

Towns County Herald

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Lightings, Sheriff's Parade lead Christmas season

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Towns County is joining the rest of the world in preparing for Christmas, and there's plenty for families to do locally as the magical day draws closer, with something to appeal to every age and just about every interest coming up.

As a holiday favorite and a tradition to many, the Young Harris Tree Lighting will be coming around again this year on Friday, Dec. 1, at Mayor's Park just outside Young Harris City Hall, courtesy of the Enotah Garden Club.

Ring in the season at 6 p.m. by enjoying complimentary coffee, hot chocolate, cookies and other festive refreshments. Santa will show

up around 6:30 p.m., and if the kiddos haven't finished writing their letters to him yet, they can stop at one of the tables and jot it down real quick.

There will also be entertainment courtesy of some of Towns County's youngest carolers and story time with Santa, so bring your warmest blankets and comfy chairs to take part in this decades-long tradition.

One of the most dazzling ways to celebrate the holidays is the Mountain Country Christmas in Lights at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, every Thursday through Saturday from now until Dec. 9, and then every evening from Dec. 14-23, from 6-9 p.m. each night.

Admission is \$8 – kids 12 and under get in free – so be sure to check out all the activi-

ties, light displays, photo opportunities, arts & craft areas, food vendors and more.

Then there's the annual Light Up Hiawassee! on the Town Square Dec. 2, starting at 2 p.m. The event will include cookie decorating – and eating – courtesy of McConnell Baptist Church, hot chocolate, ornament making, letters to Santa and more as the square is lit up that evening.

Volunteers worked hard Nov. 18 to get the square ready for Christmas, and the City of Hiawassee-sponsored display will no doubt provide plenty of family-friendly entertainment for residents throughout December.

Right after that on Dec. 2, Santa Claus will come riding. See *Christmas Season*, Page 6



Cookie decorating has become a beloved tradition of the annual Light Up Hiawassee! Christmas event. Photo by Lowell Nicholson/2021

Bradshaw updates on courthouse, parrot-feather

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The monthly Towns County Commission Meeting took place on Nov. 21 inside the Temporary Courthouse Offices in Hiawassee – though Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw revealed that it won't be long until renovations to the Towns County Courthouse are complete.

"It's coming along very, very quickly, and it looks great," said Bradshaw, urging guests to "ride around" and look at the additions from the outside. The current completion estimate puts the doors opening sometime in February.

Already, the next steps are being planned. Bradshaw said that once construction is finished and everyone is "moved in," the parking lot



Cliff Bradshaw
Sole Commissioner

will face reconfiguration.

"We've already hired a company and paid them to re-evaluate the parking there. We can get a lot more parking with what's there without having to

add more property," explained Bradshaw, noting that the old spaces weren't installed with future expansion in mind.

In last month's meeting, Bradshaw offered insight into current county projects, and he came prepared Nov. 21 to give updates. Namely, the new windows have been ordered for the Lake Chatuge Chamber, with plans to replace the frames and add a fresh coat of paint to the building.

Earlier this month, Bradshaw spoke with Georgia Department of Transportation District Engineer Jason Dykes to continue to push for center turning lanes on US 76 West, which is a safety issue he has been championing for many years.

That conversation proved fruitful, and a full re- See *County Meeting*, Page 3

Oak Ridge Boys bringing Farewell Tour to Hiawassee



The Oak Ridge Boys will be performing live in concert at Anderson Music Hall in Hiawassee on Saturday, Dec. 2.

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

According to beloved bass singer Richard Sterban of The Oak Ridge Boys, he's not sure when the legendary act will be wrapping up its Farewell Tour, but he does know that they'll be stopping by Hiawassee very soon to greet fans.

Specifically, The Oak Ridge Boys will be celebrating the holidays with the American Made Christmas Tour. Happen-

ing on Dec. 2 inside the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds' Anderson Music Hall, the concert starts at 7 p.m. and will keep going until about 11 p.m.

This isn't the first time The Oak Ridge Boys have performed in Hiawassee, but make no mistake – they're eager to come back.

For his part, Sterban is looking forward to experiencing the Mountain Country Christmas in Lights while in town, and as for the Music Hall

itself, Sterban said, "There's not a bad seat in the house," and "it's a great venue to do a show."

