

# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, September 15, 2021

## Patriots reflect on 9/11 tragedy in memorial service

By Todd Forrest  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

On the 20th anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001, Union County residents from all walks of life gathered at Meeks Park to pay their respects to the victims of that tragic morning while honoring the first responders and military personnel who made the ultimate sacrifice in the minutes, months and years that followed the date known nowadays as simply "9/11."

Union County Fire Chief David Dyer provided the ceremony's keynote address on a cool, clear morning that brought to mind the serene baby-blue horizon that served as a backdrop two decades earlier during one of the most turbulent events in the country's history.

"September 11 will go down in history as a day of catastrophe, a day of great loss (and) a day of surprise," said Dyer, who serves as director of the local Emergency Management Agency and 911 Center as well. "But it will also go down as a day of great heroism, a day of unification and a day of American patriotism."

While acknowledging how much the nation's perspectives have changed in the 20 years since 9/11, Dyer explained how the attitudes shifted over approximately 20 minutes as the shocking events unfolded on the television screens of millions of Americans.

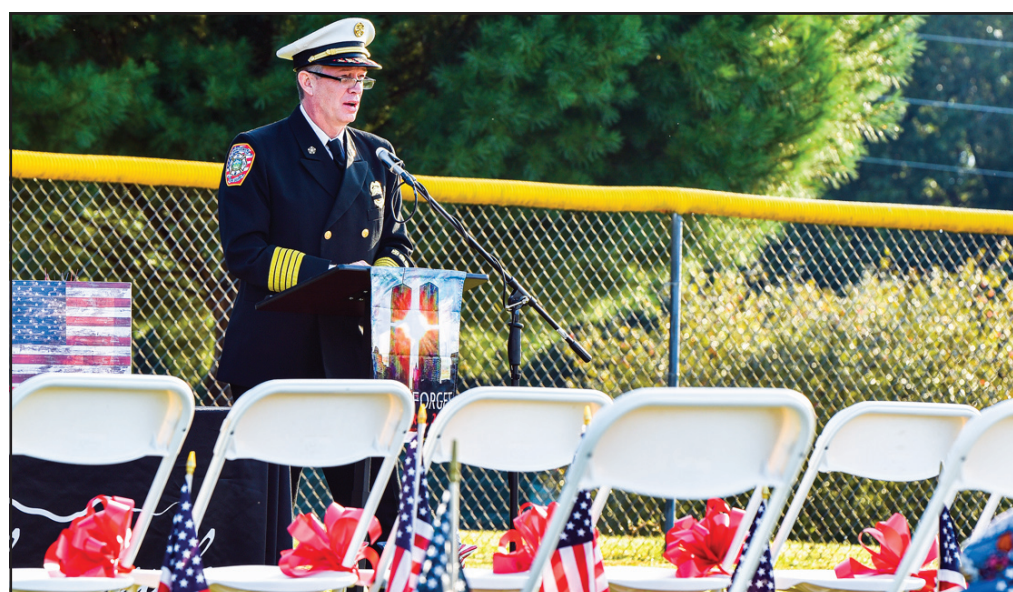
"Everyone that was old enough to understand has their own 9/11 story," he said.

"But one thing that is hard to convey to people (who aren't old enough to remember) is that when it first started, everyone saw the news and thought, 'Wow, a plane has hit the tower, what a terrible accident.'

"We were all watching, but we were all separated from it. It was happening up there (in New York). It was happening to them, not to us. And then, if you were watching TV, you saw the second plane come screaming across the sky and hit the South Tower."

"Everyone's frame of mind changed at that moment. They knew it was not an accident. It was no longer an event happening to them in New York. It was happening to us. It was happening to America."

See Never Forget, Page 6A



Fire Chief David Dyer offered remarks in Saturday's 20th anniversary ceremony commemorating 9/11, pictured here in front of 13 empty chairs signifying the service members who lost their lives in a suicide bombing in Afghanistan Aug. 26. Photo by Todd Forrest

## Local numbers offer glimpse into state of COVID-19

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

Hospitalizations for COVID-19 began declining at Union General Hospital over the last week, with 41 inpatients for the novel coronavirus as of Monday morning. That's down from a recent high of 56.

What hasn't changed is the fact that the vast majority of COVID inpatients continues to be unvaccinated. Conversely, Union General Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said she is unaware of any vaccine-induced illnesses or deaths having come through the hospital.

"We seem to have peaked (for COVID admissions) and are starting to come back down but still have a lot of very sick patients," Barnett said. "Still seeing patients such as sicker and a higher death rate with this surge, and we remain well over capacity with temporary beds in areas we don't normally house patients."

Fewer but sicker patients is certainly a mixed development, though there are some signs of hope amid the ongoing spread of the delta variant locally.

