

Good Samaritans lend helping hand after Pet City USA catches fire

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Pet City USA owner Chris Wilson would like to thank all the people who stopped in to take animals off his hands as firefighters worked to extinguish a blaze at his business on Old Blue Ridge Highway June 29.

Fortunately, no one was hurt in the fire, and among the animals, all but several fish made it out of the store safely and into good homes thanks to Blairsville residents asking to provide shelter for the critters.

Wilson reported the fire around 2 p.m. that Monday

after noticing smoke coming from the roof of one of the warehouse sections adjacent to his pet store. It appeared that the fire had started in the attic of the building before burning through the roof.

The Union County Fire Department responded to the scene, where they worked diligently to knock the fire out. Once the flames burst through the tin roof, firefighters got direct access to the fire and were able to deploy Ladder 1 to attack the blaze from above with an "elevated master stream."

"When you try to go in and fight an attic fire, you've

got to get water into the attic," Fire Chief David Dyer said. "At the same time, the attic and the ceiling and the trusses are burning, so you've got to worry about collapse."

"If you send crews into that building, you've really got to worry about it collapsing in on them, so it's best to have that ladder truck, which is amazing; it really did its job."

Approximately 16 firefighters responded to the fire with various emergency apparatus, as did the Sheriff's Office and Union General EMS.

"The Sheriff's Office came out to help us with traffic because there was so much smoke going across the road people were afraid they were going to have an accident," Dyer said.

Chief Dyer went on to say that the cause of the fire was unknown at this time, but that foul play was not suspected.

Pet City occupies a section of a strip mall there on Old Blue Ridge, and while the damage to the ceiling and roof was extensive at Pet City, Dyer said other businesses in the mall were fortunate to have been spared, and that several business owners thanked firefighters after the fact.



Pet City USA on Old Blue Ridge Highway suffered damage after a fire spread in the building's attic. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Wilson also expressed his appreciation.

"The Fire Department's response was incredibly timely," Wilson said. "The professionalism that they showed on the scene - I was a police officer for 14 years, so I can appreciate this, because a lot of times I was on the other side of the yellow tape helping take care of the situation instead of being on the inside of it like I am today."

The pet store owner has operated Pet City for about five years now, specializing in a variety of pets such as mammals, birds, reptiles and fish, as well as pet supplies. In that time, he has cultivated a loyal group of customers whom he said exemplify the best in this community.

And while Pet City is closed following to the fire, Wilson said he's currently working out next steps for

his business, and that he'll let people know the future of the shop when the time is right. In the meantime, the store will surely be missed.

"People would bring their kids here, and it would be like they were going to this aquarium in Tennessee, but in Blairsville," Wilson said. "I don't want them to remember it as this (burned building) now."



The fire at Pet City USA caused so much smoke that the Union County Sheriff's Office had to direct traffic in front of the store. Photo/Facebook

State officials work to get public health, schools squared away

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The state and nation have experienced a marked uptick in new positive cases of novel coronavirus in recent weeks, prompting officials across the U.S. to re-examine mitigation efforts as the COVID-19 target continues to move.

Noting an increase in positives and hospitalizations in Georgia while also recognizing "a decreasing case fatality rate, expanded testing and adequate hospital surge capacity," Gov. Brian Kemp said June 29 he would be extending the state's public health state of emergency.

Kemp originally enacted the state of emergency on March 14, and he has extended it multiple times in the intervening months, with the current iteration set to expire Aug. 12.

"The Public Health State of Emergency allows for enhanced coordination across government

and the private sector for supply procurement, comprehensive testing and healthcare capacity," Kemp said.

People in Union and Towns counties can still get free COVID-19 testing by utilizing the specimen collection site at the Towns County Health Department every Friday between 8:30 a.m. and 1 p.m., though folks should call their local Health Department to set up appointments.

The state has been working since the end of April to re-open the economy and other aspects of society that have either been shut down altogether or significantly impaired due to the pandemic, with a streamlined reopening process having been interrupted by the number of cases continuing to rise.

As such, Kemp signed a separate order June 29 re-upping his calls requiring social distancing; banning gatherings of more than 50 people incapable of allowing 6 feet between



Gov. Brian Kemp

individuals; outlining mandatory criteria for businesses; and requiring the medically fragile and those living in long-term care facilities to shelter in place.

"The order also outlines that the State Board of Education must provide 'rules, regulations and guidance for the operation of public elementary and secondary schools for local boards of education,' in accordance with guidance from Dr. Kathleen Toomey, the Department of

Public Health, and the American Academy of Pediatrics," Kemp said. "The order runs through 11:59 p.m. on July 15, 2020."

Both Kemp and State School Superintendent Richard Woods issued a statement on June 18 declaring their intent to "submit a waiver to the U.S. Department of Education for the suspension of the 2020-21 Georgia Milestones assessment and CCRPI school and district rating."

"Given the ongoing challenges posed by the pandemic and the resulting state budget reductions, it would be counterproductive to continue with high-stakes testing for the 2020-2021 school year," they said. "In anticipation of a return to in-person instruction this fall, we believe schools' focus should be on remediation, growth and the safety of students."

"Every dollar spent on high-stakes testing would be a dollar taken away from the classroom ... To our

knowledge, Georgia is the first state in the nation to make this announcement for the upcoming school year."

In order to receive the federal waiver, the state must solicit public comment, which officials are doing via the following link: <http://gadoc.org/ESSASurvey>.

The questionnaire will be available through Friday, July 10, and every single person in Georgia is being encouraged to fill it out to provide the best possible feedback to the U.S. Department of Education.

Georgia suspended standardized testing mid-March for the spring 2020 semester, and moving forward, it is unclear what long-term impacts the continued suspension of standardized testing will have on student performance and achievement in years ahead.

As they have since the start of the pandemic, Union County Schools and the local Board of Education will be

paying very close attention to all state guidance as it comes.

In other local news, Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court Chief Judge Raymond George has signed an administrative order regarding face masks and social distancing in the Union County Courthouse.

According to the order, courthouse visitors and employees alike will be required to wear masks in all public areas, including in restrooms and hallways, and social distancing of at least 6 feet will be enforced. People will have to follow specific guidelines for admission to individual courtrooms as well.

The order, signed June 24, includes many other provisions, such as guidance on screening guests for symptoms, handwashing and frequent sanitation, and it "shall remain in effect until amended or withdrawn by future order of this court."

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