

North Georgia News

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City Council previews SPLOST VI agreement

From Staff Reports
North Georgia News

In their July 8 regular monthly meeting, Blairsville City Council and Mayor Robert “Buddy” Moore discussed how much the city is estimated to receive if the upcoming SPLOST continuation succeeds at the ballot box next year.

A referendum call is currently in the works, so the discussion at City Hall last week was only an early step toward SPLOST VI appearing for voter consideration in the May 2026 General Primary Election.

Moore told the council he recently asked Sole Commissioner Harold Collins for a greater allocation than the 8.5% the city negotiated for SPLOST V collections, and

the two agreed to an additional 0.5% to make the city’s share of the next SPLOST 9% should it pass electoral muster.

The council agreed with the larger percentage, which will be finalized later this year when an intergovernmental agreement is signed by both the city and county. The agreement will contain categories for capital outlay projects on which collections would be spent.

Based on average collections from recent years, at the newly proposed 9% allocation, the city would receive an estimated \$3.87 million from SPLOST VI. That puts total projected SPLOST VI collections at \$43 million, with the county’s estimated portion coming in at \$39.13 million.

A SPLOST, or Special

Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, is a 1% countywide sales tax levied against eligible goods and services to finance voter-approved capital outlay projects, such as new facilities, facility upgrades and emergency vehicles.

Each SPLOST lasts six years, and the current SPLOST – SPLOST V – runs through March 2027. By the time SPLOST V ends, Union County will have had a continuous SPLOST in place since 1997, and it will continue through March 2033 should SPLOST VI pass.

Voting for the SPLOST will not mean a tax increase, but instead, a continuation of the 1% sales tax that has been in place for nearly 30 years.

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Blairsville City Councilwoman Kayla Hemphill and Councilman Tony Dyer in their July 8 regular city meeting.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Legend of Randall Collins lives on in fiddle donation

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Blairsville native Randall Collins’ legacy endures with the donation of one of his fiddles to the Union County Historical Society.

Several members of the Collins Family, including three of Randall’s children, two grandchildren and his brother F.C. Collins, met with Historical Society members on Wednesday, July 2, to present the instrument.

Prior to his illness and subsequent passing at the age of 84 on June 27, 2024, Collins had expressed interest in donating a fiddle to the Historical Society.

According to his family, Collins maintained a large collection, but the one offered to the Historical Society is

indeed special.

Custom-made for Collins and featuring his name on the inside along with an electric bridge, the fiddle was crafted by Greg Brooks of Mineral Bluff and had been played before at concerts at the Old Courthouse.

Now, it will feature in the room showcasing some of Union County’s musical talent, likely mounted below portraits of Sam Ensley – another local virtuoso and a good friend of Collins.

That said, Collins’ performance history is long and noteworthy. Having been raised around music, he carried on the tradition from his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and beyond; he once told the Atlanta Journal Constitution that learning the fiddle was

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(L-R) Historical Society Member Mickey Cummings with the late Randall Collins’ daughter, Jamie Shook, daughter Sherri Jones, granddaughter Finley Collins, grandson Easton Collins (holding the donated fiddle), brother F.C. Collins, daughter-in-law Shawna Collins and son Benny Collins, plus Historical Society President Mike Cook.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Laura Briggs continuing strong Senior Center tradition

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

On April 28, Laura Briggs officially assumed the title of Union County Senior Center Director. Since then, she’s been adjusting to the position and working to maintain the strong sense of community that has come to define the place over the years.

“With over 22 years in public service, I have a desire to serve others and to make a positive impact in the community,” Briggs said. “Over my career, I have loved being able to assist residents, build consensus with stakeholders and find ways to improve efficiency and effectiveness in operations.”

Briggs’ focus on public

service began in 2004 when she took a job at the Florida Division of Emergency Management. Though initially a volunteer, she went on to build up a career spanning 15 years, with experience handling “every major disaster in Florida during that time.”

Along with that, she managed Florida’s Homeland Security and disaster recovery grant programs and served as contract and vendor manager during the pandemic. She also joined Florida’s Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in 2019, where she handled federal and state grants.

“My focus has always been on results, accountability and service to the public,” Briggs revealed, bringing with

her a wealth of knowledge in leadership and financial organization. With that, she says plans for more fundraisers to assist the financially struggling Senior Center are underway.