Those who haven't yet experienced an Oak Ridge Christmas are in for a treat. The lineup includes traditional holiday carols, "fun" and "romantic" songs, and, of course, to finish the night on the most important note, songs to commemorate the true meaning of Christmas in Christ's birth. See *Oak Ridge Boys*, Page 3

TCSO makes five drug arrests in 'Operation Round-Up'

News Special
Towns County Herald

Towns County Sheriff's Office Drug Investigators recently undertook a six-week investigation into drug dealers selling in Towns County. The dealers were identified through investigations and reliable informants.

Undercover investigators moved on these individuals, making hand-to-hand drug transactions that were captured on video clearly showing the drugs and cash changing hands.

Sept. 30, 2023, a hand-to-hand transaction was made with Macayla Ann Laster, 38, of Hayesville, North Carolina.

Oct. 14, 2023, a hand-to-hand transaction was made with Kimberly Faye Hall, 24, of Hiawassee.

Oct. 14, 2023, a hand-to-hand drug transaction was made with Jason Earl Barrow, 43, of Hiawassee.

Oct. 14, 2023, a hand-to-hand drug transaction was made with Brett Austin Teasley, 28, of Ellijay.

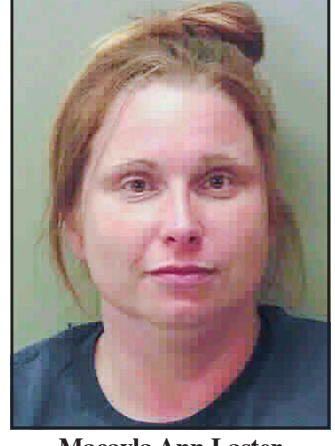
Also on Oct. 14, 2023, a hand-to-hand drug transaction was made with Jeremy Weaver, 39, of Ellijay.

Arrest warrants were obtained for all suspects, and on Sunday, Nov. 19, a round-up began. The following were

arrested, charged, and are being held without bond:

Macayla Ann Laster, felony possession of methamphetamine, felony sale of methamphetamine, felony sale of marijuana, and possession of marijuana.

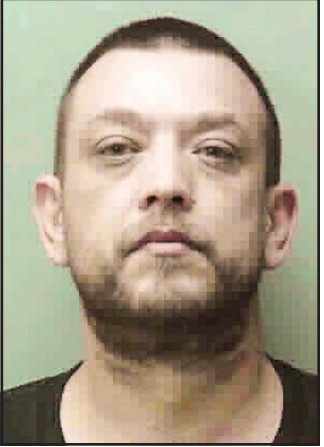
Kimberly Faye Hall, felony possession of methamphetamine and felony sale of See *Drug Arrests*, Page 7



Macayla Ann Laster



Kimberly Faye Hall



Jason Earl Barrow



Brett Austin Teasley



Jeremy Weaver

Mountain Country Christmas open now thru December

By Daysha Pandolph
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Officially heralding the Christmas holiday season, the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds opened its gates Thanksgiving night for the first of many showings of the Mountain Country Christmas in Lights.

Between now and Dec. 9, the event will be open each Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 6-9 p.m., and it will run nightly Dec. 14-23.

The first night of the annual lights show was nothing short of spectacular, debuting an awaited \$100,000 worth of new features: a dazzling LED ball, an enchanting walkthrough lighted tunnel and many other magical Christmas additions that have made this year's show truly special.

On top of the impressive glittering lights and Santa Claus taking visitors, Mountain Country Christmas offers an abundance of activities for the whole family, such as the interactive petting zoo Cowtown USA.

With Cowtown USA, not only do children experi-



Santa Claus always has a blast visiting with local youngsters at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds' Annual Mountain Country Christmas in Lights. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

ence the delight of feeding and petting farm animals, but they can also participate in hands-on milking, butter churning and pony riding.

Another family-favorite activity at the lights is smore and hot dog roasting. Under a welcoming canopy of lights, guests pay a small additional

fee to roast marshmallows on hotdogs over an open fire.

M.J. Parker, a fairgrounds employee working at the campfire station, shared that the activity gives many people a heartwarming chance to relive their cherished childhood memories, and it even See *Country Christmas*, Page 7

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City of Young Harris enacts PUD amendment, sets millage rate

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Young Harris City Council and Mayor Andrea Gibby met for a public hearing and their regular meeting on Nov. 7. Discussed in the public hearing was a Zoning Ordinance Amendment regarding Planned Unit Developments.

City Attorney Marvin Harkins offered an update on zoning, specifically referencing last month's talks on the ordinance amendment to create a third category of PUD.