Any optimism at this point should be extremely cautious, as it is too early to say whether COVID is truly beginning to decline in the area, but percent positivity has been dropping in recent weeks in both Union and Towns



The Georgia Department of Public Health District 2 has contracted to provide free local drive-thru COVID-19 testing at Union General Hospital. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

counties per Department of Public Health figures.

In examining the data, on Friday, Aug. 27, Union showed a two-week testing positivity of 33.7%. A week later that figure had dropped a single point to 32.7%. And last Friday, the number had fallen again by 2.1% to 30.6% on Sept. 10.

Towns County has experienced a similar drop in positivity. On Friday, Aug. 20, 29% of Towns County tests had come back positive for COVID-19 over the previous two weeks. By Aug. 27, that number had fallen to 26.4%, then to 24.8% by Sept. 3, and to 23.1% by Sept. 10.

As mentioned above, the

end of August bore witness to a local record of 56 COVID inpatients, though last week saw a solid decrease that culminated the morning of Sept. 13 in 41 hospitalizations for the novel coronavirus. That's a 26.8% decrease from the recent record.

The local school systems offer more reasons for guarded optimism in the region, with positive cases in Union County Schools declining from 200 at the end of August to just 59 cases systemwide last week. And as of Friday, there were six total positives at Towns County Schools.

Looking at deaths for the See Cautious Optimism, Page 2A

## Dr. Church talks COVID hospitalizations, vaccination

By Shawn Jarrard  
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Dr. Samuel "Le" Church of Synergy Health in Hiawassee has admitting privileges at Union General Hospital, Northeast Georgia Medical, and elsewhere, and he has been observing many more sick patients and hospitalizations currently than in any previous COVID-19 surge.

"Locally, we are seeing multiple cases per day, and sometimes per hour, in our parking lot," Dr. Church said. "And the hospitals are basically full here."

"Most of those hospitalized related to COVID are unvaccinated folks, but there are a few who have been vaccinated that are in the hospital as well. We're also seeing hospital follow-ups of some people who were extra sick."

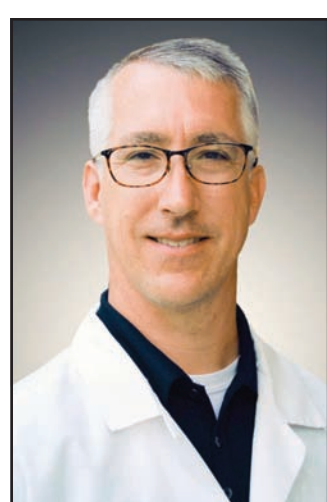
"On top of all those things, we have the other illnesses that we normally see anyway, so it's been unexpected and quite a burden on the list of things to care for."

training out of Dr. Church's office is Dr. Macy Tabb, a resident physician at Northeast Georgia Health System. What she has been seeing in the region's largest hospital is dismaying, to say the least.

"Things at Northeast Georgia Medical Center, in terms of COVID, I believe we're at max capacity," Dr. Tabb said. "At this point, patients are sharing rooms or in hallways. It's overfull, and we're all staff on (deck)."

"For example, I'm supposed to be with Dr. Church for a whole month. But I'm a resident that can be utilized, so I'll be pulled to work in the hospital with COVID patients starting (this) week, and that is across the board for residencies and extra staff everywhere, just being pulled to try to meet the demand that we have right now."

"I also work in our clinic, and I know from the outpatient side, we send multiple patients - at least one, if not more, to the hospital almost daily from our sick clinic. We're testing for COVID daily with multiple positives daily. So, yes, the



Dr. Samuel "Le" Church

system's pretty overwhelmed right now."

Dr. Tabb said Northeast Georgia Medical began to recognize an alarming trend toward the middle and end of August.

"Our staff who runs our numbers and looks at our predictions called a meeting and said, 'By the beginning/middle of September, if we don't do something, we're expected to peak above much

See Dr. Church, Page 3A

## Blairsville offering vaccine incentive pay for city workers

Special Election being called to fill Easter's seat

By Shawn Jarrard  
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To protect its workforce against COVID-19, the City of Blairsville voted last week to offer employees and elected officials incentive pay for becoming fully vaccinated.

All told, 45 people are eligible for the incentive, with full-timers and elected officials set to receive \$1,500 and part-time employees \$750, to be paid for with federal COVID relief funds.

In addition to encouraging vaccination, the incentive is being made available retroactively to reward employees who have already been vaccinated. Proof of vaccination will be required to receive the incentive, and there



Blairsville City Hall is considering ways to memorialize longtime Councilwoman Betty Easter, whose presence was conspicuously absent in last week's council meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

are currently no plans in the works to mandate vaccination. As of last Tuesday, approximately 43% of full-time staff had yet to be vaccinated. See City Council, Page 2A

## Paris adopts rollback rate, explains higher tax revenues

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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In a called meeting on Wednesday, Sept. 8, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris set the 2021 millage rate for the county's portion of property tax bills at the rollback rate of 6.024 mills to meet the county's budgetary needs next year.