Over 37% of Union County’s population is made up of those aged 60 and older, and presently, the Senior Center serves about 100 meals daily. Those who attend can check out a variety of classes and activities or just come for the sake of getting out and socializing.

“Many seniors here are far from family or rebuilding life after loss. The center offers friendship, purpose and a fresh start – often with seniors giving back as volunteers,” noted Briggs. “When seniors stay active and connected,

they stay healthier and more independent.”

Indeed, the Senior Center has made a difference in countless lives. Bobbi Faye, for example, is a member and is forever grateful for the new lease on life the center has provided.

“The friendships and camaraderie transcend the center and become part of your life outside the center as well,” Faye said. “The center was a lifeline for me, and it helped me start a new chapter of my life.”

Kathy Hill, former Senior Center director and current volunteer, also shares that her time spent at the center has been “meaningful, filled with wonderful friendships and community spirit.”

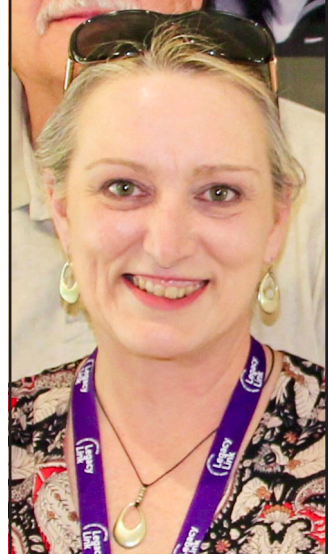
“The Senior Center is

much more than a place to gather – it’s a lifeline where seniors find connection, comfort and joy. For many who receive home-delivered meals, that visit may be their only friendly face each day,” Hill said.

With growth inevitably occurring in the county, Briggs knows there is a need for careful management and preparation for further expansion to keep the Senior Center operating at its best.

To accommodate that, Briggs has been pushing to organize more partnerships with residents, businesses and county leaders, and more help is always appreciated.

So, what can the community do to support the
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Laura Briggs
Senior Center Director

Isaiah 117 House grateful to receive community contribution



Isaiah 117 House recently met with generous community members to receive a donation benefiting the local nonprofit.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Since opening last fall, the Isaiah 117 House has been making a difference for Towns and Union County kids taken into foster care. When initially seized by the Division of Family & Children Services, children have a chance for one of the most traumatic moments of their lives to be softened by the kindness of dedicated local volunteers.

“When children are removed from their homes and they’re waiting for placement in foster care, the DFCS workers take them here rather than taking them to an office,” explained volunteer Sheila Loy, giving a tour of the facility.

“This is the only house like it in Georgia.”

The children receive a warm welcome with gentle smiles and can take a shower if needed or eat a warm meal. Some arrive with only the clothes on their backs; most are shocked to find the shelves downstairs stocked with a variety of toys and books, not to mention brand-new clothes they can choose to be outfitted with. In fact, each child receives a suitcase with about five days’ worth of clothes when they leave, along with a set of pajamas.

Thanks to the efforts of a local trivia group, Isaiah 117 has a little bit of help continuing what they do best – supporting some of the most

vulnerable members of the community. Donna Neal says her group came up with the idea to start raising money for a local charity back in January, and the near-unanimous choice was Isaiah 117.

The group met up each Thursday, and everyone pitched in \$2 to play trivia. Averaging between 65 to 70 players each week, that money added up over the course of five months.

“To me, it was very fun just to get together each week and meet people that I didn’t know and really form bonds and friendships ... and to know that we were also raising money, \$2 at a time, for a great cause,” Neal said. “(Participants) had the option of either taking a
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Randall Collins...from Page 1A

“part of the responsibility of becoming a man in the Collins Family.”

And he took that responsibility seriously, going

on to develop his own style and playing with the likes of Earl Taylor and Jim McCall and Bill and Wilma Millsaps. He released several singles and

four albums of his own making but was also known for his collaborations.

First, Collins was part of the short-lived Carolina

Buddies but boasted a longer career playing with Curtis Blackwell and the Dixie Bluegrass Boys. In fact, he became co-leader of that group in short time, and together, they played at festivals across the South.

