

# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County

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## Federal judge temporarily halts COVID vaccine mandate

### Hospitalizations, cases trending upward

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

The Dec. 6 deadline for health care workers to comply with a nationwide COVID-19 vaccine mandate has been postponed by a federal judge in Louisiana, effectively pausing implementation of the mandate locally.

Until last week, the mandate was requiring all people working with health care providers that receive

federal Medicare and Medicaid funding to have received an initial dose of any of the approved COVID vaccines by Dec. 6, with full vaccination expected by Jan. 4, 2022.

Citing concerns over constitutionality, U.S. District Judge Terry A. Doughty ordered a preliminary injunction on Nov. 30 blocking the national mandate by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, or CMS.

The judge's decision, which came on the heels of a

separate national injunction from earlier in November that blocked the Biden administration's vaccine mandate for companies with 100 or more workers, is certain to be appealed to a higher court.

"There's still no guarantee that it's not going to be a CMS mandate at some point," Union General Health System Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said. "How we have to look at it right now is as a temporary delay that gets

rid of those deadlines that we felt were unrealistic for our staff anyway."

What this means locally is that health care providers such as Union General have more time to prepare for any eventual mandate by either encouraging staff to get vaccinated or collecting federally recognized exemptions.

Currently, exemptions are only being granted for "recognized medical conditions or religious beliefs, observances, or practices," per CMS, with no exemption presently for individuals who have recovered

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## 'Christmas on the Square' shines brightly over weekend



Union County Middle School Theater Arts students had a blast throwing candy to children lining the streets of Downtown Blairsville during the nighttime Christmas parade Saturday. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Santa Claus came to town Dec. 4, and though he was busy earlier in the day visiting with families at the Union County

Community Center, he later joined local businesses and organizations in really shining for the "Christmas on the Square" events in Downtown Blairsville.

Things kicked off as early as 2 p.m., when the

Old Courthouse welcomed children for pictures with the man in red himself. The doors remained open all day for the joint Historical Society and Downtown Development Authority venture, allowing

See Blairsville Christmas, Page 6A

## Kris Kringle Market event enjoys record attendance

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The 2021 Kris Kringle Market held on Saturday, Dec. 4, at the Union County Farmers

Market from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. attracted a record number of people this year.

"This is the largest crowd we've ever had at a Kris Kringle Market," said Market Manager Mickey Cummings. "And it

may be the largest crowd we've ever had at any event at the Farmers Market.

"One year we had the Green Bean Festival here, and there were about 10,000" See Kris Kringle, Page 6A



Members of the Lady Panthers High School Basketball Team at their face-painting booth during Kris Kringle Saturday. Photo by Mark Smith

## Residents fill courtroom for proposed budget hearing

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

About 40 residents attended a presentation of the Fiscal Year 2022 Proposed Union County Budget at the Dec. 2 Budget Hearing held inside in Courtroom A of the Union County Courthouse.

From the Sheriff's Office to the Fire Department, Tax Commissioner's Office and more, all elected county officials and most department heads were present to answer questions, and County Attorney William Mercer moderated the post-presentation question-and-answer session.

After officially opening the hearing, Sole Commissioner

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The general tone of the Dec. 2 Budget Hearing was calmer than recent county meetings that have featured a public curious about many topics related to the goings on of the Commissioner's Office. Photo by Mark Smith

## Knights of Columbus donate coats to Union County Schools



L-R: Glenn Harahand, Katy Jones, Becky Tracey and Rick Graff for the local Knights of Columbus coat donation Nov. 29. Photo by Jeremy Foster

By Jeremy Foster  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

On Monday, Nov. 29, the Knights of Columbus Council 11746 from St. Francis of Assisi

Catholic Church of Blairsville delivered winter parkas for six boys and six girls in need to the Family Connection Office at Union County Schools.

The goal of the Coats for Kids program is to ensure

that no child in North America goes without a coat during the winter season.

