

North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Union General grosses \$7 million in property sale

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Union General Health System has sold the old Hill Property for \$9.6 million, reaping a \$7 million gross profit on an asset for which it had no practical use.

The hospital purchased the roughly 580-acre parcel off River Bend Farm Road for \$2.6 million in 2014 under the leadership of former CEO Mike Gowder, with the intent of potentially turning the large acreage into a retirement village.

That vision never advanced, and since the hospital has more than 25 unused acres on its main campus to accommodate future expansion, the system decided to advertise the property for sale in March to

help finance major construction projects that are currently in the works.

More than half a dozen bidders came through with offers, and Union General decided to go with Hangar One Investors LLC, a land investment company owned by the Payne Family, which also owns and operates the local manufacturing business Advanced Digital Cable.

One of the stipulations in the request for proposals to purchase the property was that bidders outline their intended use for the property, and Union General felt that Hangar One – which also submitted the highest bid – had the best plan in terms of community impact.

Representing Hangar One Investors, Cory Payne said the property will remain largely

intact for private use, to include farming and conservation.

He noted the family was looking at potentially carving off a modest amount of acreage for a small “family starter-home type community,” which has long been identified as a need regionally, and the Paynes have “no commercial plans” for the property.

“We saw an opportunity to acquire a beautiful tract of land with great agricultural potential that is also close to town,” Payne said. “That doesn’t become available very often, and we wanted to keep it as it is, as a farm, and not see it broken up and developed. When an opportunity to acquire a property such as this becomes available, you go for it.”

Added Payne, “There are around 30 or 40 acres in the See UGH Property Sale, Page 2A



The large River Bend Farm Road property is located off Old Blue Ridge Highway adjacent to the Nottely River.

UCHS College & Career Academy celebrated with ribbon cutting

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County Schools celebrated the completion of the new College and Career Academy Complex on the High School campus with the dedication of the final piece of the project – a brand new skilled trades building – on Friday, Oct. 28.

The new 16,000-square-foot building, with another 7,000 square feet of covered exterior space, houses the automotive and construction trades parts of the College and Career Academy.

This project was completed over the summer in time for the 2022-23 school year and will serve students from Union, Towns and Fannin counties in Georgia, and in

Cherokee and Clay counties in North Carolina.

In addition to the new building, which effectively doubles the area for education in the trades, the old vocational building was renovated with expanded areas and extra classrooms for teaching electronics, CNC machining, and welding/metal working – all part of the manufacturing pathway.

On top of the skilled trades, the College and Career Academy also offers pathways in agriculture, computer science, education, entrepreneurship, nursing, and sports medicine, with options for work-based learning in the regional community.

Among the ceremony attendees were State Rep. Stan Gunter and his wife Rita. See CCA Ribbon Cutting, Page 2A



The College and Career Academy at Union County High will be producing opportunities for students to find local jobs for years to come. Photo by Mark Smith

Family seeking info for teen’s return

News Special
North Georgia News

Investigators with the Union County Sheriff’s Office have been searching for runaway teen Jacqueline “Jackie” Vester for more than a week and are asking anyone with information on the 16-year-old’s whereabouts to come forward.

The family is offering a Cash Reward “for the person or the information that brings Jackie home safe,” per a Facebook post by Jackie’s older sister Anne Hyles.

Last seen Oct. 23 at approximately 1:23 a.m., Jackie’s family believe that she could possibly be in Forsyth County, Dawson County or the Atlanta area of Georgia.

She is believed to possibly be in the company of two to three African American males between the ages of 17 and 20 whom she met through a friend back in August.

Unfortunately, law enforcement interviews with two of the teens in question, who have ties to the Forsyth County area, had not resulted in Jackie’s location being known by press time.

Jackie’s mother and father, Avia and Rick Vester, want her to know that she is loved and terribly missed, and regardless of who she is with



Jackeline “Jackie” Vester

or where she might be, “we are waiting for her with open arms and zero judgment.”

“We just want her home,” Ava said Friday. “All she has to do is say the word, no matter the time or the distance, and we will come.”