The 2021 rate is down 1.154 mills from the 2020 rate of 7.178 mills. This reduction is due to the recently completed countywide revaluation of greater than 22,500 property parcels that resulted in a total inflationary increase of about \$292 million in the real property digest.

And while the county

is set to realize an additional \$997,886 in property tax revenues over 2020, Paris said the additional collections will be coming exclusively from new growth, that is, from newly built homes as well as improvements and additions at existing properties.

The amount of inflationary growth in the digest is what triggered such a large rollback in the millage rate, as the county must advertise a tax increase if it plans to collect more revenue than it did the previous year due to inflationary increases to existing property values.

Therefore, increases in property tax bills this year should be due to either values having gone up following



Lamar Paris  
Sole Commissioner

improvements and/or additions, or because properties were significantly undervalued

See County Rollback, Page 6A

## Kevin Foley pleads guilty to robbing Circle K in 2020

By Shawn Jarrard  
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Kevin Michael Foley has pleaded guilty to the Circle K masked robbery from April 25, 2020. For his crime, he was sentenced last month to a total of 15 years, eight of which he will serve behind bars with the remainder on probation, per court documents.

Foley, 29, of Blairsville, will be receiving credit for time served in the Union County Jail from April 2020, with a maximum possible release date of April 29, 2028, according to the Georgia Department of Corrections.

With family members

present in the courtroom, Foley entered the plea on Aug. 16 before Enotch Judicial Circuit Superior Court Chief Judge Raymond George at the Union County Courthouse.

He also pleaded guilty to an aggravated assault charge, with a sentence to run concurrently with his robbery sentence, per court documents. As a condition of his eventual probation, he is not to have contact with the clerk on duty during the robbery or any Circle K convenience store.

District Attorney Jeff Langley's Office negotiated the plea, reducing his original charge of armed robbery, which carried with it a minimum sentence of 10 years to



Kevin Michael Foley

potentially life in prison, to the lesser included offense of robbery.

"Armed robbery is See Circle K Robbery, Page 6A

Vol. 112 No. 38  
4 Sections 24 Pages  
Weather  
Thurs: T-Storm Hi 78 Lo 63  
Fri: T-Storm Hi 79 Lo 63  
Sat: T-Storm Hi 80 Lo 62

Arrests 5B  
Church 2C  
Classified 3D  
Opinion 4A  
Legals 5D  
Obits 4C  
Sports 2B

SPORTS  
SOFTBALL  
9/16 vs. Rabun Co 5:30 PM  
Senior Night  
FOOTBALL  
9/17 @ Pickens 7:30 PM

Hope in the Mountains  
See page 4B

Grant Ricks Earns Eagle Scout  
See page 6B

EMC Annual Meeting Sept. 23  
See page 1D



# City Council...from Page 1A

according to City Hall.

In other news, the council voted to call a Special Election to fill the remaining term of Councilwoman Betty Easter, who died Aug. 31 following a brief illness.

The Special Election will be held at City Hall on Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Following the election, the council term will begin on Nov. 9 and expire on Dec. 31, 2023.

A special qualifying period will take place at City Hall starting Monday, Sept. 20, through Wednesday, Sept.

22, between 8:30 a.m. and 12 p.m., and from 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. each day.

The qualifying fee for the position will be \$162, and qualifying packets can be picked up at City Hall during regular business hours beginning Sept. 15.

Early voting will run weekdays Oct. 12-29, as well as on two Saturdays, Oct. 16 and Oct. 23, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day at City Hall.

Mail-in absentee ballots may be requested from Election Superintendent Kaye McCann at 706-745-2000, with the last day to request an absentee ballot by mail being Oct. 22.

To be eligible to serve, a candidate must be 21 years of age, a resident of the city for at least one year immediately prior to Election Day, a registered and qualified voter in the election, and he or she must continue to reside in the city for the remainder of the term of office.

Also in the meeting, the city approved the creation of a new sewer-only rate to streamline access by developers to sewer services outside of the city's water service area.

As the only sewer provider in the county, the city's service area for sewer is countywide. However, Union County has two other water providers in addition to the City of Blairsville, each with its own distinct territory.