Through the dedication of Knights of Columbus

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## 'Shop with a Cruiser' a heartwarming event Saturday, Dec. 4

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Christmas season is a time when the denizens of Blairsville-Union County really show their true colors, as evidenced by the Blairsville Cruisers Christmas shopping event for local children Dec. 4 at Walmart.

According to Katy Jones of Union County Family Connection, there are upwards of 65 separate individuals and organizations that come together to help kids and families who, for whatever reason, be it job loss, sickness, loss of a breadwinner, etc., are struggling at Christmastime.

One of those organizations is the Blairsville

Cruisers, a vintage car club based in Union County with membership scattered around North Georgia and Western North Carolina.

For about the 10th year running, the Cruisers have been collecting money throughout each year through various means - fundraisers, raffles, car cruises, car shows, donations - to distribute to children via a shopping spree, thereby helping not only the children, but their families as well.

Middle school-age children are the target demographic for "Shop with a Cruiser," because they're young enough to still appreciate toys and gadgets, but not quite old enough to join the workforce.

And, as any parent knows, those toys and gadgets don't

come cheap.

With the money they raise each year, the Cruisers determine how many kids they can serve based on a specific amount they want to award each kid for shopping. This year, the Cruisers were able to allot \$250 to each of 65 children.

In addition, the Cruisers also donate to Shop with a Hero, a Christmas shopping program in Hiwassee sponsored by the Hiwassee Police Department, as several of the Cruisers' membership live in Hiwassee.

Parents brought their kids to the Blairsville Walmart Superstore at around 8 a.m. on Saturday, and at the scheduled 8:30 a.m. start time, volunteer

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The Blairsville Cruisers raise money all year round to take kids on a special Christmas shopping spree at Walmart, which was held this year on Dec. 4. Photo by Mark Smith

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# Vaccine Mandate...from Page 1A

from COVID-19.

To combat the spread of the coronavirus, CMS initiated the mandate as part of an "emergency regulation" Nov. 4.

"CMS's goal is to bring health care providers into compliance," the federal health agency said last month. "However, the agency will not hesitate to use its full enforcement authority to protect the health and safety of patients."

"Full enforcement" would entail cutting off federal Medicare and Medicaid funding, which makes up a sizeable portion of monies collected by many medical establishments.

Union General Health System – the largest employer in Union County and one of the largest in Towns – receives between 70%-75% of its revenues via federal funding, including Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement programs, according to Barnett.

A loss of CMS funding would be devastating for the

Health System, Barnett said, adding that such a major revenue cut would require the hospitals and nursing homes here to either dramatically reduce services or perhaps close altogether.

Up to this point, vaccination by employees has been optional. Barnett said Union General Health System desires to allow individuals to direct their own health care decisions; but faced with a serious threat to much needed CMS funding, compliance with a valid vaccine mandate would not be optional.

To be clear, Barnett encourages all eligible individuals to get vaccinated, as she believes the vaccines to be both safe and effective; she has yet to see any vaccine-related hospitalizations at Union General, and as for efficacy, she supervised the Health System's medical efforts through the recent COVID surge that overwhelmingly affected the unvaccinated.

Still, she said she is uncomfortable with the idea of a mandate for anyone who has a personal reason to forgo vaccination, including any of the roughly 2,000 people currently working with Union General who, under a mandate, would need to comply or face termination.

As the mandate was not implemented this week, Barnett said she does not have a completed list of staff, contractors and volunteers who would have been in compliance via vaccination or exemption.

And though she's unaware of any Health System employees quitting prior to the mandate going into effect, she anticipates losing workers if the mandate is eventually enforced. This would be unfortunate, as Barnett said the health care sector – like many sectors – is severely understaffed.

"I do think this is something that everybody

understands is not a Union General Health System mandate but a CMS mandate," Barnett said. "So, while it might affect morale and we wish it was not being done, I don't think that (our staff) necessarily blame the hospital for it."

In order to be prepared should the mandate be reinstated, the Health System is continuing to educate its workforce about the benefits of vaccination, including encouraging people to attend in-house vaccine clinics or otherwise turn in an "applicable exemption," Barnett said.