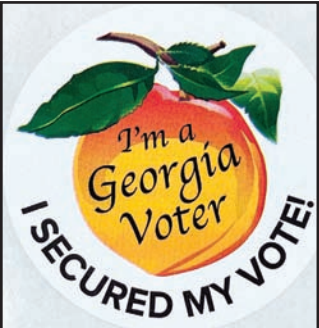
Her mother said that Jackie does suffer from petit mal seizures and migraines that manifest during times of stress, so the family is very concerned for her health and safety.

Jackie is described as being 5 feet tall and weighing approximately 140 pounds, with brown hair and brown eyes. She was last seen wearing a black hoodie and black pants.

She has been entered as a missing person in both the Georgia and National Crime See Looking for Jackie, Page 3A

Early voting ends Friday; Election Day is November 8

By Shawn Jarrard
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Advanced in-person voting for the Nov. 8 General Election will continue this week through Friday, Nov. 4, in the Jury Assembly Room on the lower floor of the Union County Courthouse located at 65 Courthouse Street.

Early voting hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., even during lunchtime.

According to officials with the Registrar’s Office who are overseeing advanced in-person voting, so far, this is the busiest midterm election on record in terms of early voters, with 5,896 people having cast ballots in person through last week.

Union County has 20,269 active registered voters, and factoring in the 564 absentee-by-mail ballots returned by Saturday means that 32% of the local electorate voted through 12 of the 17 total early in-person voting days, counting the two weekend opportunities.

Georgia has been experiencing record-breaking voter turnout to date, with Union Countians doing their part to boost official figures even higher as North Georgia in particular appears to be outvoting many other areas of

the state.

Election Day voting for the General Election will take place Tuesday, Nov. 8, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. at the 11 pre-assigned precincts of Union County, which are as follows:

- Blairsville Precinct: Haralson Memorial Civic Center at 165 Wellborn Street.
- Jones Creek Precinct: Jones Creek Fire Station at 15 Jones Creek Road.
- Owltown Precinct: Fire Station No. 3 at 14 Waldroup Road.
- Ivy Log Precinct: Fire Station No. 4 at 179 Moccasin Road.
- Suches Precinct: Fire Station No. 5 at 80 Firewater Lane.
- Trackrock Precinct: Old 911 Center at 36 Lindsay Lane.

See November Election, Page 3A

Union County School Board honors Teachers of the Year

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Union County Board of Education announced the five new Teachers of the Year for Union County Schools on Tuesday, Oct. 25.

That evening, one teacher from each of Union County’s five schools received a silver apple trophy and a certificate to commemorate his or her hard work and passion for teaching.

Fellow educators voted for who they believed deserved the position, and the System Teacher of the Year will be chosen from among this year’s TOTY educators and announced in the November meeting.

The High School’s choice was construction teacher Charley Cattanch, whom Principal CT Hussion described



Union County Primary School Teacher of the Year Elizabeth Jin Seon Goddard with Principal Debbie Decubellis last week. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

as an “outstanding” presence in the classroom. teaching at the High School was 2020, and while pandemic Cattanch’s first year See Teachers of the Year, Page 6A



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FOOTBALL
THURSDAY NOV 3 7 PM
vs. Fellowship Christian
CROSS COUNTRY
Sat. Nov. 5 @ Carrollton 9 AM
• CLASS AA STATE CHAMPIONSHIP

Local results from the Nov. 8 General Election will be available on Wednesday, Nov. 9, at nganews.com.



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UGH Property Sale...from Page 1A

west end that we would like to possibly divide up to create some affordable housing for the area that is attainable with the average incomes in our community.

“(Advanced Digital Cable) and some of the other businesses in town have trouble attracting and retaining employees due to the inflated

cost of housing in the region. So, if we can do something to contribute to providing some affordable housing for the community, we’re all in.”

Union General CEO Kevin Bierschenk said these plans resonated with the hospital’s board members, who wanted to maintain the rural integrity of the area and did not wish to see any major corporations or large developments on the property.

“It lined up for everything we needed,” Bierschenk said of the sale that closed the week of Oct. 10. “They’re a local business in our communities, because we’re in North Carolina, Towns County and here, and their use lined up with what (we had in mind for the property).”

As previously reported, situated in the middle of the large property is a 3.382-acre parcel bought by Union County Government for \$750,000 in 2020. The parcel was coming on the market, and Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris authorized the purchase with the idea of holding onto it to keep the overall property unified so as not to diminish Union General’s holding.

