

North Georgia News

4 Sections 28 Pages

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Property tax rate to drop 15.5% in 2022

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Union County Government and the Union County Board of Education are expected to lower their respective property tax rates by more than 15% in called meetings next week.

Once they do, the new combined county/school millage rate used to calculate taxes owed by property owners will be 13.313, which is 2.446 mills less than the 2021 rate of 15.759, making the 2022 rate 15.5% lower than last year.

School Board members will hold a meeting on Wednesday, Sept. 7, at 7:30 a.m. inside the Board of Education Office to adopt a millage rate of 8.2 mills, down from the 2021 rate of 9.735. The new rate is actually lower than the rollback

rate of 8.213 mills so counts as a tax decrease.

Then, in a called meeting on Thursday, Sept. 8, at 5 p.m. in the Union County Courthouse, Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris will adopt a rollback millage rate of 5.113 mills, down from the 2021 rate of 6.024 mills.

Both the School Board and the county levy property taxes annually in order to meet their proposed budgets to provide their respective services in the community year after year.

On top of actual growth from new construction and additions, property values for many residents have risen dramatically over the last two years due to housing market volatility amid the COVID-19 pandemic, with people fleeing more populated areas for rural settings like Union.

Conversely, the property tax rate has been falling, as the state requires inflationary increases to be offset by local levying authorities with "rollbacks" to their respective millage rates – unless they wish to raise taxes, which neither the county nor School Board feel is necessary at present.

Per the Georgia Department of Revenue: "When the total digest of taxable property is prepared, Georgia Law requires that a rollback millage rate must be computed that will produce the same total revenue on the current year's new digest that last year's millage rate would have produced had no reassessments occurred."

As mentioned above, there has been tremendous actual growth in addition to the inflationary market environment, which means



Commissioner Lamar Paris will hold a meeting at the Union County Courthouse next week to adopt the rollback millage rate signifying no property tax increase in 2022.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

that the county and School Board will still be seeing revenue gains in property taxes compared to last year, even with substantially reduced millage rates.

The new rates are

coming after completion of the most recent property tax digest of countywide values, which, following the annual mandatory assessment process, saw an increase of about \$386 million in taxable real property

values over last year.

To highlight just how much total growth Union County has experienced of late, county can look to pre-pandemic digest growth numbers, which

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Union County Fire hosts multicounty training event

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Union County Fire Department hosted firefighters from multiple nearby counties for training on Saturday, Aug. 20, at the Union County Live Fire Training Center behind Fire Station No. 1 Headquarters and EMA Center.

There are only a few live-fire training facilities in rural areas of Georgia, usually built out of stacked seagoing cargo containers welded together so that they're at least two stories, more often three stories high, with interior stairways installed between floors.

Such facilities can be used for other training evolutions in addition to conducting live burns, like repelling and ladder exercises.

About three years ago, the Union County Fire Department built its own three-story live-burn facility so firefighters could train locally rather than having to travel to a remote facility several hours away.

"In the State of Georgia, if someone wants to get certified (as a firefighter), or registered as a volunteer firefighter, that person is required to participate in a live-burn exercise, which means they actually have to



A Towns County firefighter combatting a training fire earlier this month at the Union County Live Fire Training Center.

Photo/Submitted

fight a live fire in a controlled environment," said Union County Fire Chief and EMA Director David Dyer.

"So, Towns County,

Fannin County, and Cougher Basin, Tennessee, each had a few (recruits) that were just

See Fire Training, Page 8A

Heritage Fest to highlight local history this weekend

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

After a two-year hiatus due to COVID-19 concerns, the Union County Historical Society is bringing back the beloved local tradition known as the Mountain Heritage Festival this Labor Day Weekend, Sept. 3-4.

The festival will be open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on both Saturday and Sunday, and while it's being held at its usual place at the 1906 Grapelle Butt Mock House, this year will include access to the renovated John Payne Cabin.

As guests stroll backward through time, they can enjoy a multitude of performing artists, both in groups and singing solo. If possible, arrive early enough on Saturday at 9:30 a.m. to hear the unique sounds of a bagpipe band celebrating the largely Scottish heritage of Appalachian settlers.

