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it is, that choral performances are forced to be held in the high school cafeteria where the acoustics are less than desirable.

"I'd like to ask the folks here tonight who are in favor of the top priority being a fine arts center to stand up," Rittenhouse said.

Almost the entire room, more than 100 people, stood in support of the Fine Arts Center being the top construction priority of the ESPLOST.

One person who didn't stand was Mickey Cummings, the county extension agent and manager of the Union County Farmers Market.

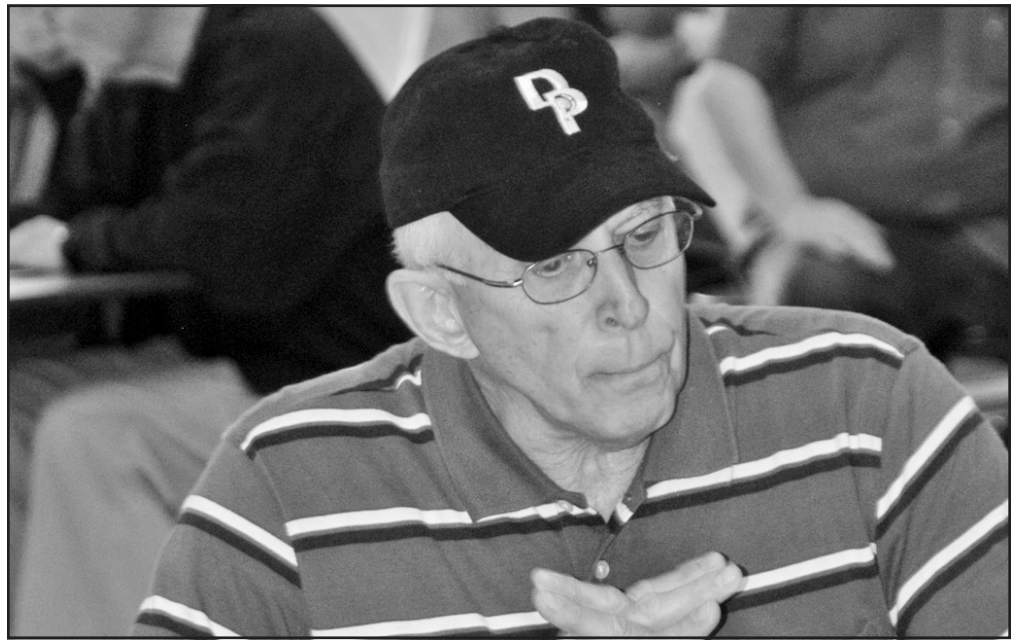
One might think Cummings would be in favor of constructing the Agri-Science Center first. That wasn't the case.

"All of these projects are very important," Cummings said. "If we're going to prepare our students for the future, we're going to need an Agri-Science Center.

However, this ESPLOST is filled with diversity," he said. "There's something here for every student.

"However, it's my opinion that the safety of our students should be the top priority of this ESPLOST," Cummings said. "The world we live in dictates that."

Union County Agriculture Teacher John Clark Pettit told the board that he didn't envy their position. He told the board that all the projects



George Mitchell isn't sure which direction the school system should take. Photo/Charles Duncan

were worthy of being the top priority.

Pettit told them if he were in their position he'd have to take his time and study each project before making a decision.

"I come to you tonight, not as a teacher, not as an employee of the school system, but as a stock holder, ticket holder to the future," Pettit said. "I know this board will do its due diligence and make the right decisions."

Carli Kidd, a senior at UCHS, told the board that she had learned a lot through her participation in band and chorus. Music is her gift.

She told the board that

the land where the Fine Arts Center hopefully will be built, is just a spot on the map if they don't do something to change that.

"If we can't realize this dream, then what's left?" she asked. "This would be great for every facet of the arts."

George Mitchell urged the school board to avoid going for image over substance.

"I don't know what should come first," Mitchell said. "I do know that we must prepare for the future and we must do it in a manner that benefits the education of the students and makes a difference in their lives."

School Board Chair-

man Gary Davenport told the crowd that he and the board appreciated their attendance at the forum.

Davenport told the crowd that the response to the survey regarding the projects list on the school system's Web site has been highly encouraging, with more than 1,400 responses.

"Again, we want to thank you all for coming out and caring about the Union County School System," he said. "If you'd like to take part in the survey and haven't already, go to the school system Web site and make your voice heard."

## Outage...continued from Page 1A

made to the existing fuse panels to eliminate a repeat of this issue. Their engineers are still working to see what additional backup they can provide in the future and we appreciate very much their cooperation."

Paris said it's hard to point a finger at human error because, that simply wasn't the case.

"I really don't think we need to blame anyone," Paris said. "This is something that has never happened before. Some are quick to blame Windstream, but we also lost cell phone coverage.

"We also need to remember, prior to cell phones and for many years, Windstream (Standard Telephone) was the only company willing to provide telephone service and Internet in these mountains," he said. "I remember well the Snow Storm (Blizzard of '93) when the telephone service never went out in most parts of the county even though we lost power for several days."

Paris and other county officials met with both Windstream and Blue Ridge Mountain EMC to examine the extent of the communications outage and how to prevent a similar crisis in the future.

"Union County is very lucky to have two excellent utility providers with the Blue Ridge EMC and Windstream," he said. "All the local employees work hard to handle any emergencies that come along. It may be a couple of months before we finally have all procedures in place to address this in the future. But we must remember that contact with our citizens for emergency services must be the absolute priority in developing our future plans."

The communications outage is hard to forget. It occurred at approximately 6:15 p.m., on March 4th. From that point in time, all telephones, Internet, cable, and AT&T as

well as Verizon cell phones in two counties went dead for almost two hours.

"There wasn't a power outage or a radio outage, so Emergency Services were able to maintain contact with the emergency vehicles, but there was no way to contact anyone that did not have a 2-way radio," Paris said. "The E-911 Center could not receive or make any type of telephone calls. Union County was essentially cut off from the rest of the world."

Paris said Union's E-911 center had a backup communications plan in place.

"We have two plans," Paris said. "First, our system is designed to automatically roll over all calls to the Towns County E-911 Center should our center go down. However, the Towns County system also was down. Second, we have a special trailer set up with all communications equipment similar to an E-911 Center. It is designed for an E-911 total backup system in case any problems developed with the

actual center, such as a fire. However, in this case there was no where to hook up the trailer; all hookup points also were dead."

Fortunately, he said, there were no medical emergencies at the time of the communications outage.

"The Good Lord was looking out for us as there were no emergencies during this particular time period, which is pretty rare," he said.

As for the future, Paris said he has met with the county's E-911 Advisory Board Committee and others to discuss what happened and how it might be handled differently in the future.

"While we have been told that this is not likely to ever happen again, since it has happened one time, we must be better prepared in case it should happen again in the future," he said. "Once we have a final solution, we will notify the public. We will develop protocols for what and how to react if this situation ever repeats itself."

### Bell Ringing Union County Old Courthouse



In memory of  
**Jack C. Lance, Sr.**  
by Union County  
Historical Society

April 11  
In memory of  
**Derrick Whittle's Birthday**  
by Joe and Laurie Johnson

April 19  
In memory of  
**Virginia B. Meeks**  
by Ginger and Terry Meeks

April 28  
In memory of  
**Dolly C. Meeks**  
by Ginger and Terry Meeks

Bell ringing information  
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