At the time, Paris pledged to either sell the parcel to the hospital should it decide to develop its property or sell the parcel to whoever bought the larger property from the hospital, with a goal of eventually recouping the county’s costs while protecting the hospital’s investment.

Now that the hospital has sold its property, Payne said Hangar One Investors is certainly interested in purchasing the smaller portion from the county, and both parties signaled last week they would be meeting soon to hammer out the details beyond “preliminary negotiations.”

“Union County is very proud that the Hill Property

sale by the hospital has been consummated,” Paris said. “We are also pleased with the company that has purchased the property, as we feel they will protect the area with the proper use of this incredible farm.”

“We will be working with the farm purchaser to include the sale of a small tract owned by the county. The county made a commitment to those who were bidding on the property that we would include the old homeplace for sale to them at the price we paid for it.”

The county-owned parcel consists of a life estate for Jackie Hill, one of its former owners, and while not ideal for Hangar One, Payne said such an arrangement was not a deal breaker, adding that the company is glad to have the option of purchasing the smaller property.

“We don’t want to leave that parcel hanging out there,” Payne said. “We want to unite the property, and now is the chance to do that.”

As for what the hospital will do with the \$9.6 million it has acquired in the sale, Bierschenk said that money will go toward financing the upcoming major hospital expansion and help offset the costs of the \$19 million medical office building that is about 98% completed on the Blairsville campus.

Union General broke ground on the medical office building in December 2021, and while construction was estimated to be finished by the end of last month, supply chain issues have stalled finishing touches on the project, which will serve patients from North Georgia and Western North Carolina.

The new three-story office building features 42,000 square feet of space and will house existing and new medical services. Importantly, the building will enable the

Health System to recruit new physicians and free up space for growth within the main hospital building and elsewhere.

Regarding the main hospital building, Union General received state approval in January on its Certificate of Need to build a four-story tower and operating room expansion, which will allow the Health System to service the regionally growing population for years to come.

Expansion costs were originally estimated at \$55 million, but there’s been a dramatic uptick in nationwide inflation since the hospital initially sought Certificate of Need approval, so the Health System is now updating project plans to reflect the present-day inflationary environment.

The tower is to be built where the helipad sits today, to result in additional observation beds for the emergency room, labor and delivery unit, and intensive care unit, plus three new operating rooms that will bring the total number of operating rooms to seven.

Bierschenk said previously that he was hopeful construction of the hospital expansion could begin as early as the first quarter of 2023 and take two years to complete.

Union General is considering dividing the expansion into separate construction phases to make the project more feasible and affordable to eliminate or minimize the debt burden on the Health System – which remains in the black at present – especially during troubled economic times.

There are currently no plans to expand Chatuge Regional Hospital in Towns County, but Bierschenk did say that the Health System is hiring for multiple openings across its coverage area and is always on the lookout for future growth opportunities.

CCA Ribbon Cutting...from Page 1A

State School Superintendent Richard Woods, Technical College System of Georgia Commissioner Greg Dozier, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris and Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley.

Also present were Union County Schools Superintendent John Hill, Union County Board of Education members, CCA Governing Board Chair and Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce President Steve Rowe, and numerous community business leaders and CCA contributors.

“Today is the ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate these new facilities; all of these new facilities are for our skilled trades programs,” said Josh Davis, Career Technical and Agricultural Education Director and CEO of the College and Career Academy.

“So, it’s training students to leave here and be workforce ready to go either right into the workforce or to continue their education elsewhere,” he continued. “We’re just excited to be here and excited for all these guests, and excited to show off these facilities.”

Davis said the facilities are all 100% paid for thanks to a \$3 million grant from the State of Georgia for the new building, and \$1 million in Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax money that went toward renovating the existing vocational building.

Additionally, Davis said, all the new equipment in the facilities was provided for by Georgia Department of Education Construction-Related Equipment Grants.

Union County Development Authority Executive Director Mitch Griggs was equally excited to share information about the new facilities in Union County.

“There are a couple of innovative aspects to our College and Career Academy,” Griggs said. “One is, it is truly regional. We’re incorporating school systems in Towns and to a degree Fannin counties; and two, the incorporation is across state lines.