Later in the day, expect performances from the Tunnel



The Mountain Heritage Festival honoring the history of the area is returning to the Mock House Saturday and Sunday. Pictured here: a butter churning demonstration from 2015 outside the John Payne Cabin.

Photo/North Georgia News

Rats Band, Shooting Creek Band, and the Mars Hill Porch Pickers, all of which offer traditional bluegrass music to listen to while perusing the festival.

Also playing on Saturday will be John Cochran, Cathy

Maddox and Mike Lane. Sunday will see Nelson Thomas and Jim Wood take the stage, but the Tunnel Rats Band, Mars Hill Porch Pickers, John Cochran, Mike Lane and the Shooting Creek Band will also return.

See Heritage Festival, Page 3A

Matheson attempted murder trial set for Tuesday, Sept. 6

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

HIWASSEE – The jury trial of Charles Jason Matheson is scheduled to begin next week on Tuesday, Sept. 6, in the Towns County Courthouse.

Matheson stands accused of attempting to murder his estranged wife, Crystal Matheson, by allegedly shooting her eight times with a 9 mm handgun inside her Hiwassee workplace in January 2021.

One of multiple witnesses to the shooting, Crystal is expected to provide trial testimony.

The trial will focus on allegations that Jason Matheson entered Chatuge Regional Hospital Rehabilitation & Wellness Center on Jan. 26, 2021, and fired upon Crystal "with malice aforethought"

in an attempt to cause her death, according to charging documents.

At the time of the shooting, Crystal had a protective order in place against her husband from when he was arrested for strangling her in July 2020 in Clay County, North Carolina. He was arrested again in October 2020 for violating that protective order.

In anticipation of the trial, members of the Towns County Grand Jury were called back Aug. 18 for the purpose of issuing a superseding indictment, allowing the Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney's Office to fix a "clerical error" in the original indictment from March 2021.

"We cannot change so much as a comma on an indictment without a Grand Jury's approval," District Attorney Jeff Langley said.



Jason Matheson

"The new indictment does not change the charges in any way – it is still the same three charges: Aggravated Assault, Aggravated Stalking and Attempted Murder.

"We just fixed the typo, See Matheson, Page 3A

Gospel Music Festival lifts spirits in Union County



Storied Southern Gospel Music group The Kingsmen performed two shows during the first ever Union County Gospel Music Festival over the weekend.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Lord was present last weekend at the Union County Schools Fine Art Center. 2022 was the first year of many planned for the Union County Gospel Music Festival, and

things opened with a bang, featuring gospel giant Jeff and Sheri Easter, Gold City, and the Kingsmen.

Full of spirit and song, the festival provided family friendly faith-based entertainment the evening of Friday, Aug. 26, with performances resuming Saturday afternoon and into

the evening.

According to Kingsmen baritone and Hiwassee native Alan Kendall, the Union County Gospel Music Festival was first conceptualized about a year ago among other musicians looking to return to worship after COVID-19 put a ban on

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BPD Rubber Duck Derby Sept. 3 See page 6B

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Annual Georgia Mountain Fair says 'farewell' until next year

By Jeremy Foster
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

HIWASSEE – Having taken place amid the beautiful backdrop of the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, the 71st Annual Georgia Mountain Fair is officially in the books after another successful nine-day run that ended on Saturday, Aug. 27.

Thousands of attendees from near and far flocked to the fair in 2022, traveling with family and friends to enjoy all the carnival rides, food and craft vendors, live musical performances, historical demonstrations and special acts, photo exhibit, antique reed organ playing and more.

Whether catering to longtime patrons or first-timers, there was truly something for everyone, for young and old alike, including the Majestik Spectacular Globe of Death and Rollo the 10-foot stilt artist, the Pioneer Village, a front-row seat to the Hamilton Gardens and beyond.