The first two categories of PUD in the ordinance are mixed-use lots that allow for residential and commercial units on the same land, and conservation PUDs consisting of residential structures and greenspace.

This amendment codifies an infill PUD designation, defined by Harkins as, "for less than 10 acres, you can add just residential (units), and there's greenspace requirements, but since you're dealing with a smaller parcel, you have a smaller percentage of greenspace."

In short, the purpose of an infill PUD is to develop or redevelop smaller pieces of land, described as "pockets of properties," that already exist.

PUDs allow municipalities better developmental control by requiring the submission of complete site plans up front, so communities know exactly what they're getting, and the development process is streamlined by cutting down on the need for variance approvals during construction.

In the regular meeting that followed the public hearing, the council unanimously voted to enact the Zoning Ordinance Amendment.

Also in the regular meeting, the council voted to accept the city's rollback millage rate of 2.335 mills for 2023 property tax bills.

Councilman Steve Clark said that the Engineering Report was "a sad one," as he revealed there were no bids on the Timberline booster pump project. That said, there's still some interest from companies who want to take on the job but declined from bidding for multiple reasons.

"A short bid time is not going to work anymore because you just can't get stuff," Councilman Dr. John Kelley said regarding one justification. "We had three or four companies not be able to meet the 10-day deadline because they couldn't get information from their vendors, like pipe vendors, etc."

Clark expects bids will go out again in December or later, especially considering "nobody's going to (install the second pump) in the dead of winter anyway."

The Sewer Rehabilitation Project just completed restoration on two more pipelines, and 18 more Mueller water meters arrived in the mail, but more discussion – and meters – need to arrive before their installation.

City Hall is discussing whether the city needs to raise sewer rates, but several key pieces of information remained unclear at press time, including an exact expense breakdown at the Sewer Plant and an anticipated Sewer Fund budget shortage in 2024.

When the city finally replaces its water meters, it's likely that greater water usage will be captured, which means that sewer numbers will go up and increase revenues. Further discussion will take place be-



Young Harris Mayor Andrea Gibby and City Attorney Marvin Harkins in the November regular city meeting.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

fore the city decides on a rate increase next year.

During the Main Street Director Report, Rosemary Royston revealed she has been working with Union County's new Main Street Director Kristen Bentley. Going forward, Young Harris events and Blairsville events will be planned together and scheduled out of the way of each other.

Council members held two public hearings that occurred after press time on Monday, Nov. 27, one for the Fiscal Year 2024 Proposed Budget, and another on the PUD Rezoning of the Kelly-Gibson property, formerly the city-owned Kaiser-Dean property.

Both the budget and Kelley's PUD Rezoning Application are set to be accepted in an upcoming city meeting. The Kelly-Gibson development project will bring additional housing to Young Harris.

The Young Harris City Council meets on the first Tuesday of every month at 6:30 p.m.

at City Hall located at 50 Irene Berry Drive, barring delays or rescheduling for holidays. These meetings are open to the public, and the community is encouraged to attend.

Oak Ridge Boys...from Page 1

"We have a lot of problems in our world right now and in our country, but we feel like Jesus is the answer to those problems," Sterban said, optimistic that the performance will lift the spirits of the audience and inspire hope – and faith.

"This year is our 34th annual Christmas tour," said Sterban, noting that, often, Christmas performances are "the biggest part of the year" for The Oak Ridge Boys. "You're going to hear and experience just about every aspect of Christmas."

That said, diehard fans will also find that their favorite Oak Ridge classics are included in the performance.

"You will hear 'Elvira,'" Sterban promised with a rumble chuckle. "You will hear me do, 'giddy-up, oom pa-pa, oom pa-pa mau mau.'"

But the Christmas Tour isn't just about singing. Included in the night's events is a segment where each Oak Ridge Boy sits down in front of a fireplace and talks about childhood memories, the importance of Christmas music and what Christmas means to him.

Sterban also hinted that Santa himself would be part of the show, making a point to go out into the audience and interact with kids. Sometimes, Santa even compares beards with the band, though William

Lee Golden might just give him a run for his money.

As for the Farewell Tour, Sterban said following some heavy conversations between the four bandmates, their manager and talent agency, they "felt like it was time" to begin winding down. In his own words, "Nothing last forever in this life, including us, and we know that."

Of course, that doesn't mean The Oak Ridge Boys are on their way out by the end of the year. There's a reason they haven't decided on a specific end date, and they will in fact be in the studio in January to produce a new album.