“So, we’re the only one that actually crosses the state line in the State of Georgia to work with Cherokee County (North Carolina) and Hayesville (North Carolina) as well.”

Hill said the significance of seeking regional relationships with industries and other schools, even nearby out-of-state industries and schools, is to help keep kids in the local community after they graduate high school.

“Our kids here in Appalachia, even 50 years ago, had such limited options for employment when they left our schools,” Hill said. “You generally had to go to Atlanta



Georgia School Superintendent Richard Woods with UCHS CTAE Director Josh Davis at the Oct. 28 ribbon cutting for the multimillion-dollar College and Career Academy.

Photo by Mark Smith

to make a good living. Now, we can make a great living here in our own communities, in our own backyards.

“What it is, is employability for our children’s success and prosperity. That’s the goal. ‘Success for All’ is our vision. That’s not just a motto, that’s how we live; that’s how we make decisions.”

Hill said there are kids here living in abject poverty, and that education, support and opportunity are their ways out of those situations; that a welcoming school system that recognizes and supports the basic needs many take for granted is the spark for them taking the initiative to better themselves.

For many kids, that cycle of poverty can be broken, and it all starts with Union County Schools providing the means and inspiration for them to climb out, Hill said.

“It’s a great day for Union County and the surrounding counties,” said Georgia’s State School Superintendent Richard Woods. “It’s always good to see what happens when you push the adult issues to the side and do what’s right for the kids.”

“They’ll be blessed. I

think their future is bright, and I’m just excited for what the future outcome is going to hold for each and every person attending these schools.”

In an ongoing partnership with Habitat for Humanity of Towns/Union Counties, one of the major projects being undertaken by students is the construction of a home to be used by a family in the community, and progress on the home is visible from the Glenn Gooch Bypass.

The College and Career Academy Network was established in 2007 by then-Lt. Governor Casey Cagle to offer high school students access to accredited college-level courses and technical certification programs.

“College and Career Academies represent a community partnership between a local school system, a technical college or post-secondary institution, and business leaders represented on the academy’s governing board,” according to the Georgia Department of Education website.

Georgia College and Career Academies are certified by the Technical College System of Georgia.

November Election...from Page 1A

- Dooley Precinct: John Smith Fire Station at 30 John Smith Road.
- Gumlog Precinct: Gumlog Fire Station at 5484 Gumlog Road.
- Pat Colwell Precinct: Pat Colwell Fire Station at 1520 Pat Colwell Road.
- Coosa Precinct: Willie Hutson Fire Station at 114 Willie Hutson Road.
- Choestoe Precinct: Old Choestoe School at 1034 Collins Road.

Importantly, in terms of in-person voting, only early voting is taking place at the courthouse, so people must go to their pre-assigned precinct if they want to vote on Election Day.

Voters must possess an acceptable form of identification to cast ballots, such as a government-issued driver's license or identification card.

The deadline to request an absentee ballot was Friday, Oct. 28, and all absentee ballots must be returned by the close of polls on Election Day to be counted.

Folks can mail their completed ballots back or utilize the official drop box inside the Jury Assembly Room during early in-person voting hours. Voters may also drop completed absentee ballots off at the Registrar's Office through 7 p.m. on Election Day.

People may visit the state's "My Voter Page" website at <https://mvp.sos.ga.gov/> for valuable information, including precinct information, sample ballots,

mailed absentee ballot status, voter participation history and more.

The last day to register to vote in the General Election and any subsequent runoff election was Oct. 11.

Appearing on the ballot will be federal, state and local candidates. At the federal level, people will be deciding the following races:

U.S. Senate, Republican Herschel Walker, Democratic Incumbent Raphael Warnock and Libertarian Chase Oliver.

U.S. House of Representatives for District 9, Republican Incumbent Andrew Clyde and Democrat Michael "Mike" Ford.

At the state level, voters will be deciding the following:

Governor, Republican Incumbent Brian Kemp, Democrat Stacey Abrams and Libertarian Shane Hazel.

Lt. Governor, Republican Burt Jones, Democrat Charlie Bailey and Libertarian Ryan Graham.

Secretary of State, Republican Incumbent Brad Raffensperger, Democrat Bee Nguyen and Libertarian Ted Metz.

Attorney General, Republican Incumbent Chris Carr, Democrat Jennifer "Jen" Jordan and Libertarian Martin Cowen.