Approximately 76,000 health care facilities and more than 17 million health care workers are subject to the mandate, which the White House has said "will enhance patient safety in health care settings."

"The rule applies to employees regardless of whether their positions are clinical or non-clinical," per the White House, "and includes employees, students, trainees, and volunteers who work at a covered facility that receives federal funding from Medicare or Medicaid."

"It also includes individuals who provide treatment or other services for the facility under contract or other arrangements."

So far, COVID-19 booster shots that have been rolling out in the last couple months are not a part of the mandate, which has only called for first and second doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines, and the single shot of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

## COVID IN REGION

Union General has continued to see a small yet steady rotation of new COVID-19 inpatients since the record delta surge receded at the end of summer, though the numbers are way down from their recent

peak.

Over the last two weeks, however, the Health System has experienced a noticeable uptick in COVID hospitalizations and outpatient visits, but Barnett said it's too early to tell if the area is looking at the onset of another big surge for the winter months like in January 2021.

"There's all the news on this new variant, but we haven't really seen any different types of presentations (locally) from what we've been seeing over the past few months, and about the same severity of illness range as well," Barnett said.

Above, Barnett is referring to the latest "variant of concern" that has been dubbed "omicron," of which the first known domestic case was discovered in California last week, quickly followed by the first known case in Georgia and other states.

At press time, delta was still the predominately circulating COVID-19 variant in the U.S., but omicron has many public health officials concerned due to early indications of increased transmissibility, as well as the relatively high number and kind of mutations the virus seems to have undergone, potentially to the detriment of protection induced by the current crop of vaccines and recovery from prior infection.

Regardless of what variant may or may not be looming, Barnett said the Health System remains vigilant in preparing for whatever comes next by applying lessons learned over the course of the pandemic, e.g., stocking up on additional hospital beds, respiratory equipment, PPE and more.

If COVID figures do continue to climb and there appears to be a bigger problem on the horizon, Barnett said the Health System will resume its efforts of regularly updating the community on the numbers of local COVID hospitalizations and general vaccination status among inpatients.

# Knights of Columbus...from Page 1A

councils across the U.S. and Canada, hundreds of thousands of new winter coats have been distributed to children since the program's inception.

Council 11746 representatives on hand for the donation were Grand Knight Rick Graff, Deputy Grand Knight Glenn Harahand, and Secretary Ralph Kwiatkowski.

"In the United States and Canada, this year so far, we have distributed over 134,000 coats, Kwiatkowski said. "Last year, due to the pandemic, we only distributed 103,049 coats. In Georgia this year, 'K of C' councils have distributed 4,392 coats. (Coats for Kids) is always on our calendar for this time of year."

Harahand said the group raises money using various fundraisers throughout each year, including breakfasts and dinners in the church, the proceeds of which go into the organization's general funding.

"And we donate to charities from that, and we also still support seminarians that are studying to become priests," Harahand said. "But mainly, it is primarily through donations that we are able to achieve this."

"Boxes (of coats) come in arranged by approximate age. Last year we picked

high school, but this year we picked middle school so we can fairly alternate between each group."

Grand Knight Graff has been involved with the St. Francis-affiliated council for three years now, but the council has been doing the coat donation program for close to 20 years.

"This is just a small part of our overall mission," Graff said. "We have four founding principles: charity, unity, fraternity and patriotism."

Katy Jones is the Union County Family Connection coordinator, and she said that community support from organizations like the Knights of Columbus is crucial to making sure as many kids as possible have their needs met, regardless of financial status.

"With all of the different programs we are involved in, including this one, we are able to serve between 500-1,000 students, not just for coats but basic needs as well," Jones said. "The students who are referred are typically through a teacher or maybe even a bus driver who sees they are not coming to school with adequate clothing."

"The need is pretty high currently due to some families having hard circumstances from the onset of the COVID

pandemic last year by losing jobs, etc., and they are coming to us for the first time.

