

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

www.nganews.com

Legal Organ of Union County

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909

Wednesday, August 19, 2020

Residents, staff tested after COVID outbreak in nursing home

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Union General Health System is dealing with a COVID-19 outbreak at the Union County Nursing Home after 20 residents, or about 15 percent of the population, tested positive on a single hall.

The outbreak has resulted in the nursing home's first resident death from COVID. A second resident is being hospitalized currently, with the 18 other known positive residents remaining well enough to stay in the nursing home under observation.

All residents and employees have since been tested, and results are pending.

Most of the positive residents are not experiencing any symptoms, and all are being isolated together on a specially prepared hall inside the nursing home per Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, Union

General Chief Nursing Office Julia Barnett said.

The outbreak is occurring at a time when community spread has become more common among area residents, with the hospital itself – the largest employer in Union County – having seen a systemwide increase in positive cases among employees and patient admissions since July.

Additionally, recent data from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and Johns Hopkins University have shown corresponding upticks in nursing home and community spread cases nationwide, also since July, though deaths have remained relatively flat in long-term care facilities.

The local outbreak began about two weeks ago when a new resident at the nursing home suddenly developed symptoms before quickly requiring hospitalization, Barnett said, noting that this same individual had tested negative twice before being

admitted as a resident.

A second resident started exhibiting COVID symptoms soon after, prompting the nursing home to test everyone on that hall for the virus on Friday, Aug. 7. When 20 tests came back positive Aug. 12, the hospital made the call to test all residents and staff in the building, Barnett said.

Test results illuminating the extent of the outbreak were unavailable at press time, though Barnett did say five employees had tested positive in the last two weeks, with more potentially pending, and she emphasized the impossibility of knowing exactly how the virus entered the building.

"When we talk to epidemiologists who have dealt with these (outbreaks) all over the state ... they tell us that, despite your best efforts, and even if you're doing everything perfect, sometimes (the virus) still gets in – and I believe that," Barnett said.

Viral outbreaks are not



The Department of Public Health announced Friday that 23 long-term care facilities statewide experienced outbreaks from Aug. 6-12. This would include Union County Nursing Home.

Photo/Union General Health

March. "I'm confident that we will contain and protect the best of our ability," Barnett said.

See COVID Outbreak, Page 2A

Paris to hold public hearings on county property tax increase

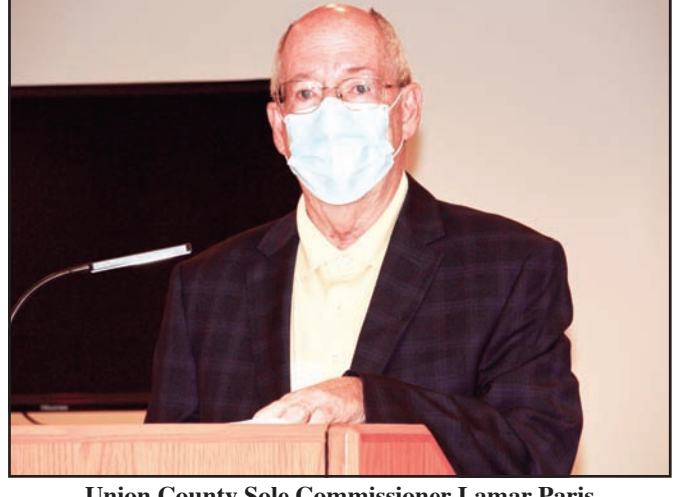
By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris is planning to raise the county's portion of property tax bills by 19.98 percent this year.

The millage rate will tentatively be going from a 2019 rate of 6.144 to a 2020 rate of 7.361 for a year over year increase of 1.217 mills. Compared to the rollback rate, the increase will be 1.226 mills.

Paris will be hosting three public hearings for community input on the tax increase: two on Aug. 20 at 10 a.m. and 5 p.m., and a third on Aug. 27 at 6 p.m.

Fortunately, county-leveled taxes only make up a little more than a third of property tax bills, with the other



Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris

roughly two-thirds coming from school taxes. The Union County School System has announced it plans to keep the same tax rate from 2019.

This means the actual

impact on property tax bills due to the county's millage rate increase will be about 7 percent, which should absorb some of the public shock of that

See Public Hearing, Page 2A

Schools opened Monday, August 17; district rolls out weekly virus update

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Union County Schools welcomed students back Monday, though the halls were about 25 percent emptier than usual, since many families chose to keep children home using the district's completely online learning option due to COVID-19.

It's been more than five months since students graced the halls of any building on campus, as school systems shut down statewide in the spring at the onset of the pandemic, so staff and students were particularly excited to get back to it Aug. 17.

"Everybody has been waiting for this moment since we got out in March," Elementary School Principal Jerry Bavero



Jennifer Hooper of Union County Primary School welcomes young bus-riders back to school on Monday, Aug. 17.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

See Back to School, Page 6A

Department of Public Health shines light on COVID-19 trends

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer



As COVID-19 numbers continue to rise in Union County, with a nearly 40 percent increase in cases in the last two weeks alone, the Georgia Department of Public Health seems to be seeing light at the end of the tunnel.