Commissioner of Agriculture, Republican Tyler Harper, Democrat Nakita Hemingway and Libertarian David Raudabaugh.

Commissioner of Insurance, Republican Incumbent John King and

Democrat Janice Laws Robinson.

State School Superintendent, Republican Incumbent Richard Woods and Democrat Alisha Thomas Searcy.

Commissioner of Labor, Republican Bruce Thompson, Democrat William "Will" Boddie Jr. and Libertarian Emily Anderson.

State House of Representatives for District 8, Republican Incumbent Stan Gunter and Democrat June Krise.

District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch and Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley, both Republican incumbents, are running unopposed in the Nov. 8 election.

At the county level, voters will be choosing between Republican Incumbent Tony Hunter and Democrat Michelle Maloney for Union County Board of Education District 2. Republicans Jason McCarter and Incumbent Patrick White are running unopposed in their School Board districts.

Incumbent Jennifer Logan is running unopposed for Blue Ridge Mountain Soil and Water Conservation District Supervisor in Union County.

Also appearing on the ballot will be two proposed amendments to the Georgia Constitution, including one calling for pay suspension for elected state officers and Georgia General Assembly members if such individuals become "suspended from office following indictment

for a felony."

If approved by voters, the second proposed amendment would authorize local governments and school boards to provide temporary tax relief to local properties that are "severely damaged or destroyed as a result of a disaster and located within a nationally declared disaster area."

Additionally, voters will be approving or rejecting two statewide referendums to authorize acts passed recently by the Georgia General Assembly.

The first act would grant certain statewide ad valorem tax exemptions benefiting the timber industry, while the second act would expand ad valorem tax exemptions for family-owned farms.

Looking for Jackie...from Page 1A

Information Centers, and the National Center For Missing and Endangered Children is "following this case."

The flier that was created by Jackie's family has been shared well over 1,000 times and has reached places as far as California, New York, and Colombia, but no new information helpful in the case had been substantiated by press time.

Family members have no way to contact her at present, as she did not have her cellphone on her when she left and does not appear to be using her social media accounts, and ultimately, they do not know where Jackie is or where she may be headed.

Ava and her daughter Anne, who lives at home with Jackie and their parents, have been tirelessly canvassing the Dawson, Forsyth and Union County areas, hanging reward flyers seeking info on Jackie's whereabouts and following up on leads generated by their social media and public postings.

According to two Facebook posts by Jackie's sisters, she is clearly loved, missed and wanted home safe, and Anne Hyles said she is feeling broken without her

sister at home.

"As we are approaching day five (97 hours and 23 min), I am so lost without my sidekick," Hyles said last week. "Every public place I walk in, I think I see you. Every time I walk in the house, I want to call your name. I can't sleep at night because every time I close my eyes, I see you standing there, so I open my eyes and NOTHING, the same empty feeling."

"Driving back and forth to Atlanta today by myself was the most painful trip I think I have ever taken. No one to 'Rock Out' with or scream our favorite songs together. Certain songs come on, and you always say, 'Come on, Anne, you know this one. Sing it with me.'

"Jacqueline, where are you? Please come home. Please send a message through someone, somehow, somehow. Please. I beg you."

Jackie's other sister, Sarah Ruth Vester, is equally worried about the situation and her sister's wellbeing.

"Jay just knows I'm not going to stop looking or calling/texting you trying to see if you are safe or needing help," Sarah said. "I want you to know that I love you with all my heart and won't ever stop. I just hope you

are safe.

"Please reach out to me. You can tell me to 'f-off' if you want, just let me know you're okay. My heart breaks more and more with every second that goes by. I love you so much, kid. I need my mini me back."

The family is hopeful that Jackie will see one of their many attempts to find her and reach out, or that someone with information about where she might be – either her friends, acquaintances or even strangers who have spotted her – will also make contact.

Ava and Anne are asking anyone with information, "no matter how small," to please call or text them at 470-521-6430 or 706-781-5427, or to call the Union County Sheriff's Office at 706-439-6066.

"If anybody knows anything, even something they think is the smallest, most minute and miniscule piece of information – it could be that little piece of the puzzle that ties it all together and brings Jackie home," Anne said.