John Collins of Greenville, South Carolina, made his first ever trip to the fair as a vendor, setting up a booth for his company, Modern Forestry, which sells wax



Kids had a blast with face painting, rides and more at the Amusements of America carnival during the 71st Annual Georgia Mountain Fair.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

melts and soy-based candles and can be found at www.theforestrystudio.com.

In business since 2015, Collins was inspired to start Modern Forestry after his wife began getting frequent migraines. They tried various potential remedies, but nothing seemed to work, and she would have to lie down until the headaches subsided.

"Things did not get better, so we went to our doctor to figure out the problem, as we thought it could be sugar-related," Collins said. "As it turns out, it was from the wax from our candles that were paraffin-based, which is a fancy name for petroleum."

"Petroleum is one of the producers of parabens and phthalates, which those two things will mess with your endocrine and nervous system, which control all the most essential functions of human health but are the least strong."

"It's been a great journey so far because it became my passion to find greater fulfillment to help many others with their health and wellbeing."

Added Collins, "I have driven through Hiwassee a lot for other events, and I would always think, 'Wow, this is a very beautiful spot.' I wanted to find reasons and longer events to come up here more, and when I found out about the fair, I signed up as a vendor to be able to do both."

Based on his experiences at the fair, Collins said he definitely plans to return "as much as I can for future shows."

"Everyone and the locals that I have interacted with are just amazing, very welcoming and loving people," he said. "This area is booming, and it has a gorgeous landscape and people with warm hearts."

"One of the greatest things about here is the support from everybody to the other makers and crafters and the whole community. This has given me such light, and this is a very special thing that is happening."

Fairgrounds Event Coordinator Shannon Baldwin-Nguyen was elated with the turnout and participation this year, and she reflected with enthusiasm on the week-plus



Wyatt Espalin doing a little porch pickin' in Pioneer Village over at the 2022 Georgia Mountain Fair.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson



Jerry Taylor playing antique reed organs in the Exhibit Hall of the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds is always a popular attraction during the fair and other times of the year.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

of offerings.

"This year's fair went extremely well, and we had some cooler weather because we did not do it in July, so I know everyone enjoyed the cool mountain air better," she said. "We had a really great turnout with people that I met from many areas, including Atlanta, Chattanooga, Asheville and several others."

"My favorite part of any event is always the vendors, and I love seeing everyone come out and interact with each other, shopping local, supporting each other and watching everybody just make more connections

and friendships.

"We greatly appreciate everyone that supports our events, and we want to go ahead and inform people on the next big things coming next month with the Dailey & Vincent's American Made Music Fest on Sept. 15-17, and the 49th Annual Shelby Mustang Car Show on Sept. 23 and 24.

"We can't wait to see you all there."

For more information on upcoming events, visit www.georgiamountainfairgrounds.com or stop by the office in person at 1311 Music Hall Road in Hiwassee.

Property Tax...from Page 1A

seem modest compared with the last two years.

Gross property values for the entire county in 2017 were about \$1.38 billion; in 2018, \$1.41 billion; in 2019, \$1.44 billion; and in 2020, \$1.46 billion. So, from 2017 to 2020, gross county values increased about 5.5% over those three years.

In 2021, however, due to countywide revaluations largely reflecting the extreme pandemic trends of an incredibly hot real estate market and an economy flush with federal stimulus cash for home improvements, the gross digest shot up to \$1.89 billion for a roughly 23% increase in one year.

Exacerbating the issue last year was the implementation of the first countywide property revaluation since 2006 – incidentally having taken place during the pandemic value surge – which resulted in increases for many properties that were undervalued prior to revaluation.

But this year, with values updated across the board, the 2022 gross digest of \$2.27 billion is about 18% higher than the already elevated 2021 digest, and these figures become even more stark when considering that gross values

are up approximately 36% from recent pre-pandemic numbers.

Signs have emerged recently that the real estate and housing development markets are cooling in reaction to rising federal interest rates and a worsening national economic outlook, making it increasingly likely that property values will be dropping over the next couple of years.

As millage rates are downstream of county and

school budgetary concerns, it is possible that, if values do drop, the back-to-back millage rate decreases of 2021 and 2022

will need to be reversed to some extent to ensure the continued provision of services in the community.