"This type of assistance can be the determining factor between someone having food at night or a coat to stay warm, and no child or family should have to weigh those options."

Union County Schools Superintendent John Hill said the entire system was "very appreciative from the donations of this wonderful organization and what they represent from both the Knights of Columbus Council and Katy Jones and her team from the Family Connection Center."

"I think Union County is a very unique community where we are economically diverse," Hill said. "Some of our students come from affluent homes, and some come from poverty."

"We have a 61% free or reduced lunch program rate from our kids, and to be able to help out those families in need is without a doubt the ultimate validation for us."

People desiring more information or wanting to contact the local Knights of Columbus Council about how to help may email [ralphk41@gmail.com](mailto:ralphk41@gmail.com) or call 706-870-0819. Hill can be reached at [jhill@ucschools.org](mailto:jhill@ucschools.org), and folks can find Union County Family Connection on Facebook.

# North Georgia Technical College GOAL program finalists



NGTC GOAL Finalists: NGTC Practical Nursing Instructor Sharon McFarland; NGTC GOAL finalists Courtney Holbrooks, Jessica Garner, Brian Carlucci, and Ashley Pankey; and NGTC Registered Nursing Instructor Dr. Martha Marquardt

Four North Georgia Technical College (NGTC) students have been selected as finalists for the Georgia Occupational Award of Leadership (GOAL). GOAL, a statewide program of the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG), honors excellence in academics and leadership among the state's technical college students.

NGTC's finalists are: Registered Nursing students Brian Carlucci of Blue Ridge, GA and Ashley Pankey of Blairsville, GA nominated by NGTC Registered Nursing Instructor Dr. Martha Marquardt and Practical Nursing students Jessica Garner of Gainesville, GA and Courtney Holbrooks

of Clayton, GA nominated by NGTC Practical Nursing Instructor Sharon McFarland.

The four finalists will compete Jan. 13, 2022 in front of a panel of business, civic, and industry leaders, who will select the college's 2022 GOAL winner. The NGTC GOAL winner will then have the opportunity to represent NGTC at the regional and state competitions.

Other nominees include Alexis Franklin of Morganton, GA, Krysten Hodges of Blairsville, GA, Alicia Jones of Epworth, GA, Kirsten Ledford of Young Harris, GA, Lisa Garrison of Blairsville, GA, Kelley Kilgore of Lula, GA, Rhonda Stepp of Blue

Ridge, GA, Lisa Demers of Cleveland, GA, Amber Elder of Ellijay, GA, Rachel Hill of Morganton, GA, and Jessica Tanner of Blue Ridge, GA.

"We are very proud of each of these individuals for their commitment to excellence in technical education and for representing NGTC well," said NGTC GOAL Coordinator Madison Hopkins. "These individuals exemplify hard work and dedication, and we wish them continued success in their future endeavors."

For more information regarding North Georgia Technical College programs or admission, visit [northgatech.edu](http://northgatech.edu) or call 706-754-7700.

## Shop with a Cruiser...from Page 1A

chaperones began taking kids on their shopping spree, some taking one child, others taking two or more.

There is a need for more volunteers, who generally consist of Cruiser members, local law enforcement officers, schoolteachers, and others who just want to take part in the event by having positive interactions with children of the community.

One volunteer who asked to remain anonymous said he was a little nervous escorting a kid around the store at first, but once they got acquainted, it became obvious that there was a lot to learn from the middle school-age folks.

"Those kids are really excited to be able to shop for whatever they want without a parent telling them what to get," the volunteer said. "It's truly like the old saying, 'like a kid in a candy store,' to be with one of them. We let them take their time and make up their own mind."

"And once the novelty wears off, they start thinking of their family members and begin looking for things their parents or grandparents or siblings would want. They ask, 'What do parents like?' or say, 'Wow, my sister/brother would really like this!' It's a rewarding experience."

The Shop with a Cruiser event turned out great this year with the help of volunteers



Parents and Union County Family Connection checking kids into the "Shop with a Cruiser" Christmas giving program at Walmart Saturday. Photo by Mark Smith

from the Blairsville Police Department and the Union County Sheriff's Office, especially with a lot of the pandemic fears dispelled.