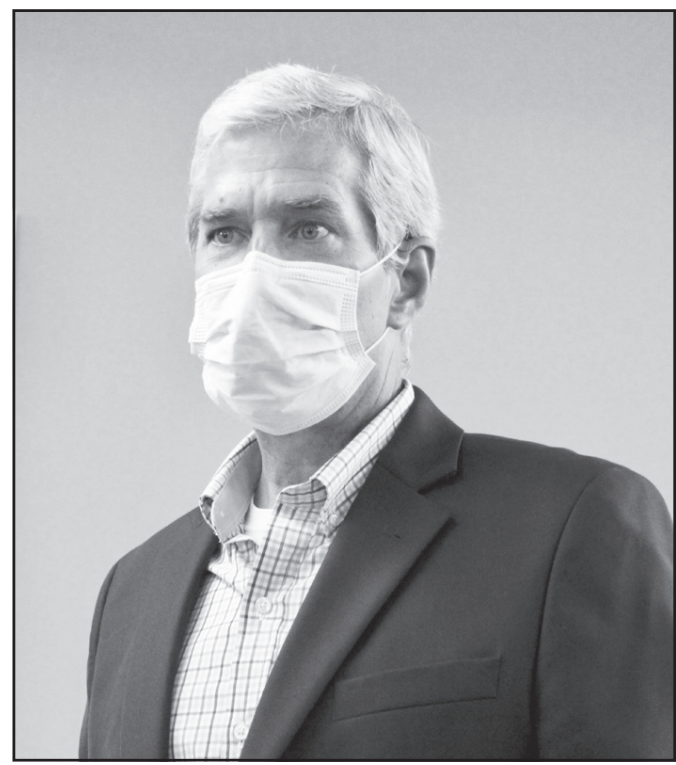
The city currently has two rates for providing water to customers, one for inside city limits and another for outside city limits, and wherever it provides sewer, the city also provides water.

Sewer has historically been provided at a loss made up for with concurrent water sales, which is not legally possible in another water provider's territory without negotiating agreements that do not really benefit either party and have been unsuccessful to date.

To simplify the process, Union County Development Authority Executive Director Mitch Griggs approached the council last week to offer an elegant solution – implement a sewer-only rate that is equivalent to the city's outside rates of water and sewer.

This solution is a triple win, explained Griggs, as it incentivizes the city to provide sewer-only services outside of its water territory by allowing the city to effectively bill both for sewer and for water it is not delivering; enables other water providers to pick up new customers in their territories; and grants access to sewer for developers and eventually new customers of the city.

Developers already pay all infrastructure costs related to connecting to the city sewer, and Griggs said they will gladly



UCDA Executive Director Mitch Griggs addressed the council with a novel solution to a longstanding issue in the Sept. 7 City Council meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

agree to a higher sewer-only rate because water is already so cheap to purchase, and having sewer is worth it to bring new development to town.

Specifically, Griggs said the new rate will assist two upcoming residential developments but that the potential for new growth is outstanding.

The City Council voted last Tuesday to move forward with this third rate, with next steps to include amending the water/sewer ordinance to allow for sewer-only service and adding a rate schedule.

Also in the meeting, the council voted to promote Blairsville Downtown Development Authority Program Manager Darren Harper from 32 to 40 hours a week in recognition of his value to the city and commitment of more than eight years in the position.

The DDA and city have experienced much growth during Harper's tenure, which saw him start at 20 hours before being increased to 30 hours, then 32 hours with benefits. Now, Harper is a bona fide full-time employee, and he's thankful for the opportunity to serve in his expanded capacity.

"I appreciate their continued confidence in me and look forward to working with them on improving the heart of our downtown through projects such as better parking, public restrooms and new sidewalks," Harper said following the meeting.

Continuing, "Blairsville is growing, and I'm determined to keep the core of our downtown quaint while at the same time creating more opportunities for our locally owned restaurants and businesses to thrive."

In other new business, council members approved the 2022 group insurance premiums totaling \$356,000, with coverage including health,

vision and dental insurance, as well as life and short-term disability insurance.

The council also decided to write off an old debt from Fatz Café Enterprises, which previously filed bankruptcy and left owing a total of \$10,110.67 on two water accounts. The funds came from an account dedicated to write-off utility balances that are deemed uncollectible.

Mayor Jim Conley said that River City Bank had shown interest in remodeling the old Fatz building into a full-service bank.

"That's the purpose of this – we need to clear the (old debt) off first," Conley said.

Additionally, the council approved the 2021-22 airport general liability insurance premium of \$14,982; drainage repair work by Ricky Rich Backhoe and Grading for \$11,350, paid with SPLOST; and asphalt work at Jones Street by Colwell Construction for \$22,236.80, also paid with SPLOST.

Blairsville - Union County Chamber of Commerce President Steve Rowe also attended the meeting, and he revealed that Granddaddy Mimm's Distilling Company had been named Business of the Quarter for the third quarter of 2021.

Speaking of Granddaddy Mimm's, the council gave its blessing for Owner Tommy Townsend to hold a Fifth Birthday Bash featuring live music and beverages at the downtown business on Sept. 25.

The Blairsville City Council meets the first Tuesday of each month at 6 p.m. inside City Hall. Councilwoman Mary Ruth Cook was unable to attend the August and September meetings due to COVID-19, but she is recovering and said she looks forward to making the October meeting.

# Cautious Optimism...from Page 1A

current surge, the picture for the rest of September remains unclear, as deaths have consistently lagged hospitalizations throughout the pandemic.

Sadly, Union and Towns each lost three residents to COVID in August as hospitalizations began to ramp up, and those numbers have jumped in the first third of September, which, again, is expected with so many hospital admissions for severe illness.