The City of Blairsville also levies property taxes, but only on properties inside city limits. The city is expected to adopt its own lowered millage rate on Tuesday, Sept. 13, at 6 p.m. in City Hall.

Wealthplan Financial Group Staff passes Insurance Exam

WealthPlan Financial Group, Office of Supervisory Jurisdiction, is pleased to announce that Kristen Flesher, Client Relationship Manager in our Blairsville, GA office, passed the Life and Health Insurance exam on August 9, 2022. She has worked in the financial services industry for over 17 years and has assisted Melissa Ekeberg, AIF®, Premier Partner, for seven years.

As part of the WealthPlan office, Kristen is the first point of contact and is responsible for maintaining the highest level of service that each of our customers has come to

expect. Kristen, her husband, and son have called Blairsville home since 2005. She is an animal lover and currently has two dogs, two cats and a bearded dragon. She and her family love being outdoors spending time exploring nature, hiking, swimming kayaking and running races.

"Kristen is a valued member of our team, and I couldn't be more excited for her. It has been so rewarding to see her professional growth through the years and I can't wait to see what she accomplishes next," stated Melissa Ekeberg, AIF®, Premier Partner. NAUG31Z15CA

Gospel Music Festival...from Page 1A



Gospel-duo Jeff and Sheri Easter performing at the Fine Arts Center Friday night.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

public performances. that it was the best choice for the festival, considering the “small-town America” atmosphere of the North Georgia Mountains.

His feelings were confirmed over both days when audience members clapped, cheered, stood, and raised their hands toward Heaven to testify to the lyrics that moved them.

Friday’s lineup included the Kingsmen, Jeff and Sheri Easter, Brian Free & Assurance, Jordan’s Bridge, and Josh and Ashley Franks.

Speaking of whom, Josh Franks himself served as the emcee for that first night and some of the second, doing his part to introduce vocalists, briefly list their accomplishments, and sometimes insert humor into dialogue between performances.

Humor indeed played a role in the goings-on, which Kingsmen tenor Chris Jenkins found perfectly appropriate when he asked the audience, “I believe God’s people ought to have more fun than anybody in

the world, don’t you?”

That sentiment was demonstrated well in the friendly rivalry between Franks and his “co-host” Pat Barker of The Guardians, who argued over which host made the better presenter in light of Franks’ excitement and Barker’s puns.

“Go home, Josh,” boomed a playful voice over the speakers as one of the sound operators mimicked the Holiest Judge, at which point Franks immediately feigned fainting to the roaring amusement of the audience.

Saturday was even busier, with Chris Adams and Union County fine arts students performing a pre-show before the festival commenced its second day with afternoon shows from gospel royalty Karen Peck and New River, Phil Cross and Poet Voices, Real Truth Revival, and another performance from Josh and Ashley Franks.

By Saturday night, the house was packed. Upper and lower seats were nearly all taken up by folks applauding the likes

of Gold City, the Mylon Hayes Family, The Guardians, and for the second time that weekend, the legendary Kingsmen.

Notably, the oldest member of the Kingsmen, 83-year-old bass singer Ray Dean Reese, was inducted into the Southern Gospel Music Hall of Fame in 2008, and Brian Free, formerly of the Gold City Quartet, is the most awarded tenor in gospel music history.

The most breathtaking part of the concerts occurred in the second half of each night. After each band had their turn in the spotlight, everyone came back to share the stage together. The resulting collaborations were a huge hit, but the Kingsmen also used this time to unveil a surprise.

As it turns out, bass Ray Dean Reese had been training a protégé, and 20-year-old Drew Laney received wild applause and whoops from the crowd after blowing everyone away with a rib-tickling bassline that left a heartwarming proud grin on Reese’s face.

Both nights saw

performances lasting close to three hours, with each group performing about four or five songs. The intermission between individual and group shows allowed audience members to visit tables lined with wares from each band.

The most popular choices were CDs and shirts, followed by USB thumb drives containing entire albums. As the musicians sold their own merch, many folks also lingered to get autographs from their favorite singers, or just to request selfies.