"We've had a lot of fun," Family Connection Coordinator Jones said. "Kids are having a great time. Parents are very appreciative, as always. This is sort of a culmination for us of a lot of hard work, but it's such a joy to come and see the children experience this today."

Family Connection is the entity that selects the kids based on need.

"We appreciate the community backing us up," said Blairsville Cruisers Founder and current CEO and Board Chair Wayne Tanner, adding that the Cruisers would be assisting with the upcoming "Shop with a Cop."

The next event for this Christmas season will be Shop with a Cop on Saturday, Dec. 11, sponsored by the Blairsville Police Department, and will also take place at the Blairsville Walmart. Volunteers are still needed to help with the 125 kids slated to shop this

year.

For more information on Shop with a Cop or to volunteer, call Blairsville PD at 706-835-1692. They would be grateful for the help.

## Budget Hearing...from Page 1A



Elected officials and county department heads filled the jury box of Courtroom A in the Union County Courthouse last week to field budget questions from attendees. Photo by Mark Smith

Lamar Paris introduced County Finance Director Laura Driskell and turned the hearing over to her.

Driskell gave a brief overview of how the budget process works. She said, for Union County, the fiscal year matches the calendar year, and the process for developing the budget for the following year begins each June.

The process starts with an estimate of expenditures for the next year. Department heads must have their proposed budgets submitted to her office by July 15 every year, Driskell said, adding that the process is a huge undertaking as she pointed to a several-inches-thick binder.

Salaries for elected officials are set by the state, Driskell said, and each county department must explain any major increases in their proposed budgets, which she reviews in light of the department's prior five years of operations.

Then begins the development of an estimate of expected revenues for the following year, she said.

"I take (revenues for) the prior five years, and I project out what our revenues are (estimated) to be for that upcoming year," Driskell said. "That is the point in the process where we start talking about millage rates."

Once the property tax millage rate has been set, Driskell said she meets with the County Manager, the Purchasing Director and others to discuss what's been submitted and how they might reconcile the difference between estimated revenues and estimated expenditures.

Driskell said the State of Georgia requires each county to submit a balanced budget, that is, a proposed budget where revenues equal expenditures.

"That means that revenues and expenditures have to match, or you have to make

up that difference somewhere," Driskell said, "either taking away from fund balance (of the General Fund) or adding to it."

"Once the budget has been balanced, we then look at the percentage increase from the current year to the upcoming year, go back through the adjustment process, whittle down everything that we can, and try to get down to what is required to keep the county running in the current manner, and to be able to provide equal or better services for the citizens of the county at the lowest cost possible."

At that point, said Driskell, the balanced proposed budget is taken to the commissioner for a final review, where it is scrutinized again, and once they agree on a final proposed budget, the county advertises the state-mandated public hearing to announce it and the called meeting to adopt it.

Driskell finished her overview with a comment that the budget process is a team effort and "is not created by one individual."

"Our proposed budget for the calendar year 2022 is \$22,878,191, which is up (5.2%) from 2021," Driskell said. "The (5.2%) increase is less than the current 6.1% rate of inflation."

Continuing, "Most of our proposed increases for 2022 are actually tied to increasing our workforce and (escalating) pay rates for our current workforce, to reward them for their hard work and to retain (them)."

Driskell then took the attendees through an abbreviated explanation of the various revenue and expense accounts and graphs portrayed in the handout that was distributed at the hearing.

For questions or detailed explanations regarding the 2022 Proposed Budget, which has been published in the North Georgia News, county

residents are urged to contact the Commissioner's Office in writing, as the county doesn't have a bank of operators to answer questions, give explanations, or make callbacks via telephone.

However, Driskell assured the people that all questions and requests for explanations would be answered.

One point Driskell made is that Union County property tax revenues are split between Union County Schools and Union County Government, as illustrated in the handout from that evening.