According to a press statement released Friday, the department said that, statewide, COVID-19 appears to be in decline, both in terms of overall case numbers and hospitalizations.

"During 8/3-8/9,

Georgia's weekly statewide case numbers decreased by 7 percent," Georgia DPH said. "The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that Georgia has experienced a 22 percent decrease in case numbers over the past two weeks relative to the two weeks prior to that, and that we have seen a downward trajectory of cases for two weeks now."

"The highest percentage of case numbers still come from the high population counties in metro Atlanta – Fulton, Gwinnett, DeKalb, Cobb have the highest case numbers – but these counties are actually experiencing decreases now."

Additionally, as of Aug. 13, the state was reporting over 1.9 million COVID-19 tests in all, with eight of the last nine days at time reporting

witnessing more than 25,000 tests per day, including private tests and more than 750,000 tests from 180 DPH specimen collection sites in Georgia.

"Positivity rates are decreasing from 11.86 percent on July 27 to 10.98 percent on Aug. 3 to 9.5 percent on Aug. 9," DPH said. "Daily hospitalizations have decreased 6.62 percent in the past seven days (as of Aug. 14)."

Still, as cases increase locally above the 1-percent of population threshold, people continue to have questions about the state of the virus and how best to perceive it.

Enter Public Information Officer Dave Palmer with District 2 Public Health, who says residents should

See COVID Trends, Page 3A

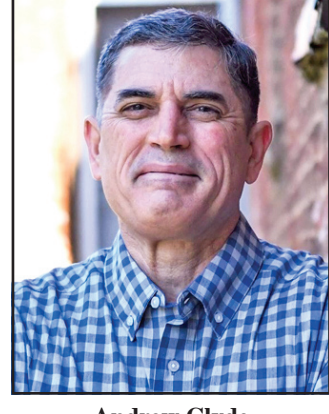
Clyde, Pandey headed for General Election showdown Nov. 3

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Following the Aug. 11 General Primary Runoffs, Republican Andrew Clyde and Democrat Devin Pandey are headed for a General Election showdown to represent Georgia's 9th Congressional District in the nation's capital.

On the Republican side of the 9th Congressional race, districtwide, Clyde beat his opponent Matt Gurtler by more than 11,000 votes. Here in Union County, Gurtler – who has served as District 8 State Representative for the last four years – won with 2,766 votes to Clyde's 1,852.

The Democratic ticket for the 9th Congressional seat featured Devin Pandey and Brooke Siskin, and Pandey won



Andrew Clyde



Devin Pandey

the district handily with 68.46 percent of the vote. Pandey took the contest in Union County also, securing 476 votes to Siskin's 216.

Interestingly, voters in the 9th Congressional race were overwhelmingly represented

by Republicans, who cast 88,905 ballots compared to the Democrats' 11,704.

Stemming from their victories last week, Clyde and Pandey will face off Nov. 3 for the office of U.S.

See Runoff, Page 3A

Community members share thoughts on coronavirus, staying safe

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

With the COVID-19 pandemic having now encompassed most of the year, many community members seem much more settled into their thoughts about the virus and how to navigate the new precautionary normal.

While eating at Blairsville's Skillet Café Saturday, Union County resident Rachel Ronald expressed her opinion that people are overreacting to the point of being unhelpful.

"People are panicking

too much," Ronald said. "I think part of it is because of the way this is being treated. There are people who think this is killing a lot of people, and it is in a way. It is certainly killing a lot more people than we are used to hearing about from a virus, and that is scary."

"When we don't understand something, we grow more afraid of it, and that is what is happening here. This is new, and we can't solve it yet. I think the best thing for us to do is calm down first and evaluate the situation."

"Panic has never led to any good ideas. Scientists

are working on it, and in a few years or so, this will be nothing."

Liz Bugle of Fannin County feels that a lack of more effective mitigations for the virus is connected to the upcoming election.

"With this being an election year, this virus will not settle down," said Bugle, shopping at the Mountain Shelter Thrift Store Aug. 15. "The focus of the government is not completely on the cure or solution for this virus, so we will not see one for a long

See Staying Safe, Page 3A



The Humane Society Mountain Shelter Thrift Store keeps the customers coming, with many wearing masks during the pandemic.

Election Results by Precinct

See page 3A

County Tax Digest and 5 Year History

See page 5B

School Digest and Millage Info

See page 6D

Vol. 111 No. 34
4 Sections 24 Pages
Weather
Thurs: T-Storm Hi 77 Lo 62
Fri: T-Storm Hi 77 Lo 61
Sat: T-Storm Hi 78 Lo 61

Inside
Arrests 2D
Church 3D
Classifieds 3C
Opinion 4A
Legals 4D
Obits 4C
Sports 2B

See page 3A