More valuable than that, however, were the many, many thanks delivered personally to each artist during those breaks and at the end of both nights. If the physical reactions of the audience weren’t enough to show the impact the incredible performances had on worshipers, many of the performers were blessed to hear from their fans on a more personal level.

“I’m thankful for everybody who came out and supported the festival. I really appreciate it,” Kendall said, adding that he hoped “that we presented (the festival) in a way that pleases God, and I just hope that they draw from it what I have drawn from (music) all my life.”

Heritage Festival...from Page 1A

And there’s a lot to see, considering there’ll be a Confederate camp reenactment courtesy of Sons of Confederate Veterans, along with other living history displays that include activities like gold panning with Bud Akins, cooking over a hearth with Cindy Rafter, quilting with Rita Killian and Evelyn Payne, butter churning with Mary Carol Akins, and possibly blacksmithing.

In a similar vein, Union County Middle School FFA Teacher Katie Rittenhouse and her students will be setting up a petting zoo around the Payne Cabin, including animals that would have been – and still are – used as livestock by mountain farmers.

Even vehicle lovers will have a chance to check out old-school mountain transportation, as a restored Ford Model T, first introduced in 1908, will be parked out front on display.

Nearly 70 vendors are booked to set up booths at the event, and from souvenirs to practical commodities straight out of the history book, guests will have quite a bit of shopping space on the massive front lawn of the Mock House.

More modern products will include dog collars and bandanas, custom T-shirts, and balloons. Still, there’s an impressive lineup of “old-timey” items like goat milk soap, woodcrafts and metalwork, and kids can find stuffed animals and other toys from Addison’s Cotton Candy and Snacks, a local business of Blairsville.

Along with mementos, household items and furniture, visitors will also enjoy a wide variety of food and drink. Kettle



Union County Historical Society President Mickey Cummings, volunteer Judy Carpenter and others held several planning meetings in the weeks leading up to the Heritage Festival’s debut over Labor Day Weekend.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

corn and turkey legs may have been enjoyed back in the day, but most gustatory fare will consist of modern-day goodies like hot dogs, hamburgers and shaved ice.

Of course, this is only considering the freshly prepared food, as some vendors will be selling packaged teas, raw honey and even gourmet hot sauce.

Popular choices often seen at other events will include My Pop-Pops Nuts, Chill and Fill, Nana and Papa’s Ice Cream, Jim’s Smokin’ Que, Smokeout BBQ of the Blairsville Restaurant, and the Snowie Shaved Ice Truck.

Along with food, vendors and reenactments, younger guests can have their faces painted, and certain brave individuals can try their hand at axe throwing courtesy of Ax Daddy. If interested, folks may also watch live demonstrations of crafts such as Brad King’s woodworking laser.

To further support the community, information booths for certain local organizations will be set up as well, including the Georgia Appalachian

Trail Club, LeafFilter Gutter Protection, the American Legion Post 121, and Air Med’s emergency transportation services, represented by Shelley Eyerly.

The Butt Mock House, otherwise known as the Mountain Life Museum, is on a 1.8-acre site at 25 School Street in Downtown Blairsville. Admission is free, and it should be noted that volunteer traffic directors will be present to help with parking.

In addition to offering a one-of-a-kind view back in time, the other purpose of the Heritage Festival is to act as a fundraiser for the Union County Historical Society, which is run primarily by volunteers who care deeply about preserving that which came before.

During festival hours, the Old Courthouse Museum on the Square will be open for people to venture through for an even deeper look into the history of the area, and people should keep in mind there are plenty of keepsakes to purchase to support the society, including the new 2023 calendar featuring local waterfalls.

Matheson...from Page 1A

and since we had to bring (grand jurors) in to do that, we also gave some better defining wording to (Count Three). This was an added meeting of the Grand Jury; they were not regularly scheduled to meet again until October.”

Langley said he believes the trial will last between five and eight days. Prosecuting the case will be Assistant District Attorneys Buster Landreau and Kelly Holloway, with Public Defender John Cloy leading the defense, and visiting Superior

Court Senior Judge Albert Collier presiding.