Collins released his first solo album in 1972, titled “Stands Tall in GA Cotton,” featuring seven tracks written by himself. By 1973, he was leading his own group known as Dixie Grass and found a regular place among the Pinnacle Boys. Throughout the 1980s, he worked with other groups, all the while honing his passion for music.

On that note, Collins had a profound impact on his community, sharing his tunes back home and helping others to see the value in learning an instrument.

“A lot of people learned to play fiddle under him,” Benny Collins said of his father, estimating that at least 30 people were tutored by him in Blairsville alone.

In 1975, Collins organized his first fiddle contest

in Union County. Benny Collins and his sister, Sherri Jones, can recall helping out when the annual event rolled around, sharing that over time the contest became more of a bluegrass festival.

“He knew a lot about it, and I guess over the years, he just learned so much,” Jones remarked, maintaining that her father was the best fiddler she ever heard. “He had a good style ... If I was blindfolded, I could pick him out if I heard his fiddling.”

“That was his life; he had to do it. He told (his grandchildren) when they were little that if it’s in you and it (doesn’t) come out, it’ll drive you crazy,” Benny Collins recalled about a time his father imparted wisdom regarding drive and talent.

Benny estimates his father’s collection included some 40 instruments, and Historical Society President Mike Cook hails the donation to the local museum as an impressive addition.

Cook’s hope is that Collins’ fiddle can inspire a

new generation of musicians from Blairsville, though if they don’t pick up the fiddle with the same type of in-born gift that Collins had, he still believes it’s worthwhile to preserve the names of Union County’s legends through education.

“I think it’s just keeping the town alive. If we don’t care about it now, we might as well just shut it down and move on,” Cook said. “It’s good that people are still wanting to donate and give stuff that meant a lot to them that now could mean a lot to us and other people.”

Collins’ music can be found through Google and YouTube searches, and those with Spotify accounts can listen to his “Georgia Fiddler” album along with recordings of his playing with the Pinnacle Boys and a live recording of his 1973 performance at the Bean Blossom Festival.

And people should keep an ear out for the musical tradition that continues to this day with the Collins Family Band, which plays various local performances throughout the year.

Senior Center...from Page 1A

continued success of such a priceless local resource?

There’s always a need for more volunteers, whether that means helping at the center itself or taking a more mobile approach, such as driving to deliver meals along one of the over 30 routes that help get food to homebound seniors.

Financial gifts are certainly appreciated, and folks can also make donations directly through the Senior Center’s Amazon Wish List,

which can be found at <https://a.co/770jLOB>. Right now, the most requested items are cases of water, solo cups and sandwich bags.

“As the saying goes, ‘If you want to know where your heart is, look at where you put your time, talent and treasure,’” Briggs said. “We know Union County has a big heart, and together, we can make a big impact.”

Building on that, Hill added, “I want to encourage

everyone in our community to consider volunteering in some capacity. It truly makes a difference in the lives of so many seniors, bringing kindness and support when it’s needed most.”

Anyone interested in becoming a volunteer can call 706-439-6105 or visit the Senior Center directly at 95 Senior Center Way in Blairsville. Hours of operation are Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Isaiah 117 House...from Page 1A

portion of what was donated that night or donating it back to Isaiah 117 House, and the majority was donated back to Isaiah 117.”

On June 29, Neal and others from the group met up with Isaiah 117 volunteers at the house to present a check for \$1,822. There were a few misty eyes among the bunch, especially from the appreciative volunteers.

“That’s so cool. All I can say about that – that’s awesome,” said an emotional Frank Loy, husband of Sheila. The duo is currently in the process of becoming foster parents themselves, and they assured Neal and her friends that their fundraiser would “go a long way” in supporting

Isaiah 117 and the children that find respite within its walls.

Speaking of which, others can help by signing up as foster parents; Loy noted a distinct lack of foster parents in Towns and Union Counties and said that local children are often taken as far as Cumming to find the care they need. Isaiah 117 offers foster parent support and even “date nights” where volunteers watch foster kids for a while to offer some respite.

On that note, the organization is also in need of volunteers, and it should be emphasized that one doesn’t even have to be interested in working directly with children. Loy detailed the importance of having someone to cook meals for the kids and social

workers, and even the smallest jobs – like straightening out inventory – can go a long way.