The family would like to thank everyone who has called in tips and/or shown support by offering thoughts and prayers as they continue the search for their loved one.

Everything Christmas Sale November 4th and 5th



Friends of Union County Library (FOUCL) members are proud to advocate for libraries, literacy, and lifelong learning. We hold fundraisers which allow us to make quarterly contributions to Union County Public Library (UCPL); we give a yearly donation to First Readers of Union County; we volunteer to help out with, or we host, special UCPL programs and events; and, in the last five years, we have purchased and given board books and picture books to families of UCPL twice a year – in recognition of Dr. Seuss' birthday in March and in celebration of Christmas in December.

Thanks to our Friends and community library patrons, who made many generous donations of quality used or new Christmas items, plus our Friends volunteers who spent hours sorting and pricing, we are ready for our Everything Christmas Sale. The sale will take place on Friday, November 4, from 9 AM until 4 PM and again on Saturday, November 5, from 10 AM until 1 PM in the Community Room of Union County Public Library, 303 Hunt Martin Rd, Blairsville. Arrive early for best selection.

Among the donations received, we have collectibles in excellent condition that we will be offering in a Silent Auction during our sale. Last bids must be made by 1 PM on November 5, with the



Katherine Lavery, Connie Rosenberry, Sally Woodworth

highest bidder purchasing the item. These items include a Disney Santa Mickey Mouse & Friends Sleigh, a Fitz and Floyd Santa Mobile Musical Sleigh (with original box) that plays "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," a Gorman China Rockwell Santa plate, a Galway Crystal vase, and a Thomas Kincaid Village Christmas ceramic lighted holiday house. Come see them on Friday and come back on Saturday to make the highest bid.

All funds raised through the Everything Christmas Sale benefit UCPL, as the money goes towards FOUCL's quarterly contributions - which supplement UCPL's budget. For example, around 70% of the periodicals purchased by the library are funded by FOUCL. If you'd like to become a member, November and December are great months to

join. Your membership dues paid now mean you are considered paid through 2023!

We are also continuing to sell raffle tickets for a chance to win Mountain View Cottage dollhouse plus second, third, and fourth prizes of a DIY Christmas room kit, a papercraft medieval castle, and a 3D puzzle/pencil holder. All profits from the raffle are going toward the purchase of STEAM technology learning resources for UCPL children and youth programs. Come buy tickets from Friends during our Everything Christmas Sale. The drawing will take place the last day of the Everything Christmas Sale at 1 PM in the Community Room.

If you need a little Christmas, we've got what you need. You know what our mascot, Owliver, says, "Give a hoot – join us!"

Teachers of the Year ...from Page 1A

isolation made it impossible for kids to experience construction work hands-on, Cattnach did his best to demonstrate his own skills in homemade videos over Google Classroom.

Middle School Principal Pat Donaldson called up science teacher Michael Smith-Foot. A Union County High School Class of 1991 graduate, Smith-Foot began teaching physical education at Indian Creek Middle School in Covington, where he developed an interest in health studies.

From there, he pursued a science certification, and the year of his son's birth in 2002, he earned Teacher of the Year there. Interestingly, Smith-Foot received his nomination for Union County's Middle School Teacher of the Year on his son's 20th birthday.

He "pumps up" faculty and students alike, motivating and earning the respect of those with whom he teaches and works, according to Donaldson.

Elementary Principal Jerry Bavero shared teacher Rhonda Colwell's 25-year history with the school system. She spent five years teaching fifth grade, five in high school science, and 12 years in early childhood education, opening up the daycare on the bottom floor of UCHS.

"Since joining Union County Elementary School with me," Bavero said, "she spent two years in third grade, and then I asked her to please go forth a grade. She looped with her class and taught those same students for a second year in a row, and she's in that year now, in fourth grade."

Colwell also helps mentor new educators and has worked with the Mountain Education Charter High School for 15 years.

With 14 years of experience in education, it's no wonder that Elizabeth Jin Seon Goddard has "made an amazing impact on her first-grade team" in just one year with Union County Schools. In the words of Primary Principal Debbie Decubellis, she's "not only a leader, but a friend."

Goddard is known for her spirited, compassionate and honest nature, and is already making waves among peers and students as an extraordinary educator. Decubellis believes Goddard is a blessing upon UCPS, as students adore her and colleagues look up to her as reliable and inspiring.