Sixty-two percent of all property taxes levied each year goes toward funding the school system, which has a current millage rate of 9.735, and 38% goes to fund Union County Government and its associated public services. The county has a current millage rate of 6.024 to produce a total county millage rate of 15.759.

The statewide average millage rate is 28.637, giving Union County one of the lowest combined millage rates in Georgia, though property values tend to be higher here than in other parts of the state.

Driskell fielded questions from the audience following her presentation of the 2022 Proposed Budget. Most questions were budget-related but required specific answers that weren't immediately available that evening, with questioners able to get their answers after the hearing.

Perhaps the biggest concern expressed in the hearing was that there was nothing to compare the 2022 Proposed Budget to, other than the announcement that the overall increase of 5.2% over the 2021 Budget was less than the current 6.1% rate of national inflation.

Driskell recognized that as a valid point and assured attendees that she would develop year-over-year comparables in the future. Copies of the 2021 Proposed Budget were subsequently printed for attendees to compare against the 2022 Proposed Budget and distributed at the hearing.

The 2022 Proposed Budget is scheduled for adoption in a called meeting at the Union County Courthouse, Courtroom A, on Monday, Dec. 13, at 5:30 p.m.

## Citizens for a Better America upcoming December 16th meeting

Citizens for a Better America invites all Patriots to attend this upcoming meeting event. There will be a guest speaker. We are joining together, taking action, making our voices heard, defending our rights & liberties, keeping politicians accountable, & sharing information and encouraging others. Together we

can make a difference!

Thursday, December 16, food orders at 5:30, meeting starts at 6:30 PM, at Comfort Grub Restaurant, 5722 US 64 W. (west of 19/129), Murphy.

Website: <http://www.CitizensForABetterAmerica.com>, Email: [Contact@CitizensForABetterAmerica.com](mailto:Contact@CitizensForABetterAmerica.com), Call: (828) 361-5422. NT(Dec8,22)gg

## Kris Kringle...from Page 1A

or 11,000 people, and I think we're approaching that today (if not surpassing it).

"People are parked from down at the dog park all the way out to the highway, and the parking lot here is full, so there are a lot of people here today," said Cummings, adding that an estimated 90 vendors were there selling a variety of foods and goods.

"We have a lot of crafts; we have some produce here. A couple of vendors are selling some greens, and we have some people selling some meat, and some people selling honey."

A requirement of the market is that all vendors must be local, meaning "you've got to be a resident of this county or a surrounding county to sell at the Farmers Market," Cummings said.

For entertainment, the Woody Gap School Band of

Steel performed a Christmas-themed steel drum set, and the Union County High School Chorus sang Christmas carols. And, of course, Santa Claus was there splitting his time between the Christmas Train and Santa's Bench.

Union County residents Leah and Michelle Jordaan, Lisa Urban, and Stephanie Gore looked as if they were really enjoying themselves at the Kris Kringle Market.

"We came last year, and it was not like it is this year – it is grand this year," Gore said, adding that she felt people were all getting outside after being cooped up because of the pandemic.

Union County Schools Athletic Director Mandy Hunter was at the Kris Kringle Market with members of the Union County Girls High School Basketball Team, who were



The Union County High School Chorus Ensemble with Santa Claus at the Farmers Market on Dec. 4. Photo by Mark Smith

offering free face painting for kids and others.

"We came to paint faces

at the Farmers Market today as a way to give back to the community," Hunter said. "Free face painting just to get interaction with the kids and invite them to our games and get them as active in athletics as possible."

Cummings said his staff was very appreciative of the volunteers who came out to help with the Kris Kringle Christmas affair, and appreciative of the county commissioner and even the local newspaper "for

supporting us."

"We have a lot to be thankful for, and there are a lot of good people involved in this," Cummings said. "And we appreciate the people of Union County, the taxpayers, and the public for supporting the Farmers Market and coming out."

The Kris Kringle Market is the last Farmers Market event of the year, with the next event to take place sometime in April 2022, Cummings said, which

will be advertised.