Per state data, between Sept. 1 and Sept. 10, six people had died in Union and four in Towns, making nine people in Union and seven in Towns to have succumbed to COVID since the beginning of August, according to <https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-daily-status-report>.

For reference, 20 Union residents died over January and February during the winter surge, while 11 had passed over the same period in Towns. Hopefully, the current delta surge does not translate to significantly higher death figures for the rest of September, but that remains to be seen.

It is important to note that data available on the state's website is subject to revision over time as more information becomes available.

Per capita, the North Georgia Mountains seem to have been hit harder than many other parts of the state during the current summer surge, with Union making it into the unenviable position of Top 10 counties out of 159 for positivity at one point while remaining stubbornly high to date.

As reported in the New York Times, there appears to be an unexplained coincidence with COVID-19 in which many locales around the globe experience about two months of increased spread during surges,

regardless of strain type, before a tapering off begins to occur.

Of course, there is no guarantee this trend will hold, but if true locally, Union and Towns could be seeing the tail end of such a cycle, as spread here began increasing in July followed by a dramatic uptick in August, with early indications of diminished spread now in mid-September.

"Since the pandemic began, COVID has often followed a regular – if mysterious – cycle," NYT Reporters David Leonhardt and Ashley Wu wrote Sept. 1. "In one country after another, the number of new cases has often surged for roughly two months before starting to fall. The delta variant, despite its intense contagiousness, has followed this pattern."

The tentative declining trend here does not seem to be occurring in other parts of the state just yet, including the more densely populated Gainesville, where Northeast Georgia Medical Center continues to be overwhelmed by COVID admissions and Hall County is seeing rising positivity.

Vaccination continues to offer strong protection against severe illness and death from COVID-19, as highlighted in a Sept. 10 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention examining infections after delta became

the most common variant.

Over the studied period, fully vaccinated people experienced a five-fold risk reduction of developing an infection, a greater than 10-fold reduction in risk of hospitalization after contracting COVID, and a greater than 10-fold risk reduction for death from COVID-19 if infected.

COVID vaccines are available for free and without appointment at the local Health Department, and people may also find them at any number of area pharmacies.

In terms of local testing, in order to lighten the community burden on Union General Hospital, District 2 Public Health has been offering free drive-thru PCR testing to anyone wanting or needing one.

"Testing will be available Monday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.," District 2 Public Information Officer Natasha Young said recently. "The testing site will be located at 35 Hospital Road, Blairsville, GA 30512."

As of Sept. 11, an average of 60 people were being tested per day, and no appointment is required to receive a test; however, registration is encouraged to decrease wait times at the testing site, and people may register at <https://honumg.info/LTSGA015>.

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# Dr. Church...from Page 1A

higher than where we were at the last peak earlier this year," she said.

Continuing, "So, that is when we started to try different things to help counteract that, hopefully. For example, we're doing a lot of the Regeneron antibody infusions at our outpatient clinics. We've come up with a way to do it without having to (conduct) an IV infusion to try to take some of the burden off the urgent cares and the ER in the hospital itself and keep some folks out of the hospital."

Dr. Church said that patients receiving monoclonal antibody treatments are proving to be much less likely to require hospitalization, "so I'm thankful that particular treatment option is available." Still, the overall situation among area hospitals remains dire.

"There are people who ought to be in the hospital but there's just no room," Dr. Church said. "So, we're forced to do almost pseudo-hospital stuff as an outpatient, and that's been difficult for some."

"The hospitals in the region have been notified that there are no critical care beds available for transfers, so if we need help putting up local patients for people needing a higher level of care, they have a few spaces for us for strokes and traumas and a few heart attacks, but everything else, they're on diversion for, at least at Northeast Georgia.

"But this is really all over a larger area - Chattanooga, Asheville, etc."

Ambulances are also having to be staged outside of emergency rooms waiting for beds to become available, Dr. Church said, "and this is really something that I have never witnessed before."

"We have studied about triaging, but our definition of triage in the past was which room do they go to, basically," Dr. Church said. "But now it's who can we see? It's almost like a warzone at times. Not quite so bad in the office setting, but certainly in the hospital setting it's kind of like that."

Dr. Church's office was responsible for administering thousands of Moderna COVID-19 vaccinations from the moment they came online through to wider availability, and he continues to advise that everyone who is eligible receive vaccination.

He does not suggest

people rely on antibody tests to tell them whether they have immunity, as higher or lower levels of circulating antibodies in a person's bloodstream do not provide the full picture of an individual's immune response.

In addition to antibodies, immune systems have multiple layers of immunity, including specialized cells that retain the memory of pathogens the body has encountered in the past, and these memory cells are known to trigger the production of additional antibodies when needed.

"We know that there's plenty else that's involved with our immune response, including T cells and B cells," Dr. Church said. "We know that, in general, six months after Moderna vaccines, there is 94% protection."

