

North Georgia News

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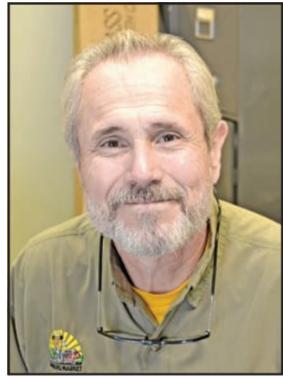
January 18, 2017

Cummings looks forward to continued transparency in 2017

By Lily Avery
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Board of Directors has been striving to create a more open and communicative atmosphere for the employees and EMC membership since the election of new directors over the last couple years. And with the new year now at hand, EMC Board President Mickey Cummings is focusing all efforts toward one thing – transparency. Cummings wishes for the EMC to ultimately become an entity of full disclosure to the public, where members feel they are not only part of the EMC, but also involved with the inner workings. “The biggest thing that we’re working on right

now is that we’re trying to become more transparent,” said Cummings. “We want to continue to work towards doing things that allow as much transparency to the public as we can get. “It’s important to be transparent with our members so they know what’s going on in the company and why we’re doing what we’re doing.” A primary way that Cummings hopes to achieve this goal is through working with recently hired BRMEMC General Manager Jeremy Nelms to improve the financial state of not only the company, but also the rates for the membership. According to Cummings, if the EMC succeeds financially, then the membership will also reap the benefits of those endeavors through better



Mickey Cummings is president of the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Board of Directors.

quality service. “We want to make the company as efficient as possible in terms of dollars and cents,” said Cummings. “We want to give the members the best

and most bang for their buck. We’re working with Jeremy, and Jeremy is working with us to try and achieve that goal.” Cummings, along with the rest of the board, is focusing on developing a strategic plan that will provide direction for the next five to 10 years. This idea of a strategic plan will help the EMC and the board assess the needs of both the company and the membership, assisting those in leadership to make the most informed decisions for the best interest of the membership. “We’re meeting with some different people to help us to develop a long-range plan for the board and for the EMC that we can use to guide the organization into the future. That’s an ongoing process,” said Cummings. “We’re supposed to meet with

some of those individuals in the not too distant future. We have those dates set and we look forward to getting the ball rolling.” In the same vein of the strategic plan, the board wants to also provide better opportunities for employees, specifically in the realm of retirement benefits. Employees of the EMC have been covered by the same plan for quite some time now, a targeted benefit plan. However, this insurance policy recently became outdated, prompting the board to look elsewhere for better coverage. “We’re trying to do things for our employees as far as improving benefits by initiating a new retirement program,” said Cummings. “The one we have been using, the targeted benefit plan, is out

of date. Not many people use those types of plans anymore. “It was becoming difficult to administer so we had to find something else. What we’re going with is a defined contribution plan. “This one, members put in so much and the organization matches part of it. It’s a very good plan and it’s affordable for the EMC as well as the members. It’s a good plan all around.” A target benefit plan is a type of retirement plan that involves fixed contributions based on projected retirement benefits. However, these benefits are based on the performance of the investments and are not guaranteed. The newly instated retirement plan, defined

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Dr. George Gowder Jr. dies at 86

By Charles Duncan
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Another community icon has left us. Dr. George D. Gowder Jr., 86, died peacefully at his home on Wednesday, Jan. 11, after an extended illness. Affectionately called “Dr. George” by all who knew him, he and Blairsville-Union County were synonymous. From the moment he arrived in 1959 after U.S. Sen. Richard Russell (D-GA) secured an early release for him from the U.S. Air Force to allow him to practice medicine in the underserved area of Union County, Dr. George fell in love with his new home. The hospital had recently created a hospital authority, and they were in the process of building Union General Hospital. Dr. George practiced medicine in Blairsville until 1962, a time when he returned to his hometown in Gainesville to



Dr. George Gowder

practice for the next decade. In 1972, a next hospital in Blairsville, known then as Blairsville General, was nearing completion, and Union General was going to be left with no physicians on staff. A group of concerned Union County citizens approached Dr. George about returning to Blairsville to allow Union General to stay open.

After much deliberation, he decided to leave his busy Gainesville practice and move with his wife and seven children to Blairsville, where he would be the only practicing physician at Union General. Dr. George worked by himself for two years, essentially seven days a week, 24 hours a day, and in 1975, Dr. James Robertson joined him in practice. In 1976, Blairsville General closed and the Union General Hospital Authority was able to obtain the Blairsville General building, reopening it in 1980 as Union General Hospital. Several years later, he once again found himself in a solo practice, and was proud to be joined by his son, G. David Gowder III, M.D., in 1983. Dr. George retired in 1986 due to health reasons. He was a true “country” See Gowder, Page 3A

Life-changing drug court opens new offices



Union County Manager Larry Garrett, North Enotah Drug Court Coordinator Barbara Honaker and Union County Commissioner Lamac Paris, all out front of the recently installed drug court offices.