People can go ahead and mark their calendars for the 2022 Farmers Market, which will open Saturday, June 4, 2022. And the Canning Plant will resume canning on Tuesday, July 5.

"We have a lot of plans trying to get the homestead area (adjacent to the market) up and running," Cummings said, adding that, hopefully, at least part of it will be functional by Spring 2022.

## Blairsville Christmas...from Page 1A



Santa Claus with a plaid pajama-clad pair of youngsters inside the Union County Historic Courthouse during the annual "Christmas on the Square" Dec. 4. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

families to come and go as they pleased.

For some, this meant pulling around a homemade sleigh crafted with a repurposed wagon decorated with tinsel. For others, it meant climbing the stairs to explore the beautifully decorated interior where Santa sat.

Later in the evening, vendors began to quite literally set up shop. A pink food truck offered pulled pork, ribs and hot chocolate, while on the other side of the square, children could grab cotton candy.

However, the most popular items seemed to be the many light-up whirligigs, swords and wands, which several children waved around excitedly even before the parade started.

The courthouse doors stayed open until 5:30 p.m., at which time the bell tower began playing familiar Christmas tunes. Santa was glimpsed for a blink of an eye before disappearing somewhere down the street, no doubt leaving to prepare for the parade.

Morganton resident Haley Tanner was there with her sons Matthew and Luke, looking for a better experience than the one she had at another area parade. Expressing frustration over the unsafe speed of the floats in the previous parade, she hoped for a calmer environment where her boys could pick up candy without running the

risk of getting hurt.

With floats lining up at the Old Middle School Gym and folks beginning to take their places on the town square, the streetlights became more prominent as the sun cycled below the mountains.

Historical Society President Judy Carpenter started the countdown to lighting the town tree on the Old Courthouse lawn, building an exciting tension before the onset of the parade at 6 p.m. By that time, the brilliant flashing lights of the lead vehicles – firetrucks – were on full display, and the view only got better.

Thanks to creative float designs and plentiful strings of lights, downtown Blairsville was lit up almost as well as it was during the day by a long procession of civic-minded parade participants, with each float and entrant announced by longtime parade encee Libby Stevens.

Children cheered from the sidewalks at the passing of the Union County High School Band and Woody Gap Band of Steel, and they shouted out greetings to the many businesses, churches, volunteer organizations and individuals making their way along the parade route through downtown.

The parade featured impressive lightshows mounted on floats, all manner of classic and other vehicles, plenty of

costumed but vaguely familiar faces, well-trained horses and mules, and, of course, much candy-tossing, to the delight of children.

The star of the show was evident, as a great, unanimous cheer arose from every direction of the square when Santa came into view, waving and ho-hoing his way into the beginning of the Christmas season.

After the last light-bedecked trucks and jingle-bell-clad horses made their way out of the square, Haley Tanner reported she was pleased with how much more careful drivers were here, and Matthew and Luke were beyond proud of their impressive two-bag haul of mints and chocolate.

Rodney and Brenda Manning, new residents from Shreveport, Louisiana, enjoyed watching their grandkids get so excited about their candy. Even more than that, the couple was charmed by how welcoming Union County has been to them.

"Blairsville seems to be a very close-knit community," observed Rodney Manning, who added that he appreciated how involved the community is when it comes to hosting events catering to children.

"I'm not into that whole 'Happy Holidays' stuff; we like to say Merry Christmas," he continued, respecting that Blairsville chooses to emphasize the true reason for the season.



Brother and sister Solomon and Peyton Marlow accepting candy from one of Santa's elves riding an electric unicycle in Saturday's Christmas parade. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## 2021 Union County Historical Society's Christmas Ornament now available

The 2021 Union County Historical Society's Christmas Ornament is now available at the office in the old courthouse. This year's ornament is of the Jim Dobson Bridge in Meek's Park. It was painted by local artist

retired art teacher, Sylvia Garner. The cost is \$16.00, which includes tax. Come get yours today as supply is limited.

●  
Jim Dobson Bridge  
in Meeks Park