"That was just filed a couple of weeks ago with the full FDA approval application. I also met with Moderna and heard that from them personally. Those numbers are very reassuring, and we know that there's more to the story than just an antibody level."

"So, it is not recommended to get antibody tests to determine whether you have vaccine protection or not."

The Pfizer vaccine has already received full approval from the Food and Drug Administration, with the Moderna vaccine expected to follow suit in the weeks ahead. And currently, there is a question of booster shot necessity for both, with federal regulators working with vaccine manufacturers to iron out those details.

"Moderna is not quite sure what date they will be recommending (boosters), but right now, their numbers are very reassuring as far as duration of protection," Dr. Church said. "That's kind of what's holding things up at the FDA, as they're trying to find the right date to recommend, and they're not there yet."

Added Dr. Church, "I think there's a sense of urgency to do something, but I think we need to be careful about doing something without good evidence to support it. I have confidence that the vaccine is still working well, and I'm waiting on that data to help us know when we will need to have a booster."

When a Moderna booster is available, Dr. Church said it is likely to consist of a smaller

dose, and he implores people not to be in a big rush to get a booster vaccination until an official recommendation is forthcoming.

In terms of first-time vaccinations among the unvaccinated, Dr. Church understands that people have concerns they feel are not being heard among the tremendous push to get 100% of eligible people vaccinated.

He simply urges those who are vaccine hesitant to consider the known risks associated with COVID-19, and he wants people to know that he has full confidence that the vaccines are both safe and effective for the overwhelming majority of people receiving them.

Last Thursday, President Joe Biden announced a six-pronged "COVID-19 Action Plan," which includes items like increased vaccination uptake and masking adoption, wider availability of rapid testing, and greater access to life-saving treatments like monoclonal antibodies.

Much of the plan still needs fleshing out, like the imposition of vaccine mandates on many in the nation's workforce, including a constitutionally questionable mandate on large private businesses, all aimed at vaccinating more of the nearly 80 million eligible unvaccinated Americans.

The Biden administration is also openly threatening Medicare and Medicaid funding for hospitals and employers in other health care settings that refuse to force COVID vaccines on their workers.

It remains to be seen when these mandates will take effect and what the consequences will be for the more than 17 million employees working in an already understaffed health care environment, including at Union General Health System and Northeast Georgia Medical Center.

Dr. Church believes that losing patience with people who have chosen not to get the vaccine is not the best strategy, and he hopes that the rhetoric out of Washington, D.C. begins to reflect the fact that "these are people that we all know and love."

"Everybody has their own rationale for why they're holding up (for vaccination)," he said. "But I think, hopefully, with additional education, that people will warm up to the idea

of how well (the vaccines) are working."

"The challenge is, a lot of things that have been happening have caused distrust, and if you were already distrusting, then the data (showing how well the vaccines work) - people don't trust that, either."

"Small influences with genuine care and concern among people that are trustworthy, I think that's what's going to make a difference. And I did have the opportunity recently to give the White House that message at a meeting I was a part of with about 10 doctors in Atlanta."

"My message was that, when you start talking about people not being informed or being dumb and just talking down to people - that's not the people that are around me. These

are smart people."

"They are getting information from lots of sources, and you need to earn their trust. That's what's going to make the difference. I have some people that I'm very close to who, only because they're being told to do something is why they're not getting a vaccine."

"I know that doesn't make sense, but there are a lot of people who are kind of wired that way, that they would rather do things on their own choosing. Some of those freedoms are what our country is based on as well."

"I hate to have to see my loved ones, friends and patients get sick, but for (some people), that's worth it to them to be able to exercise those freedoms."

"Unfortunately, my message wasn't heard

completely loud, or (the White House) wouldn't have had that announcement (Sept. 9). The people that you say you're trying to reach - that is not the way to reach them."

"In my clinic, I have some folks that have strongly held beliefs for not getting the vaccine, and some of the same things that they have concerns and trust issues about, I have some of those same concerns, yet I am still recommending vaccines."

"We need transparency, we need consistent messaging on what these recommendations are, we need evidence to support the recommendations. So, I think those criticisms that people are having are well founded; I just don't think they are adequate to keep yourself from getting vaccinated."

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# Never Forget...from Page 1A

Dyer went on to highlight the collective range of emotions that followed the scene in New York and how the attacks on the Pentagon and the Pennsylvania plane crash only exacerbated the country's swelling passions that ran the gamut from blind rage to fear and sadness.

"Then we heard a plane hit the Pentagon, and we saw the flames," Dyer recollected. "That's a whole (different) location. What's next? Nobody knew what would happen next. Then the plane crashed in Pennsylvania, and we all thought, 'How can this get any worse?'"

"And that's when the South Tower collapsed. Sadly, 30 minutes later, we saw the North Tower do the same thing. As Americans, we were

confused. We were scared and angry. We were numb."