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer
For residents who haven’t heard, the North Enotah Drug Court is on a

course to change the criminal justice landscape by helping those suffering from addiction to reclaim their lives. Enotah Judicial See Court, Page 2A

Bud Akins continues to champion Union County history

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

When William “Bud” Akins started working for the Highway Department in the mid-1950s, he had an office in the Union County Courthouse, now a historic building. At the time, Emory Dockery served as county ordinary, a sort of hybrid probate/commissioner position. While working one day, Akins noticed that Dockery was having new lampposts installed around the square, replacing four old lampposts that harkened back to the first use of electricity in Union County in the 1930s. Back then, a turbine from the Martin Mill ran a current See Akins, Page 6A



Bud Akins stands next to this old Civil War-era wagon behind the Grapelle Butt Mock House, holding his “Preservationist of the Year” award. This wagon, which has deteriorated due to exposure to the elements, is one of the reasons Akins is spearheading the new showroom/storage building next to the Grapelle Butt Mock House.

Georgia Sheriffs seek penny sales tax to upgrade officers’ salaries

By Charles Duncan
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Union County Sheriff Mack Mason asks that locals contact their state lawmakers to provide support for a penny sales tax initiative that would help pay for higher minimum salaries for Georgia’s deputies and city police officers. District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch can be reached at (404) 656-9221, and House District 8 Rep. Matt Gurtler can be reached at (706) 490-2285. Putnam County Sheriff Howard Sills, Second Vice President, Georgia Sheriffs’ Association, is proposing that state lawmakers create a special penny sales tax for each of Georgia’s 159 counties to pay for salary compensation

for deputies and city officers statewide. “The average starting pay for deputies in Georgia is between \$11.50 an hour and \$14 per hour,” Sheriff Mason said. “That’s a shameful amount to pay a deputy or city officer to go out and put their life on the line because they pinned on a badge.” In 2016 there were 140 law enforcement officers who lost lives in the line of duty in the United States. Of these deaths, 106 men and women were local city/county police and deputy sheriffs, 19 were state officers, six were federal officers, and the remaining nine were territory, college or transit officers. The loss of 140 officers’ lives in a year is unfortunately



Union County Sheriff Mack Mason not that unusual. What is different is the fact that 65 of those officers died as a result of gunfire, which represents a 69 See Sales Tax, Page 3A

Schools close for two days due to weather

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County Schools Superintendent Dr. Fred Rayfield decided last week that the icy road conditions caused by Winter Storm Helena were bad enough to cancel school on Monday, Jan. 9, and Tuesday, Jan. 10. “Monday, of course, was just plain and simple that the temperatures did not get high enough on Sunday at all to give us any kind of relief on ice and hazardous road conditions,” said Dr. Rayfield. And while temperatures did warm up a little bit on Monday, they dipped again

Monday night, causing whatever precipitation had melted that day to refreeze. This refreeze gave rise to bad side road conditions Tuesday, which Dr. Rayfield and Transportation Director Stanley Garrett knew would be hazardous travel conditions for buses and student drivers. So, for two days at the beginning of last week, Union County Schools remained dormant, as all faculty, staff and students stayed home to avoid potentially dangerous roads. Fortunately, the two missed days don’t have to be made up by students. “Every school has three



Dr. Fred Rayfield, Union County Schools Superintendent days, so to speak, that they can use and not have to make up for students,” said Dr. Rayfield.

“The decisions on employees is a local board decision, but for students, the state says you’ve got three days that you don’t have to make up if you’re out for adverse conditions or some other catastrophic event that might happen. “We’ve also got three days built in to the second semester, either as teacher work days or something like that, that we can actually flip those days into bad weather makeup days.” Of course, it’s only mid-January, and while temperatures over this last weekend reached nearly into

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Grand Jury Indictments for January term 2017

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The following were indicted during the January Term 2017 of the Union County Grand Jury: Clinton Luther Henderson, trafficking methamphetamine or amphetamine; possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; two counts possession of a controlled substance; driving under the influence (of a controlled substance); too fast for conditions; failure to maintain lane; one count recidivist. Jeff Decalve Aston,

possession of methamphetamine. James Robert Gooch, five counts sale of methamphetamine; possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; possession of hydrocodone; theft by conversion (felony); theft by taking (felony); theft by conversion (misdemeanor); theft by taking (misdemeanor); theft by taking; three counts theft by conversion; two counts theft by deception. Jamie Marie Nash, possession of methamphetamine. See Indictments, Page 2A

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Skywarn Storm Spotter Training Class
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Relay For Life Kickoff
See page 2B

North Georgia Swine Spectacular
Union County Agriscience Center
See page 4B

PANTHERS BASKETBALL
Fri. Jan. 20 vs. GAC 7 & 8:30 PM
Sat. Jan 21 vs. Hayesville 4 & 5:30 PM