"While we're still healthy and still enjoying ourselves, we kind of want to go out 'on top,' so to speak," Sterban said, believing that "the good Lord above will let us know when it's finally time to go home forever, for good. He has not said that yet."

Instead, think of the Farewell Tour as The Oak Ridge Boys slowing things down. In Sterban's case, this means spending more time with his family and enjoying the company of his two young grandsons. It's a good reward following more five decades on the stage.

"We've been very blessed over the last 50-plus years, and we want to go around to as many places as we can

around this country and thank our fans for allowing us to have such a great career," Sterban said, ever humble. "You know, we would not be who we are today without our fans."

And even when the Farewell Tour is done, that won't be the end of the bond between The Oak Ridge Boys: "There's no substitute for the friendship and the special relationship that exists between us," Sterban said.

Indeed, they've "developed a friendship that is second to none," and Sterban has observed that things have only gotten better with age, considering they've "gotten too old to let little things bother us." Each band member has brought something unique to the table over the years, in turn providing something special in each other's lives.

They'll be doing the very same thing at their Dec. 2 Christmas show, so head on over to <https://georgiamountainfairgrounds.com/localevents/id/375> to purchase a ticket. A hard copy will also get people into the Mountain Country Christmas in Lights for free.

"I can speak for all The Oak Ridge Boys, and I can tell you we're looking forward to coming your way," Sterban said. "We're looking forward to bringing our Christmas show to Hiawassee because it's a special place – it really is."

County Meeting...from Page 1

port in the December meeting will show maps and provide more information on the roughly \$7 million project, with roadwork projected to start around 2026.

"This county understands what Lake Chatuge is to us. That is our bread and butter," Bradshaw stated, transitioning to address the invasive parrot-feather weeds growing heavily in the south end of Lake Chatuge, which one resident likened to being like "kudzu in the water."

Following conversations with the Tennessee Valley Authority, a survey team was sent out in airboats to make observations for an environmental review.

The review will take anywhere between six to eight months to complete, but Bradshaw claimed to hear more and more complaints from residents during that waiting period. So far, the results have not come in.

"I am still going to push them with everything we've got, and I'm going to tell you why I am," Bradshaw said. "The county didn't build that lake; the TVA built that lake. That is their lake. Anything you go to do on that lake, you've got to get permission

from them to do it.

"But yet they want to turn around and say, 'We'll do the public boat areas, this, that and the other; the rest is up to the homeowner.' I have a problem with that."

Bradshaw went on to say that he would meet on Nov. 27 with District 50 State Sen. Bo Hatchet and District 8 State Rep. Stan Gunter, noting he plans to have the issue addressed with legislation if he must.

Further, Bradshaw hopes to pull together a meeting with TVA officials, Callie Moore of MountainTrue, and Towns County residents battling the parrot-feather, and he feels the problem is more urgent than waiting another six months.

"With all of us there putting pressure on them, I want to get as much out of them as we can. Then, if we need to do more as a community, we will. Numbers matter," added Bradshaw.

People interested in learning more about this topic can visit <https://www.savelakechatuge.org/>, a newly launched website set up by local businesses and homeowners to bring awareness to the growing problem in Lake Chatuge that threatens the economic vitality and quality of

life for the area.

Towns County Fire Chief Harold Copeland was present in the meeting, and Bradshaw spoke of a letter from the Clay County Fire Department in North Carolina thanking the Towns County Fire Department for its timely action in "suppressing and containing" a recent fire in Clay County.

Along with accepting the compliments, Copeland offered a quick equipment update, detailing a new rescue vehicle including a set of Jaws of Life among other vital, life-saving tools; the whole package cost approximately \$200,000 and was paid for through local tax collections.

Additionally, Bradshaw adopted a resolution regarding mental health reform efforts across the state, agreeing that Towns County would make strides toward a "jail diversion initiative."

Many mental health patients experiencing crises are taken to local jails rather than supportive facilities, and the resolution seeks to prevent more traumatic events by "continuing efforts" to help Georgians "receive adequate health care for mental health and substance abuse disorders."

Christmas Season...from Page 1



Sheriff Ken Henderson leading the 2022 Sheriff's Christmas Parade through Downtown Hiawassee. Photo by Lowell Nicholson/2022

ing through town when Towns County Sheriff Ken Henderson kicks off the Sheriff's Christmas Parade at 5:30 p.m.

As in past years, the route will begin at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, where the lineup starts at about 4 p.m. Float contest participants need to have their entries decorated and ready to go by 4:15 p.m., and all floats must be well lit with no political or obscene messaging.