In the weeks that followed, the United States military began operations inside Afghanistan to root out the al-Qaida terrorists accused of carrying out the attacks.

One of those American boots on the ground was Blairsville's own Art McCann, who addressed those in attendance Saturday morning at Meeks Park.

"Just like everyone else, we were watching television and watching the news come in (on Sept. 11, 2001), and we all knew what was about to happen," said McCann, a Battalion Commander stationed at Fort Lewis, Washington, at the time. "We were all afraid, but we

were also mad. I remember thinking, 'What would make someone want to attack the United States?'"

Now retired and a member of the U.S. Army Ranger Hall of Fame, McCann serves as a Union County High School administrator. And during his remarks Saturday, he brought up a recent interaction with students who compared 9/11 to the 1941 sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

"Most of us here likely did not live through Pearl Harbor – it's just something we read about or watched movies about," the decorated veteran said. "But when you live through (a harrowing) event, it's something that sticks with you for the rest of your life."

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris also paid his respects to the fallen

soldiers and first responders, as well as their grieving families who often go unnoticed. He then promised that, on his watch, Union County would never forget their sacrifice.

"Without ceremonies like this as a reminder, events (like 9/11) could become dull in many memories, and that is certainly not something we want to happen," he said. "We want to make sure that no one forgets this event and the extreme damage and fear it placed in our country on that

fateful day.

"(The first responders) are all our heroes. You risk your life for others, and we often forget that part."

James Retman of the Georgia State Patrol Honor Guard opened the memorial with a bagpipe performance of "America the Beautiful."

At the song's conclusion, Crystal Wagner, the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce Director of Operations and Marketing, offered the welcoming remarks

before introducing Blairsville First Baptist Church Associate Pastor Derrick Hartley.

Hartley paid tribute to the 13 fallen U.S. service members in last month's suicide bombing in Kabul, and he also presented the day's invocation and the national anthem.

The ceremony concluded with the Union County High School Chorus performing "Amazing Grace" and the playing of Taps on trumpet by Woody Gap Bad Director Doug Roberts.

# Circle K Robbery...from Page 1A

not parolable," Langley said, explaining the reduction in charge, "therefore you have to serve a minimum of 10 years with no opportunity to be considered for parole until 10 years is up.

"We took into account that he was relatively young, and the gun involved was not a real gun. It still placed the victim in a lot of fear, but it did not have the danger of actually killing someone."

Additionally, Langley's office considered the fact that Foley was "in no way a professional armed robber," with other reasons for the reduction being that no one was hurt, "underlying mental health and substance abuse problems," the small amount of money taken, and a "lack of significant prior criminal history."

"We believe the sentence is sufficient in this case," he said. "(Given the totality of the circumstances), obviously, this was not a well-planned, professionally executed armed robbery. This was a spur of the moment, impetuous, foolish decision by a young man.

"Therefore, we did have some mercy on him in that the regular armed robbery charge – going through a mental health diagnosis within the prison system cannot allow them to parole you; you have to serve every single day of that 10-year sentence on armed robbery.

"We believe it is appropriate to give him to 15, to serve eight, and let the parole system examine him and then go from there."

The cashier and store management from the Circle K, located at the intersection of Blue Ridge Street and Murphy Highway, were consulted before

that plea deal was offered, Langley said.

On the night of the robbery, Foley entered the store shortly after 11 p.m. wearing a black mask and gloves. He put a gun on the counter – later determined to be a BB gun – and asked the cashier for "everything in the register," according to an incident report taken by Blairsville PD.

He received \$36, told the clerk to "have a good night," and left the building. Investigators later learned that Foley had been intoxicated at the time of the robbery and afterward even had trouble locating his vehicle, which he'd parked across the street at Walgreens.

At the onset of the investigation, the Police Department quickly uploaded images of the robbery to Facebook hoping members of the community could help to identify the masked individual.

Four days later, on April 29, Foley entered the Police Department "in reference to information concerning the armed robbery of Circle K," per a supplemental incident report.

Foley told Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter he wanted to "clear his name after numerous people told him he looked like the guy who robbed the Circle K." He said he didn't remember much about that weekend because he "was drunk" but claimed he wasn't the robber.

There was no evidence at that point to implicate Foley, so he was released.

The next day, on April 30, a community tip came in identifying Foley as the potential suspect, and further investigation revealed additional evidence to that end. That same

day, Chief Baxter approached Foley at his job and asked him to come to the Police Department. Foley agreed.

There, Foley told investigators he had been drinking heavily the previous Saturday and had been "in and out of it all day." He said he didn't remember much, "but he figured out the next day that he had robbed the Circle K after he saw images of himself on Facebook," per the incident report.

Following the realization, he burned his clothes, and on Monday, he threw the BB gun used in the robbery in the dumpster at his work, which was subsequently emptied.

After confessing, Foley told Baxter he was "extremely sorry for what he did but felt a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders." He signed a statement of his role in the crime, per the incident report, and was placed under arrest and charged with armed robbery, later reduced to robbery.

