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answered and concerns heard.

The board will be holding another town hall on April 13 at 6 p.m. inside the Towns County Recreation and Conference Center, at 150 Foster Park Road in Young Harris.

In the upcoming town hall meetings, directors will take turns presenting up-to-date information about the EMC, including policy changes, which Board Vice-Chair Steven Phillips said will feature many issues important to the membership.

A past example of an item that came out of the Policy Committee was the board's decision to change up its own leadership from year to year, which is why Phillips went from chair to vice-chair following the 2016 annual meeting last

September.

"We have got a very good board," said Phillips. "We've got everybody working for the good of the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, and we've made a lot of changes."

As vice-chair and head of the Policy Committee, Phillips decided to do things a little differently from his predecessors.

"I got staff involved, the employees of the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC that actually work with the policies from day to day," said Phillips. "And instead of just having me on the Policy Committee, I have (Director) Ray Cook as a vice-chair, then (Director) Gene Mason and (Director) Charles Jenkins on the Policy Committee."

Going through policies is a tedious process. Currently, there are more than 600 policies at the EMC, and each policy must be given individual attention to ensure that its language and content is refreshed as necessary.

And that's not to mention the creation of new policies aimed at bringing the EMC and its board of directors into the 21st century.

"The first year, we made a lot of policies that governed the board," said Phillips. "We took the insurance away (from directors), we did a conflict of interest policy, we did a whistleblower policy, and all of that's been done."

Which is why Phillips and his Policy Committee have been working on getting the existing policy manual up to snuff, including the tidying up of old policies, as well as



The BRMEMC Board of Directors speaks to members in the Jan. 26, 2016, town hall held at the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center.

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"I try to get out here every day and make a difference in my community," said Deputy Stewart. "Finding drugs is how I do that."

And finding drugs, one might say, is a specialty of Stewart's, evidenced most recently by separate drug incidents that occurred on Friday, March 10, and Saturday, March 11.

That weekend resulted in seven drug arrests for Deputy Stewart as arresting officer, with six of his fellow deputies and a couple of K9 units assisting to take 8 grams of methamphetamine and plenty of drug-related objects off the streets.

"We all work together," said Stewart. "That's the good thing about our department. We've also got good administrative support making sure we have what we need, when we need it."

Stewart is a Union County native, born and raised. He started with the sheriff's office four years ago as a jailer, before transitioning to his current position as deputy in 2015.

Deputy Stewart is also a K9 handler for the sheriff's office, having completed training with K9 Dexter about a month ago.

K9 Dexter is a black German Shepherd specializing in narcotics detection, and Dexter has already helped Stewart get drugs out of Union County.

"Having a K9, that's just a great tool to have in my pocket on the side of the road," said Stewart.

Initially, UCSO Capt. Chad Deyton of the Narcotics Division approached Stewart about becoming a K9 handler, specifically so that Stewart could expand his already impressive drug-finding capabilities.

That's how it came to be that about two months ago, Stewart traveled with Dexter to Dooly County in South Georgia, where the duo completed a four-week training course together.

Training consisted of narcotics detection and tracking, and K9 Dexter certified in the former.

"I made a lot of new law enforcement contacts, got to see how other agencies worked," said Stewart. "I got to see a lot of good dogs, too. Dooly County has a really good K9 team down there because its right next to I-75, which is known for being a drug pipeline stretching from Miami, Florida, through Atlanta, and on up to

Michigan."

And this is not Dexter's first rodeo, so to speak.

At about 8 years old and with plenty of past experience, including with the Georgia State Patrol and the Towns County Sheriff's Office, Dexter is what's known in the business as a seasoned professional.

But make no mistake, Deputy Stewart and K9 Dexter are a formidable team, one that works hard every shift to tackle the drug epidemic that has infested the North Georgia Mountains and beyond.

"We have a really good bond together," said Stewart. "That's a must for all K9 handlers, to have a strong bond with your dog."

Dexter is one of four K9 units with the Union County Sheriff's Office. Rounding out the pack are German Shepherd K9 Zoe and Bloodhound K9 Lacey, both manhunters, and Labrador K9 Jet, a narcotics specialist like Dexter.

"I love being a K9 handler," said Stewart. "Having a narcotics dog is just a great tool to have on the streets whenever you're trying to find street-level narcotics."

Stewart also made a DUI arrest on Sunday, March 12, bringing his arrest count to eight for the entire weekend.

putting in place policies that have been sorely needed.

"We had a lot of policies in there that were outdated and not even signed," said Phillips. "We've added an Internet, email, and social media policy because we didn't have anything. And when it comes to social media, you've got to have some kind of a policy for that."

Another big goal for the EMC is to better channel its ability as a large organization to help its various communities with charitable endeavors.

As a start to that process, the board has put a cap on how much the general manager can donate on behalf of the EMC before said donation must be brought before the board, and Phillips is excited to be working on a project called Operation Round Up.

The EMC's own Byron McCombs approached a previous EMC board about Operation Round Up, and the board is finally at a point where it can begin to concentrate on making the project a reality.

"The way Operation Round Up works, if you get your bill and it's \$49.79, it rounds up to the next dollar bill to make it even, and then that money goes into a charitable fund," said Phillips. "They've done studies on this, and it's

about \$6 per year per customer is what they're looking at.

"That would be used for donations, and it would be set up to take it out of the hands of the directors and the manager. There would be a committee that would handle this, which each board member would have somebody at large that they would appoint on this committee, and the committee would meet to see what they would want to donate the money to."

Scholarships for area schoolchildren within the 50,000-member membership of the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC is one example Phillips said was a possibility for Operation Round Up, though that decision would be left up to the operation's donation committee.

"You would opt in to do it, so you're not automatically in it - it's a volunteer only thing," said Phillips of Operation Round Up. "The Blue Ridge Mountain EMC wants to be involved with the community all we can be. The money that we're donating now is actually operating capital for BRMEMC, it's just money that they've set aside for charitable donations to be in the community."

The Policy Committee is also busy drafting a code of ethics policy, and open board

meetings are inching closer to reality.

"We are working on that right now," said Phillips. "It's going to be open meetings we're working on for the membership. We've talked to several different EMCs that have open meetings already."

"We've done a lot of board training, and I've talked to a lot of different board members that have open meetings, and it's going to be for the membership, which is a good thing. I think most of the board members are for it."

Due to limited space in the boardroom, those looking to attend the forthcoming open EMC board meetings will need to sign up in advance, and more details will be available once the policy is finalized.

Phillips encourages residents to attend one or both of the upcoming town halls.

"We want to hear from you," said Phillips. "If you've got something you want to weigh in on, like on Operation Round Up or whatever, email us, call us. Come to the meetings, let's hear what you've got to say."

Contact information for the board is available at brmemc.com/Board\_Directors.

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