Check out www.families4families.cc or head over to the Family & Children Services Department at 420 Blue Ridge Highway to start the process of becoming a foster parent.

And contact Isaiah 117 Location Leader Audrey Gonet at audrey.gonet@isaiah117house.com or 706-897-1548 to become a volunteer of the nonprofit organization.

Finally, keep an eye out around Blairsville for lemonade stands, where volunteers for Isaiah 117 will be offering information and free lemonade to anyone curious about what the organization stands for.

The Greatest Generation: True American Heroes

“The Greatest Generation” is a term created by Tom Brokaw to describe the generation who grew up in the United States during the Great Depression, and then went on to fight in World War II, as well as those whose productivity within the war’s home front made a decisive material contribution to the war effort.

Brokaw wrote, “it is, I believe, the greatest generation any society has ever produced.” He argued that these men and women fought not for fame and recognition, but because it was the “right thing to do.” Their remarkable actions, during times of war and peace, ultimately made the United States a better place in which to live. Born and raised in a tumultuous era marked by war and economic depression, Brokaw asserts, these men and women developed values of “personal responsibility, duty, honor and faith.” These characteristics helped them to defeat Hitler and the Japanese, build the American economy, and make advances in science and implement visionary programs.

Brokaw credits the Greatest Generation with much of the freedom and affluence that Americans enjoy today. “They have given the succeeding generations the opportunity to accumulate great economic wealth, political muscle, and the freedom from foreign oppression to make whatever choices they like”. Brokaw concludes, “It is a generation that, by and large, made no demands of homage from those who followed and prospered economically, politically, and culturally because of its sacrifices.

These are the true American Heroes and the ideals they represent should be an inspiration to all of us who now enjoy the freedoms that they fought and died for in faraway lands. Many were lost forever in battles in desolate forests or on isolated islands or lost forever in the depths of oceans. When a survivor of this Great Gen-

eration leaves this life, they take with them memories and experiences that are gone forever never to be told again. We need to spend time listening to the stories and tales so we can pass them on to our next generation. Many times I put off visiting one of these walking history books and unfortunately these books were closed before I could make time to go and listen.

On September 29, 2015 we lost a member of the Greatest Generation who was my mentor, my teacher, my coach, my supervisor, my disciplinarian, my advisor, and my Friend. He was Frank Montfort Riley Sr., my Father. He always had something to say to me and his funeral was no exception. He spoke to me while I was at the grave site and this is what I plainly heard: “Danks (me), don’t cry for me, be happy! I had the best 93 years that anyone could ask for, I got to grow up on a farm in a middle Georgia, play ball, fish, hunt, and learn all about life there. I got to go to the University of Georgia and found the love of my life for 69 years and moved her back to live in the small town where I grew up. I got to join the Army Air Corps and became a B-17 pilot along with my brother, Harley Jr who was a bombardier on a B-17 that was lost on a bombing raid over the sea near the Netherlands in 1941. We went to war to defend our way of life along with many other brave men and women who left their homes to put themselves in harm’s way to defend the country we loved.

After the war I came back home and taught returning veterans how to farm and about agriculture, and I had a long career with the Georgia Department of Agriculture. I raised 4 children who made me proud and they gave me 9 grandchildren who I enjoyed more than I did their parents, and the boys were my hay crew until they found out about girls and I lost them.

I am in a much better



place now with no pain or sickness and I can walk again, and I am still among you to guide and point out things that need doing - just listen. Tell Jaybo that I have a project for him and ask Brad-a-Lou where my chain is since he was the last peckerwood to have it!

As I told your mother, those last few months were a “deplorable situation” and now thankfully it’s over. I miss all of you, but I didn’t want you to see me like I was anymore. I told her to get my clothes because “I needed to get out of here” and I did. I have to go now because Harley Jr and I are going to take Peggy (bird dog) out to see if we can find those coveys that I know are over by the clay pit”. Then he said “goodbye Danks, talk to you soon”.

I said, “Papa, wait, wait there is so much more I want to ask you”, but he was not there anymore! Those of you, who still have the opportunity, don’t delay, take the time to talk to your Greatest Generation heroes and listen to their stories before it is too late. They have a lot to tell us and we have a lot to learn from them, because “once they’re gone, it’s gone forever”.