Matheson pleaded not guilty to the charges in April of last year, and though he faces decades behind bars should he be found guilty in a court of law, he is presumed innocent until such time.

Mountain Coin Club Hosting Free Appraisal Fair for the Community



Ever wonder what those coins are that your family lovingly left you? Well, now is the time to find out!

As a token of our appreciation for the community support Union, Towns and Lumpkin counties have given the Club through the years, the Mountain Coin Club is hosting a free appraisal fair on Tuesday, Sep-

tember 13 from 4-7 PM on the Blairsville Campus of North Georgia Technical College. Reservations are required for this special event and may be obtained by telephoning our President, Charlie Johnston, at 706-781-3402. No walk-ins will be allowed and security will be on site. On hand to offer appraisals will be several illustrious officers of the Georgia Numismatic Association Board: Tom Youngblood, President; John Morris, Treasurer and Secretary; Steve Nolte, Governor; and Richard Jozefiak, Mountain Coin Club Delegate. After your appraisal, you will be offered a free 2022 membership

to the Mountain Coin Club—a fun and educational night out enjoying your favorite hobby with friends.

The Mountain Coin Club meets the second Tuesday of each month at 6 PM in the Conference Center of the College. The Club has been in existence for over ten years and is dedicated to increasing knowledge of numismatics at all levels. To that end, an educational program is conducted each month on coins or paper money. Please contact our President, Charlie Johnston, at 706-781-3402 for more information on Club happenings and to reserve your spot at the appraisal fair.

Fire Training ..from Page 1A



Nearly two dozen students and multiple instructors/support staff attended the Aug. 20 live-burn training exercises at the facility behind Union County Fire Station No. 1. Photo/Submitted



Dyer said the students were separated into small groups to run through a familiarization exercise, an “at-grade” exercise, then an “above-grade” exercise, with instructors supervising and manning the fires and a smoke barrel.

“They got to know fire dynamics and how a fire works, and they experienced smoke rollover in a low visibility environment, just like a real structure fire,” he said. “We’re very lucky to have this facility, because we can do our own training here anytime we want.”

“And then, we can have other counties come in, like we did on Saturday. We get to know everybody. We get to train together. And there is no fee or charge to other fire departments for using the facility because it is a cooperative effort.”

“Hands on is the best way to learn. You can talk about it in class all day long, but until you actually get there and put the gear on and feel the heat and have to crawl through the fire and see how a fire is going to react when you put water on it, that’s when you really learn how it works. This is as close as we can get to a real fire without going into one.”

According to UCFD Training Officer Capt. Brent Long, of the 44 course participants, 22 were students who went through the live-burn training, with the rest being instructors and support personnel helping with rehab, changing out and replenishing air cylinders, and things of that nature.

“(The exercise) went great,” Long said. “Union, Towns, Fannin, and Copper Basin all worked well together. Any time that we can work together, it definitely benefits the citizens of each county and as a whole in Northeast Georgia.”

Indeed, with all the

training conducted by the Fire Department in partnership with other area agencies, residents can sleep easier at night knowing that, if an emergency situation does arise, the first responders of Union County will be prepared to handle it.

finishing up some classes. They contacted us and requested the use of our live-burn facility, and we facilitated that.”

In service of that request, instructors from Union County and each of the participating counties, plus all of their trainees, came together at the facility at 7 a.m. Aug. 20 for a safety briefing and inspection before getting started about 7:30 a.m.

Why so early? Because it’s hot in August, and for instructors and recruits in full gear working inside a metal shipping container with a raging fire and heavy smoke, the summer heat becomes a challenge, to put it mildly, and it’s cooler in the mornings than the afternoons, which helps.

On top of the heat, the live-burn training is extremely physically demanding, so it is not uncommon for people to experience heat exhaustion and other maladies.

For that reason, live-burn exercises are very closely supervised, and a medical transport vehicle is kept on-scene until training is finished. Most if not all instructors are at least certified EMTs as well.