As for Woody Gap, Principal Wendy Reynolds introduced Robert Hill as their Teacher of the Year. Hill will be starting his eighth year at Woody Gap but has taught for 14 years, with experience in both Henry and Gilmer counties before moving to Union.

Primarily, Hill covers sixth through 12th-grade science but has also been known to teach grades four and five.

In his spare time, Hill coaches softball and tennis and makes a point of aiding his students in the weight room. Not only that, but Hill often mans the Teacher's Booth at the Indian Summer Festival and has been named the Teacher Representative for the Woody Gap Governance Team.

The next item on the agenda was recognizing the Union County Lions Club for its help in funding health screenings for 1,191 students of all grades.

"We wanted to try to come up with something that we could come alongside the parents and partner with them because, you know, a child has to be healthy to learn," Lead School Nurse Leigh Ann Hartley said, noting that the screenings help with sometimes hard to uncover chronic issues.

"What we saw mostly, children don't necessarily know that they can't see," she continued. "Sometimes it's a gradual thing. I had a student one time get glasses, and he just was amazed. He said, 'I didn't know I was actually supposed to see the leaves on the trees across the road.'"

After looking for a community partner to support funding for vital health services and screenings, Hartley "crashed a couple of (Lions Club) monthly meetings" and found that the group, which has a special focus on vision impairment, was eager to help.

Last year was the first attempt at rolling out a widespread screening program concentrated on serving the entire third grade, with a bus from the Lighthouse of Atlanta providing state-of-the-art optometrist care from Dr. Patricia Allen in May.

"They brought glasses," Harley said. "The children could come in ... and pick out the glasses they wanted,"



Union County Elementary School Teacher of the Year Rhonda Colwell with Principal Jerry Bavero in the Oct. 25 School Board meeting.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



Union County Middle School Teacher of the Year Michael Smith-Foot with Principal Pat Donaldson.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



Union County High School Teacher of the Year Charley Cattnach, center, with CTAE Director Josh Davis and Principal CT Hussion.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



Woody Gap School Teacher of the Year Robert Hill with Principal Wendy Reynolds.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

and over the summer, the kids received their new frames to start the school year off right. Because of its success, the program has spread to every school in Union County.

For that, Hartley presented four representatives of the Lions Club with a Partner in Education Award.

In his Superintendent's Report, John Hill revealed that "Union County Schools (has) a 99.1% graduation rate."

Breaking down the information for subgroups in the most recent data, 98.7% of economically disadvantaged students graduated, and 96.7% of students in special education programs graduated. That puts Union County as having the fourth-highest graduation rate in the state.

"That doesn't magically happen, and that doesn't happen without a lot of people's hard work and support," Hill said. "So, we're very proud of that, very thankful for that, and I think you all ought to be commended for that hard work."

"We want our children to be contributing members of this society, and we want them to be successful. That's what 'Success for All' means to me, and I'm very proud of that. I'm very thankful that we have a board who supports that mission."

Three community members signed up for public comment, starting with Cindy Vandereedt, who brought up the posting of meeting agendas and availability for public comment.

One requirement for signing up to speak at a board meeting is that a member of the public must let the Board Office know at least 24 hours

beforehand; however, meeting agendas are posted the day of meetings, giving people no time to study the agenda before making a speaking request.

Vandereedt proposed that agendas be made available for public review at least three days prior to meetings and that community feedback take place before discussion and action items in meetings so that residents can have more of an impact on board member voting.

Next, Zeb Blanchard said that "this school district and those nationwide are overdue for trimming of their budget," and he suggested starting with "unnecessary administration" and potentially replacing the expensive school police force with "volunteer armed teachers and trained resource officers."

He also said there was a need to address "rampant nepotism" in the district and forwarded ideas of re-establishing the PTA, allowing teachers and parents to set local curriculums, performing a forensic audit to "rid the system of bloated spending," and hosting open dialogues "with the citizens as required by the Constitution."

Vince Peterson talked about and referenced the School Board's Code of Ethics, raising similar concerns that evening regarding a need for greater communication between the board and public as well as transparency around budgeting.

The Union County School Board meets on the third Tuesday of every month starting at 6 p.m. at the Board Office. These meetings are open to the public and community speakers are encouraged.