or anyone with insurance that does not cover vaccines, the cost for children's vaccines is \$21 per vaccine. Medicaid and some private insurances are accepted. Contact your county health department for more information about your specific insurance plan.

For a list of back-to-school health events available in your county and for health department hours and locations visit phdistrict2.org. To learn more about Georgia's school health requirements, visit the Georgia DPH website.

Cornhole ..from Page 1A

raffle for \$10 to win a Yeti cooler filled with over \$500 worth of quality products.

"We had an amazing turnout for this event's debut," Baldwin-Nguyen said. "We are certainly going to be planning to make this a yearly event, to possibly make it for a new fundraising project as well."

"We could not do this without our wonderful community. Everyone is always willing to help out and happy to do it. I love bringing the community together, and that is what we are all about."

Towns County Fire Lt. Scott Shattles has been a firefighter for 11 years, and he was excited to share his appreciation for the benefit that Sunday.

"I have always loved being close to the community, and it was the best decision I ever made to join this force because I want to help people who need it, and my sense of gratitude for this turnout of people wanting to help us this time around is just completely overwhelming," Shattles said.

Towns County High School Head Football Coach Jason Roquemore brought his student-athletes along with other coaches as part of the Student Council program to give the kids a chance to take a little break from summer workouts while giving back to the community in support of the effort.

"We talk to our kids all

of the time about being servant-leaders and what that looks like, and this was a great opportunity for them to lead by example for a great cause," Roquemore said. "This is something I wanted them to be able to experience and take with them to help them be the better leaders that we are training them to be."

"And you cannot find a better way to do that than with a benefit such as this. It has really helped them learn to appreciate our community and servicemen especially all the more."

Jeremy Parker was the Event Organizer for the tournament itself, and he has been with the Fire Department for 16 years. In a true feat of accomplishment, Parker is also an EMT and law enforcement certified, all on top of working part-time security for the Fairgrounds.

"Public safety, helping people, giving back to my community and being there for people in their time of need has always been my passion," Parker said. "It feels good to see the turnout here and know that the community supports public safety."

The Yeti cooler raffle winner was Kimberly Johnstone.

Junior category winners were Hailey Bradshaw in Third Place, Andrew Kemp in Second Place and Rhett Floyd in First Place.

In the team doubles di-

Post-storm rainbow photo captures natural beauty of area



Ashley Ledford took this photo of a complete rainbow and partial double rainbow from the Friendship area of Towns County after the July 3 evening rainstorm.

GMF Fireworks ..from Page 1A



Hundreds of families remembered the sacrifices made by America's service members and the history of this great nation during the Independence Day Fireworks at the Fairgrounds.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

best time to remember to always be thankful that we live in America."

Laura's Dazzling Bling by Toccoa-based couple Laura and Reginald Williams sold paparazzi jewelry at the event and saw some steady traffic through the course of the evening.

"I love coming here to meet new people, and this is especially one of my favorite holidays because you meet a

lot," Laura said, "and we all get to share in the wealth and freedom of our country together."

"I think about our veterans for fighting so hard to have these rights of freedom of speech, religion and everything America has to offer."

Added Reginald, "When I think of the Fourth of July, I think of the growth and the independence of our country and how far we have come,

and I think of the ways that we have many opportunities to keep making our country a better place. It is a much stronger, constant reminder to not take each day for granted."

The Towns County Herald hopes everyone had a safe and joyous Fourth of July. For more information regarding upcoming events at the Fairgrounds, visit www.georgiamountainfairgrounds.com.



The Towns County Fire Department lent its ladder truck to boost the patriotism of the Freedom Cornhole Tournament with a giant American flag overhanging the July 3 competition.

Photo by Jeremy Foster



The Atlanta-based, all female Vintage Vixens band entertained the masses with a free pre-fireworks concert at the Fairgrounds July 4.

Photo by Jeremy Foster

Towns County BOE ..from Page 1A

be charging for student meals for the 2022-23 year.

Berrong urged parents of children who qualify for free and reduced meals to get their paperwork in before the start of next school year. For more information, call the Towns County School District at 706-896-2279.

On the bright side, the schools have partnered with six other North Georgia county school districts as a member of the Northeast Georgia Cooperative Bid Group to procure food for school meals through a co-op style procurement process.

This procurement process will save the district money, which will keep the price of school meals down and guarantee delivery to these seven North Georgia Mountain counties, which has been an issue in the past.

Moving along, the board has authorized Berrong to contact Charles Black Construction to get the bid process started for the installation of an air conditioning system inside the Bill P. Kendall Gymnasium at the High School.

Since the project is estimated to cost over \$100,000, plans and specs will have to be formally developed and a closed bid process initiated per school policy.

Berrong said that, until recently, the gym wasn't used enough during warmer months to warrant that kind of expenditure, but since the coaches have had athletic summer camps at

the gym for the last two years to raise money and plan to continue the camps, it's time to make the improvements.

Annual service contracts for sanitation, propane gas, and pest control for 2023 were awarded by the board.

Allen Disposal was awarded the sanitation service contract for \$1,995 monthly or \$23,940 annually. Superior Plus was awarded the LP gas contract at a price of \$1.719 per gallon. And Duncan Exterminating was awarded the pest control contract for \$450 per month or \$5,400 a year.

The board also renewed the School Resource Officer Contract and Addendum between Towns County Schools and the Towns County Sheriff's Office. There were no changes from last year.

Board members approved the final drafts of the Towns County Elementary, Middle and High School Student Handbooks for the 2022-23 school year.

School Finance Director Myra Underwood said her department is in the process of wrapping up fiscal year 2022. Sales tax revenues are still coming in higher than last year, she said.

"We have completed 91% of the year at the end of May," Underwood said. "So, we're wrapping up one year and starting the next."

The board approved the May 2022 financial statements. High School Math

Teacher Rob Benson, who is returning to teaching after a brief retirement, was approved by the board to coach the Middle School Cross Country program. Benson was recommended by Middle School Principal Dr. Connie Hobbs.

In his Superintendent's Report, Berrong said the new maintenance building structure has been completed.

"We still have wiring and heating and air to go in, but it's turning out really nice," he said, adding that the building color turned out perfectly.

The baseball dugouts and the bathroom at the football field will be bricked soon, Berrong said.

"Hopefully, by the end of July, we're going to be getting a new sign for the Elementary (School)," Berrong said.

Finally, Berrong talked about upcoming changes in school safety and security, which will be covered at a Public Safety Forum Friday featuring himself and leaders from the Sheriff's Office, Fire Department, 911 Center, Hiawassee Police Department, Towns County EMS, Young Harris College Police and the Commissioner's Office.

Berrong said the recent school shootings prompted him to scrutinize current school safety and security protocols and make a few changes, which will be presented at the forum, to be hosted by the Mountain Movers & Shakers at the Towns County Civic Center at 8 a.m. on Friday, July 15.