

# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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## School board approves bid for ESPLOST projects

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Thanks to the ESPLOST and the Education Board of Education, both the Union County middle and high schools will be receiving some additions.

In their December regular meeting, the board voted unanimously to approve a bid of roughly \$7.5 million for completion of three ESPLOST projects.

The projects will include

a new floor of classrooms plus heating and air replacement at the high school, as well as additional classrooms at the middle school.

Bowen & Watson made the winning bid, and representatives present in the meeting told the board that they had decided to bid on the projects all together to save the school system money by avoiding having to pay multiple worksite superintendents for the separate projects.

The work on the high school will tentatively begin when school lets out in May.

Union County Schools Superintendent Dr. Fred Rayfield said that the system would be receiving \$1.1 million in state funding in the fall of 2017 to go toward reimbursement of the HVAC installation at the high school, and that they should still have about \$1.7 million of ESPLOST money left over for other projects if collection rates remain roughly the same through next year.

Because of the large price of the bid – more than \$7 million – Board Chair Gary Davenport with Board Member Cindy Odom expressed that the board had previously promised taxpayers that they would not bond into debt to complete ESPLOST-funded projects for the school system.

This “pay-as-you-go” promise was made by the entire board several years ago, said Davenport in the pre-meeting work session, and Dr. Rayfield assured board members that they would



The December 2016 meeting of the Union County Board of Education was Gary Davenport's last meeting. A new board chair will be selected in the January meeting.

have enough money to cover the cost of the project with ESPLOST reserves left over in the end.

Also, Davenport expressed his desire to see air conditioning installed in the elementary school gym, which is a request he said he's been hearing from taxpayers for several years now.

Davenport, who was recognized in that December meeting for his 20 years of service as a member of the Union County Board of Education, officially came off the board at the end of December.

The current ESPLOST collection runs out in September of 2018, and

the board briefly discussed gearing up sometime soon to look at the possibility of proposing another ESPLOST to succeed the current one.

Associate Superintendent Dr. Jeremy Williams gave a presentation in the December work session on the schools' results from the

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Union County Schools Superintendent Dr. Fred Rayfield presents Gary Davenport with a plaque honoring his 20 years of service on the Union County Board of Education.

## 'Change' initiative aims to bring youth together

By Lily Avery  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

“Change,” a Union County activist group, hosted a New Year's Eve Masquerade Ball at the Union County Community Center to celebrate the past year and raise awareness for the organization throughout the community.

Founded by Blairsville local Rebecca Brendle, the organization is a program geared toward young people, typically middle school and high school students, with a focus on creating a safe environment for adolescents to learn, grow and contribute to the community.

According to Brendle, the idea for the program came to her in 2015 when reflecting

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Rebecca Brendle's "Change" organization hosted a New Year's celebration at the Union County Community Center

## Union County seniors hold their own possum drop



This stuffed possum helped the folks of the Union County Senior Center ring in the new year. See Possum, Page 6A

## Brasstown Valley rings in new year 'Gatsby' style

By Lily Avery  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

YOUNG HARRIS – Area residents and those from far and wide ushered in the New Year at Brasstown Valley Resort & Spa's Annual New Year's Eve Gala, themed this year as “The Great Gatsby,” based on the 2013 movie adaptation of the book by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

The resort has been hosting a New Year's gala since it opened in 1995, and last year's event featured a “Salute to the Troops” theme, while the previous year showcased the roughness of pirate life.

This year, however, pizzazz was the name of the game, and many who attended

the event joined in on the fun with flapper dresses, '20s style hats and plenty of sparkle.

According to Resort General Manager Charles Burton, the celebration has been a staple at the venue since its inception, and has become one of the biggest and most popular events offered at the resort.

“We always look for different themes,” said Burton. “We try to change it every year, but we always try to do something that's a whole lot of fun and glitzy. The '20s is a beautiful time, and we just wanted to make sure that whatever we came up with as a team would be fantastic.”

“We have seating for 220 guests and I want to say

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Stephanie Marchal and her daughter Jordan celebrated New Year's at Brasstown Valley Resort, which is known for its famous New Year's Eve galas.

## Wildfires contained, drought remains



Firefighters with Union County, Lumpkin County and the U.S. Forest Service worked on a couple of wildfires that started just before Christmas, one of which burned hundreds of acres before being contained.

By Lily Avery  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Just before Christmas, Richard Russell Scenic Highway (Georgia 348) saw one last wildfire for the 2016 calendar year, caused by a car crash on Dec. 23.

Union County Fire Department and the U.S. Forest Service quickly responded to the accident, managing to contain the flames before too much damage was caused, though an estimated 200 acres

have been affected by the fire. As of press time, the fire has yet to be completely extinguished, but officials have it contained and it is being closely monitored by the USFS for precautionary measures.

There were no homes or structures that were affected by the flames during the initial outburst of the fires, but the acreage burned did cause closures to the Appalachian Trail from Neel's Gap to Tesnatee Gap.

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## Sullivan always thankful for donations to food pantry

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Residents have been very generous to the Union County Food Pantry – it remained stocked throughout the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.

That's not always the case, however, as the need fluctuates throughout the year. The wintertime is when that need is greatest, and Ann Sullivan encourages residents to get involved with the local food pantry.

“There is a kid somewhere that, some nights, goes to sleep hungry,” said Sullivan. “A kid that doesn't have what we have, doesn't

have the peanut butter or the jelly, and that's normal for that kid.”

And from now until closer to spring, the nights will only get colder for that hungry kid.

Sullivan is the community resource coordinator for Ninth District Opportunity, Inc., though she also runs the food pantry out of the Haralson Memorial Civic Center near Downtown Blairsville.

The Union County Food Pantry relies 100 percent on donations, with not a single taxpayer dollar going toward the purchase of food for hungry residents who utilize the pantry.

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Ann Sullivan is the community resource coordinator for Ninth District Opportunity, and she's also in charge of the Union County Food Pantry inside the Haralson Memorial Civic Center.

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Christmas Tree Recycling Union County

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Board of Assessors Meeting Schedule

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MACA Meal Night Thursday Nights 4:30 - 6:00 PM All are Welcome

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PANTHERS BASKETBALL

Tues. January 3rd @ East Hall 6 & 7:30 PM

Fri. January 6th @ Lumpkin County 7 & 8:30 PM