This generation of “I want it now and I deserve it” should read (if they can) books on the Greatest Generation and realize that without the terrible sacrifices they made, this generation would not be able to talk about our country like they do, because Hitler and Hirohito would not allow it! Every day stop and thank a veteran for the way of life we have because of them.

Frank M Riley, Jr. is Executive Director Chestatee/Chattahoochee RC&D Council and a proud son of the Greatest Generation.

SPLOST VI...from Page 1A

Continuing the SPLOST would keep the sales tax in Union County at 7%, or 7 cents on the dollar.

Union County’s 7% sales tax is composed of the following: a statewide tax of 4%; a permanent Local Option Sales Tax, or LOST, of 1%; a SPLOST of 1%; and an Education-SPLOST of 1% for the schools.

SPLOST is frequently billed as a way to help keep property taxes down by more fairly distributing the tax burden to everyone who purchases goods and services, including out-of-town visitors.

Examples of past SPLOST projects around the county include the Farmers Market, Meeks Park, Sports Center, and Voting Center, and the new E-911 Center that is currently under construction is being paid for with SPLOST collections.

Also in the July 8 meeting, the council ratified the city’s estimated 2025 Rollback Millage Rate at 1.064 mills. This was part of the new procedure outlined in House Bill 581 that went into effect this year to more accurately reflect property tax estimates on annual assessment notices.

Additionally, Moore said he spoke with the commissioner about the possibility of doing a joint traffic study to better understand what improvements can be made both inside and outside city limits, with an eye toward implementing traffic improvements in a coordinated fashion.

Among other business, the council voted to enter an agreement with the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission to explore a new grant opportunity to potentially expand city sewer access east of the city on Georgia 515, as has been discussed in recent months.

The agreement will only cost the city if the grant is awarded and subsequently used. The project will still be an expensive undertaking, but the new grant would offset more costs than a previous grant opportunity, so the council will have more to think about at a later date.

In the June 10 regular city meeting, Mayor Moore introduced the upcoming capital project list for discussion, which the council was favorable to.

Projects include looking into removing an extra beam in council chambers, re-paving Blue Ridge Street, adding lights around the Blairsville Police Department parking lot, zoning water lines and meters to cut down on water leaks, and rehauling the city’s sidewalks.

“Water problems, sidewalks and lights are the main ones,” Moore said of the project list.

Also June 10, City Attorney Marvin Harkins informed the council about a bond involving the Housing Authority of Macon-Bibb County, which in turn impacts local apartment complex Tan Yard Branch inside Blairsville city limits.

“The only reason this is involving us is because the Macon-Bibb Housing Authority is issuing bonds, and they’re going to loan money

from the bonds to the owner of Tan Yard Branch Apartments,” Harkins explained, adding that the owners also operate 12 other complexes across the state.

The \$30 million loan is expected to go toward rehabilitating the properties, which entails indoor and outdoor work including new fixtures and flooring, replacing countertops and cabinets, and installing new tubs and showers.

Harkins confirmed that tenants living in units to be renovated will have to be temporarily placed in other housing, and rent will not go up as a result of the renovations, with tenants not expected to pay for the upgrades.

He expressed his belief that the work would be done on both family and single units and confirmed there would be 24 units slated for the rehaul.

Essentially, the reason the issue was brought before the council was because the Macon-Bibb Housing Authority needed permission



Blairsville Mayor Buddy Moore talking over an agenda item with council members on July 8. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

from Blairsville to work on apartments in this jurisdiction, which was granted that evening and followed by a required public hearing on June 26.

Importantly, the City of Blairsville is not involved financially and has no fiscal liability regarding the local renovations.



Union County School District Open House/Meet the Teacher

- Union County Primary**
August 4, 2025
12:00 - 4:00 PM
by appointment only
- Union Country Elementary**
August 4, 2025
2nd/4th: 3:30 - 5:00 PM
3rd/5th: 5:30 - 7:00 PM
(drop-in)
- Union County Middle**
August 4, 2025
6th/7th/8th: 3:00 - 6:00 PM
(drop-in)