"I want to commend my guys, because it was a team effort," Chief Baxter said. "When we started receiving information, things went real fast, and this investigation just took a complete 180 within a day or two.

"We were following leads and checking up on places and things that were pertinent to the investigation. It all just panned out for us, and we knew we had our guy. It was a partnership between the police and the community to make a complete investigation.

"Thankfully, nobody got injured in this incident, and we solved this before Mr. Foley could inflict any more fear in our community, because we're not used to that."



Union County High School chorus students sing "Amazing Grace" at the Sept. 11 remembrance in Meeks Park on Saturday. Photo by Todd Forrest

# County Rollback...from Page 1A

compared to recent fair market values.

Union County Government will use the \$10,382,953 in 2021 taxes levied to operate and maintain the services to the county, including the Sheriff's Office, Fire Department, Road Department and other operational and administrative functions.

Paris distributed a handout to those in attendance, including county staff and nine residents from the community, showing that Union County was not raising taxes this year, despite the nearly \$1 million increase in tax revenues from new growth.

"I have enclosed two forms for you to review," Paris said. "The first is a five-year history of the mill rate of Union County. In the lower righthand corner of this form, you will see a number – a net tax increase percent of 10.63%.

"So, the first thing some people have already said after seeing (the digest published in the newspaper), 'Oh, you're raising us 10.63% right off the bat.' That's not what we're doing.

"You should understand that this is not an increase of anyone's property tax but is simply the amount the county will collect off new property that has developed, new homes, new additions or new business properties.

"In other words, this just allows the county to collect on new add-ons that we haven't previously collected on because they weren't there. This number has absolutely nothing to do with the amount your property was adjusted with the revaluation.

"The second form is called (PT-32.1). In the lower righthand corner of this form ... it shows the percentage tax increase as 0.00% ... (which) means that the county did not see any increase in property tax collections based on the revaluation of all the properties."

Added Paris, "This is confusing to people, some people don't understand it, and a lot of people wouldn't listen when we tried to explain this earlier, but the revaluation did not allow us to collect any additional property taxes.

"The revaluation was something that we were required to do by the state of Georgia to keep our (property values) in line, and those numbers being in line is keeping your property values fair and reasonable according to the state of Georgia and the guidelines.

"This is why the county did not care what the revaluation in property was, because it was not going to provide the county with any additional operation funds. It was simply that the state requires that property is equally valued to the best of their ability, and that is what the GMASS company that did this for the county did for Union County.

"Those that did not agree with new values – and there were several, I think about maybe 1,100 or so – have had the opportunity to appeal those properties, and some probably are still up for appeal.

"So, as long as Union County was able to collect the proper and fair amount of taxes on the new-built structures in the county, that is where we're able to get our extra money to operate the county, because every year we've got inflation, we've got salaries that go up, we've got fuel that goes up.

"Every expense that you've got at home that goes up, we've got those same expenses in the county. We have to have the revenue somewhere to get that from. Because our property values had gotten out of sync, those number were not being added in at the proper amount.

"So, without the property tax increase, (the 10.63% in additional tax revenues from new growth) allows us to gain the amount of money we have to have in order to keep from increasing your property taxes."

Paris said that, moving forward, the county will be looking to contract with GMASS – the same company that completed the countywide revaluation – to augment the work of the Tax Assessor's Office to keep property values up to date and avoid another big revaluation.

The commissioner fielded several questions from the

audience, including comments from resident Wesley Hopgood. Hopgood lodged several complaints, including about his property taxes and overinflated real estate values in new sales causing existing property values to go up unreasonably.

He also alleged that the county and Union General Health System were busy "taking millions of dollars off the tax digest, and from that digest, the citizens are having to make up what you guys are taking off," and he contended that the TSPLOST set to appear on the November ballot would not actually be used to offset property taxes.

Paris, however, objected to Hopgood's statements, saying he was "just talking" and "not making sense," and that his comments were "not accurate and not true."

"I'm not going to sit here all night and talk about stuff that is not relevant and not true and not accurate," Paris said. "I don't have the time, I had a hard day, I've got somewhere else to go this evening ... I'm giving you an opportunity, but I'm not going to listen to crap."

"This is not crap," Hopgood responded. "I'm talking to you – you asked for comments. You brought up property taxes, you brought up all of these things that I'm asking you about.

"So, if you think that I am preaching to you, I'm sorry, but these are real issues that people are concerned with, they're black and white issues, and they know how to address these issues and find out the facts."

Paris fielded one more question about how low the rate was compared to previous years, and County Finance Director Laura Driskell said that the new millage rate was the lowest it has been since 2017.

He then officially set the millage rate and adjourned the meeting, after which he and several members of his staff attended the Union County High School Senior Night Volleyball game of Morgan Fussell, a Work-Based Learning student currently employed in the Commissioner's Office.