

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909

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WHEN YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN, WE ARE THERE WITH YOU.

As the United States faces the worst public health crisis in a generation, we want you to know we are here for you – and with you. Whatever happens, whenever it happens, your newspaper will be there for you. We'll be there to let you know how our community is managing through this crisis – from business to government to the health care system and schools to the drastic impact on individuals and families. And we'll be there to let you know about the good and extraordinary things happening in the

midst of this crisis: the school employees working tirelessly to continue providing meals for kids learning from home, the volunteers bringing food to homebound seniors, the health workers putting themselves in harm's way to care for the sick. Amidst the sadness and anxiety, there are uplifting moments that remind us of the resilience of the human spirit, and we'll be there to document those, too. We are here to help you make sense of the situation and to help you navigate it. Having fact-based, reliable reporting that provides

public scrutiny and oversight is more important than ever. Together, across the decades, this newspaper and its readers have navigated horrific events – natural disasters, terrorism, financial downturns and more. This challenge, in its scope and penetration into individual communities like our own, is greater than any of those, but rest assured, we'll be here for you. We are a resilient community where people come together to build and rebuild. Let's stick together, and we will come through this, too.

County, city declare states of emergency over COVID-19

By Shawn Jarrard
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Gov. Brian Kemp was widely expected to issue a two-week stay-at-home order on March 23 to curtail the spread of the novel coronavirus; instead, he limited statewide restrictions to run March 24 through noon on April 6.

Among these restrictions is a requirement that the Department of Public Health compel "certain individuals with an increased risk of complications from COVID-19 to isolate, quarantine or shelter in place," to include the elderly and/or people with underlying health conditions.

Kemp's March 23 order also closed all bars and nightclubs in the state, and it banned gatherings of 10 or more people "unless you can maintain at least 6 feet between

people at all times."

Furthermore, it granted the Department of Public Health the power "to close any business, establishment, nonprofit, or organization for noncompliance."

This order – and the countless others passed in recent days by local governments around the state – appears to apply to churches and other houses of worship as well, as they typically feature large gatherings of people in rooms arranged for close seating.

"Social distancing" is at the heart of these measures, as are strict personal hygiene habits like frequent handwashing and regular disinfection of surfaces and objects, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Department of Public Health.

The CDC defines "social distancing" as remaining out of

crowded public spaces where close contact with others may occur; avoiding mass gatherings; and maintaining approximately 6 feet from others when possible.

"If we can get our citizens to follow these directions, it will absolutely turn this curve, and we can get on the other side of this virus," Kemp said in a March 26 televised town hall. "It's critical that we do that for our health care system."

In the same town hall, Kemp said he hadn't ordered residents to shelter in place to that point because each county was affected differently, and he was hoping to balance out the impacts on individual communities by allowing local leaders to adjust to their constituents' needs.

The reality, however, is that more and more Georgians



Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris declared a state of emergency last week on the courthouse steps, to be in effect March 30-April 30. Also pictured: Chief Magistrate Cary Cox and Superior Court Clerk Judy Odum. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Suspects wanted in connection with THC cartridge ring

Investigators find indirect link to local woman's death

By Shawn Jarrard
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Four people have been arrested in connection with an illegal drug ring allegedly responsible for distributing thousands of THC vaping cartridges in the region last year, and the Union County Sheriff's Office is hoping the public can help investigators locate two additional suspects.

Thomas Richard Nickerson, 21, and Tania Marie Wyble, 34, both of Murphy, North Carolina, have



Thomas Richard Nickerson



Tania Marie Wyble

Small businesses, community feeling coronavirus crunch

By Todd Forrester
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

With COVID-19 affecting everything from tourism to regular trips to town by locals, small businesses are certainly feeling the pain of COVID-19 while adjusting to the changes handed down from the state, commissioner's office and City Hall.

While most everyone's bottom line seems to be suffering during this unprecedented situation – Blairsville Cinema temporarily closed over coronavirus concerns recently – limitations on indoor eating



Foodland Floor Manager James Baker bags groceries. Photo by Todd Forrester

State parks welcome visitors as USFS closes Appalachian Trail

By Shawn Jarrard
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With the novel coronavirus bringing about a new "social distancing" phenomenon, folks from all over have turned to the North Georgia Mountains as a getaway destination where they can do just that – get away from other people to a place where they might enjoy the spring weather.

As such, Union County is seeing an influx of out-of-town visitors perhaps beyond

the usual numbers experienced at the beginning of spring each year, with people from far and wide cruising the area in cars, motorcycles and RVs to take in the natural beauty of the mountains.

Many of these people are coming from Atlanta and other nearby communities that have witnessed varying degrees of virus exposure and local restrictions.

A great number of Georgians residing in harder-hit locales are dealing with strict "shelter-in-place" orders,

like Fulton and Gwinnett counties, meaning their leisure options have been dramatically reduced.

And clearly, would-be outdoorsmen have begun taking note of the travel opportunities in different communities so they can spend time away from their hometown isolation.

Last week, the U.S. Forest Service put a damper on many such plans by deciding to close all trailhead facilities and access points to Appalachian Trail and other trails "to prevent groups from congregating and

to protect public health and safety."

This has manifested itself here with the addition of orange barrels blocking off the entrance to the Byron Herbert Reece Memorial Trail and stretches of roadside traditionally used as overflow parking on Gainesville Highway, and other trails have been closed off until further notice.

Another important reason to close the Appalachian Trail is to prevent lost hiker situations, which require communities to give of their precious emergency

responders who otherwise would be serving residents during the pandemic.

The Forest Service's Helton Creek Falls near Vogel State Park, however, appeared to remain open over the weekend, with hundreds of people reportedly visiting Union County to see the site. Additionally, national parks remained open at press time as well.

At the state level, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources State Parks, Recreation & Historic Sites

Division chose last week to continue welcoming all visitors to its parks.

This resulted in hundreds if not thousands of people from multiple states flocking to Vogel State Park over the weekend, with folks filling campsites and cottages, and still others stopping in for day trips, making their way into town, and potentially straining local first responder resources.

At gastateparks.org, park officials have been advising visitors to maintain safe social

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