"We ask that no float have a Santa Claus on it because

Santa Claus will be bringing up the rear of the parade and is the grand finale (more than one Santa will confuse the smaller kids)," the Sheriff's Office said.

The Young Harris College community will be holding their annual Christmas Concert Dec. 2-3 from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Tickets to get in are \$10 and can be purchased at www.yhc.edu/boxoffice.

Glenn-McGinnis Hall will host the concert, and guests younger than 14 and individuals with a Young Harris

College ID can get in for free.

And the Buchanan Family Lights are back this year after decades of building an impressive home display for the enjoyment of area residents. To see these lights, head east from Hiawassee on US 76 and make a left on Scataway Road. Keep going till you see the lights!

For more area Christmas attractions, visit the Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce website at <https://www.golakechatuge.com/>.



The renowned Buchanan Family Lights – which have appeared on national television – can be seen at 469 Scataway Road through the New Year's holiday. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Country Christmas...from Page 1



Folks have been having fun at the Mountain Country Christmas this year – even before the gates officially opened last week!
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

helps families – and strangers – bond with one another.

“We’ve had some people come by that don’t even know how to roast marshmallows,” she said. “We met a grandfather and his grandkids, and they had never cooked a marshmallow on the fire. So we showed them how to (do it). It’s just pretty rewarding to be down here.”

The Mountain Country Christmas is a great place to reminisce on the good times of yore while making new memories to cherish for a lifetime, with the decorative displays and thematic photo booths giving guests countless opportunities to capture and immortalize those moments.

Michel Teston, a Blairsville resident who visited the fairgrounds with his 5-year-old daughter Teagan, was one of many guests who loved his experience so much that he plans to make it a yearly family tradition.

“I’ve been up here seven years, and this is my first time coming, and I’m thrilled with it; I love it,” he said. “The Grinch player at the front (was Teagan’s favorite part). She

loved it, and she loved the animals.”

Like Teagan, many other young visitors couldn’t get enough of the Cowtown USA and the Grinch, such as 8-year-old Kaydence Crisson from Dahlonega.

“It’s really good. Seeing the Grinch was the best part, and I took a picture with him,” Crisson said. “I also rode the pony, and that was one of my favorite parts, too.”

And this year, young visitors like Crisson and Teston will also have an opportunity to engage in several friendly holiday competitions, including an ornament painting contest and a girls’ Christmas Pageant.

Aside from the many child-oriented activities, there are also plenty of local arts, crafts and snack booths for the guests to enjoy, as this festive outdoor market gives small local business owners a chance to promote their companies.

One tasty addition to the market this year is Campground Cookies, a bakery owned by 15-year-old Hailey Rowdon. The young entrepreneur hopes that the Mountain

Country Christmas in Lights will help get her business’ name out there.

“I’ve been doing pretty good here so far,” Rowdon said. “I live behind a campground, so I wanted to sell something there. And my mom had this recipe, so I just started practicing. I (started out) selling one cookie at a time, and now I sell them by the dozens.”

“I’ve been doing so well at the campgrounds that I thought (the lights show) would be a really big hit for the business. I just want to spread the word.”

Other local business owners, like Lauren Logan, are just as excited about the opportunity. Logan owns a business out of Young Harris called Mama’s Concierge, and she has loved showing off her young business at the fairgrounds.

“We did the Fall Festival here, so we knew this would be a good event and we were happy to sign up,” Logan said. “It’s been going well. I mean, there’s a line of people to get into the event, so it’s definitely a good turnout.”

“It gives a lot of local people something to do, and it gives them an opportunity to shop local small businesses.”

With all of these glowing opportunities for business owners and families alike, the Mountain Country Christmas in Lights truly encapsulates the Christmas spirit in Towns County this winter season.

Admission is \$8 at the gate, cash and credit cards accepted, with children 12 and under getting in free. For more information, visit www.georgiamountainfairgrounds.com.

Drug Arrests...from Page 1

methamphetamine.

Jason Earl Barrow, felony possession of methamphetamine and felony sale of methamphetamine.

Brett Austin Teasley, felony possession of methamphetamine and felony sale of

methamphetamine.

Jeremy Weaver, felony possession of methamphetamine and felony sale of methamphetamine.

“If you are selling drugs in Towns County, we are coming after you,” Sheriff Ken

Henderson stressed. “This six-week investigation and long hours have resulted in getting these dealers out of our community.”

All individuals are presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.