

# Library board meets to discuss successes, yearly upgrades



MRLS Training and Outreach Coordinator Dyana Costello Banks and Union County Library Branch Manager Susie Brendle. Photo/Lily Avery

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The Union County Public Library held its quarterly board meeting on Thursday, Jan. 12, in the library's community room to discuss recent successes, collection and software updates, and events scheduled for the coming months.

Branch Manager Susie Brendle has been working toward expanding the library's collection, a continuous effort based on newly published books as well as patron requests.

As part of the collection expansion, Brendle made the executive decision to remove all VHS tapes from the library's circulation. According to Brendle, the checkout frequency of the tapes has slowly decreased over the last five years.

"The only areas of substantial decreases continue to be videos, books on tape and music CDs," said Brendle. "That's largely in part because we're discarding a lot of those due to lack of use. We just now, officially last week, discarded the last holdouts of our juvenile videos. They were still being checked out. We have a cart out front of the library where we're selling them for a quarter apiece."

"Those are the last videos we have in this building. Their circulation dropped so drastically in the last year, that they were taking up space in the children's room that was needed for something else."

Since the last meeting in October, Brendle noted that the use of the library, as well as the number of participants in library-sponsored activities, has increased by 2 percent. According

to Brendle, many patrons have been utilizing the library's free Wi-Fi and attending tutoring offered by library employee Dyana Costello Banks on Tuesdays.

"Our attendance during programming and classes has increased," said Brendle. "Dyana has been doing a lot of tutoring. We haven't been doing classes, per se, but every Tuesday when she is here, there are a lot of people needing assistance, so she stays busy when she's here."

Costello Banks is the training and outreach coordinator for the Mountain Regional Library System, where she is available to aid patrons on most library-related topics and library programs.

Mountain Regional Library System Director Vince Stone shared information on a system-wide update to the PINES website used by most libraries in the region, as well as many across the state.

As of now, the PINES website is only available in English, something that has been of detriment to the PINES system's

ability to provide optimum customer service.

However, with the new update, those who wish to view the site in Spanish need only do so with the click of a button.

"There's a pull down that asks what language you would like to sign in," said Stone. "You're able to chose between English and Spanish with just one button. Although we don't have a huge Hispanic population here, this is a big deal for the state of Georgia."

Along with the excitement of the new update, Director Stone delivered news of a possible MRL Board of Trustees member to fill a vacant spot that has been sitting empty for almost a year.

Young Harris College Professor and Young Harris City Councilman Jared Champion has been nominated for the position, though his nomination has yet to become official.

"We possibly have a new board member that was assigned from the City of Young Harris," said Stone. "This spot has been open for almost a year. He's a literature professor at Young Harris College. We're excited to get him on board. As a Young Harris funding entity, he would automatically be thrown on the regional board as well."

If Champion does join the board, he will be the only Young Harris representative on the board. A decision will be made during the regional board's quarterly meeting in February.

Over the weekend, all MRLS branch managers, along with Director Stone, traveled to Atlanta to take part in the American Library Association mid-winter meeting. This is the first time both Director Stone and the branch managers were given the opportunity to participate in this national event.

"The American Library

Association has these massive shows twice a year," said Stone. "They travel all over the country and are rarely this close. We're going to be able to walk the exhibit halls and go to different

seminars. I'm sure it will be a very educational thing for us to see it and go to ALA."

"This will be a good way for us to learn what we can."

According to Director

Stone, this opportunity will be beneficial for not only the leaders in the library system, but will also be beneficial for the patrons who experience all that the libraries have to offer on a regular basis.

## Sheriff...from Page 1A

that a portion of the local money from traffic and other fines be used for this purpose.

According to figures from the district attorney's office in Union County Superior Court, in 2015, \$1.4 million was assessed against violators in fines and forfeitures.

That money, collected from the court, goes straight into the commissioner's office and into the county treasury, and this is in addition to fines collected from probate court, which is also a substantial amount, according to Sheriff Mason.

"In addition to these monies, the sheriff's office collects \$50 on each civil process service paper we deliver, again turned over to the commissioner's office," said Sheriff Mason. "The common county taxpayer doesn't realize the revenue the county sheriff's office and city police departments generate."

And call volume has increased substantially since the sheriff first took office in 2013, due in part to population growth and what the sheriff says is a clear increase in public trust of the sheriff's office.

In 2013, the number of calls for service by patrol was 8,673. In 2016, that number had grown to 14,159 calls, a significant increase in workload per deputy, a statistic showing that the sheriff's office is increasingly doing more with less.

Other than mandating that a portion of fines assessed locally goes to the sheriff's office for salaries, the sheriff sees really only one alternative that will aid his office in keeping employee numbers up and rewarding hardworking deputies with just compensation.

The sheriff is asking that his constituents and the community at large help him lobby Georgia lawmakers to give local law enforcement a fighting chance to compete with state agencies in the long

term by establishing the penny sales tax, "thus enabling us to keep qualified personnel to do our job effectively," said Sheriff Mason.

Tax monies collected this way would allow for higher starting pay for deputies and officers, which would in turn enable local agencies to remain competitive compared to state agencies.

Filling the salary gap between state peace officers and local law enforcement became even more of a priority when Gov. Nathan Deal announced last year that all state peace officers would be getting a 20 percent pay increase effective this month in an effort to stop job losses at the state level, this after a 6 percent raise for those same state law enforcement personnel last July.

The governor's announcement has certainly helped the troopers with an influx in applications, but it also effectively widened the gap between the starting pay of, for example, a local deputy Union County sheriff's deputy (\$29,120), and a trooper with the Georgia State Patrol (\$46,422).

For talented young deputies who are trying to support their families, the temptation is becoming almost too great not to apply for and transition to a state job after spending a few years with local law enforcement.

The new starting pay for a trooper is about \$22 an hour now that the governor's raises have gone into effect, and that rate is more than any single deputy or supervisor in the Union County Sheriff's Office makes, including seasoned deputies and the sheriff's right-hand man, Chief Deputy John George, who has 34 years of experience and qualifications unmatched in this region.

Of course, Sheriff Mason is grateful for the continued support of the community and the county, and he said that Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris

has provided yearly raises for county employees since the sheriff took office in 2013.

And though Sheriff Mason's office may be competitive with surrounding sheriffs' offices, he still can't afford to pay his deputies enough to compete with the pay offered to state peace officers.

For nearly 30 years, Mason worked with the Georgia State Patrol, so he knows that they, too, deserve to have their wages increased.

But he also just entered his second term as sheriff, and he knows that when someone calls 911 with an emergency, it's not the state patrol who answers the call - it's the deputy or police officer, who gets paid significantly less to be a first responder to any number of potentially dangerous or deadly situations.

When it boils down to it, Sheriff Mason is asking that the state play fair with local law enforcement. The minimum salaries of all Georgia sheriffs and other elected officials are mandated by the state, but not the salaries of deputies or police officers, which has added to the effect of creating pay disparities between agencies.

Even the salaries of local teachers are regulated at the state level, which was done originally to solve a retention problem just like the one facing sheriffs' offices all over the state.

Sheriff Mason is thankful for his deputies, and would like the community to know that his employees work very hard to keep criminals off the streets and Union County families safe around the clock.

That is why he is seeking the support of those who have twice now put him in office, asking that they reach out to state legislators in support of the penny sales tax for sheriffs' deputies and city police.

"I humbly appreciate the support that we get from the citizens of Union County," said Sheriff Mason. "Without them, our job would be undoable."



The Union County Public Library Board met for their quarterly meeting on Thursday, Jan. 12, to discuss the year ahead. Photo/Lily Avery