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as that Monday was a holiday – Martin Luther King Jr. Day – and Dr. Rayfield determined that road conditions were too dangerous for student travel the rest of the week.

“Union County Schools

have been closed due to winter weather and road conditions,” said Dr. Rayfield. “Wednesday and Thursday, we were one of 83 counties under a state of emergency issued by Gov. Deal driven by winter weather and extremely low temperatures.

“Our staff thoroughly evaluated roads and bus routes

on Thursday evening, and we still were faced with many smaller side roads and bus routes that were not safe or passable.

“Fannin and Union counties along with several others opted to cancel on Friday and give the roads time to thaw and clear. Student and

the roads during the coldest stretches of time during and after Winter Storm Inga.

“We had several accidents, but no major injuries were reported,” said Fire Chief Dyer. “The accidents occurred over several days, mostly in the morning.

“The Georgia Depa-



**Blairsville Police Chief Johnny Carroll posted up on the Downtown Blairsville Square on Wednesday, Jan. 17, 2018. Photo/Shawn Jarrard**

employee safety is always our top priority.”

The Union County Courthouse closed on Jan. 17 and held a delayed reopening on Jan. 18.

Several community events were canceled in the area, and for the most part, drivers seemed to stay off

rtment of Transportation and Union County Road Department cleared or salted roads within the county. There were multiple reports of ice on secondary and private roads. The temperature did not get above freezing to melt the snow and ice, making these roads hazardous, especially for the school buses.”

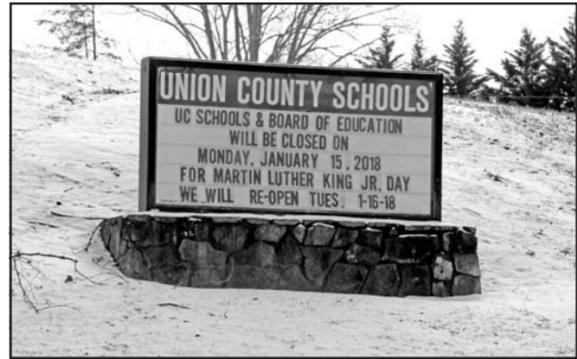
Continued Dyer: “We had one structure/chimney fire during this event. We did have one search and rescue at Gooch Gap in Suches with no injuries.”

Chief Dyer would like to remind residents to visit Ready.gov to learn more about winter weather and other kinds of disaster preparedness.

Stay tuned to local first responder social media outlets for up-to-date information on incoming weather events.



**The Haralson Memorial Civic Center after Winter Storm Inga blew through. Photo/Shawn Jarrard**



**Union County Schools closed for one holiday and three-and-a-half bad weather days the week of Jan. 15, 2018. Photo/Shawn Jarrard**



**Winter weather caused the Union County Courthouse to close on Wednesday, Jan. 17, and it opened again on Thursday, Jan. 18, at 10 a.m. Photo/Shawn Jarrard**

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Still, we are doing more work with the same personnel and resources.”

So, when Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal announced 20 percent pay raises for troopers, GBI agents and other state-level peace officers to start 2017 – on top of a 6 percent raise in 2016 – many Georgia sheriffs and police chiefs felt their deputies and officers had been left out in the cold, including Sheriff Mason.

Taken together, the decreasing presence of state law enforcement (troopers not out patrolling for DUI, reckless drivers and dangerous speeders) and the growing disparity in state and local pay rates spell trouble for the future of local law enforcement in Georgia.

Eventually, local officers are likely to wonder why they should continue to shoulder more and more burden, while at the same time facing fewer incentives to stay local or work in law enforcement when the grass seems greener elsewhere.

“All during my career, I have seen dedicated young men and women want to come into law enforcement,” said Sheriff Mason. “They are hired, they get training that is paid for by the counties, the cities, the state or whoever, they get experience.

“And then they realize, I can’t make it on these wages. I can’t feed my family, I can’t pay my bills. They either wind up working one or two extra jobs in order to make ends meet, or they have to go into another line of work.

“It’s disheartening to see people that are willing to risk their lives for somebody they don’t even know have to leave this profession. It keeps us constantly looking for new employees.”

Of course, the sheriff is glad to see state-level officers being compensated more fairly, but those agencies are meant to offer secondary support to local agencies, and it’s the local guys who respond to the overwhelming majority of criminal activity around the state.

Perhaps the best example in recent memory of local Union County law enforcement doing more with less came last year, when UCSO deputies arrested 57 people in a two-week period in April 2017, bringing the number of inmates at the Union County Jail to 107.

Even though it’s unusual for the sheriff’s office to have so many inmates at one time, it’s not unusual for the sheriff to have to house overflow inmates outside of the county in neighboring county jails, given that the 54-bed jail was built too small originally.

In 2017, the sheriff’s office spent a record \$194,075 housing inmates outside of the county, at \$35 a day per inmate, breaking the previous record of \$30,485 spent housing out inmates in 2016, and \$6,220 in 2015.

That doesn’t mean Sheriff Mason went over budget by \$194,075. On the contrary, he made cuts and adjustments that allowed him to finish the year under budget, as the sheriff remains adamant that his office always stays within budget.

And the \$194,075 only covered housing costs, and did not take into account deputy pay for inmate transport to and from facilities, wear and tear on vehicles during transport, fuel costs, etc., not to mention the community loss of deputies being pulled off patrol for transport duties.

“The state doesn’t pay us anything for housing these inmates,” said Mason. “They don’t pay us anything for transporting them. Once they’re sentenced in superior court, they become a state inmate, but they come back to the county jail and the state doesn’t compensate.

“We have to do the paperwork for them, send it to the state, and when they get it approved, they send back to us a time when they will call and let us know where we can bring these inmates to state facilities.”

Continued Mason: “The

law in Georgia says that the state would be responsible for that. Code Section 42-5-50 covers that, that the state will bear the burden of transporting these inmates, along with the cost of it. But that’s not happening. That’s another way that the state has tacked their responsibility, mandated by law, onto the counties.”

There is currently an effort at the state level to appropriate \$7 million for local law enforcement pay increases.

However, Sheriff Mason believes that to be woefully inadequate, considering there are 159 counties, hundreds of local law enforcement agencies, and thousands of peace officers in the state of Georgia.

“This has gotten to the point where the state of Georgia must step up to provide a higher level of support to counties and cities, and work on supplementing the cost of law enforcement statewide,” said Sheriff Mason.

Continued the sheriff: “Election season is almost upon us for governor, lieutenant governor and state lawmakers. Ask the people running for these offices about these issues and what, if anything, they intend to do about it.”