

# North Georgia News

2 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

www.nganews.com

Legal Organ of Union County

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909

Wednesday, July 31, 2024

## UCSO seizes kilo of meth, 110 fentanyl pills

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

The Union County Sheriff's Office has made an unusually large drug bust for this area following a roughly three-month investigation by the Narcotics Division, getting a kilogram of methamphetamine – that's 2.2 pounds – and more than 100 fentanyl pills off the streets.

Later in the evening of Monday, July 15, UCSO deputies executed arrest and search warrants for Jesse Dockery, 47, of Blairsville, a resident of the Nottely River Campground off Gainesville Highway.

The arrest and search came after investigators spent months looking into Dockery using standard law enforcement techniques like controlled drug

buys and "countless hours of surveillance" that initially resulted in meth sale charges, Narcotics Lt. Tyler Miller said.

Upon executing the search warrant, however, investigators found a kilo of meth. To put that quantity of the drug into perspective, on the street, the meth was worth at least \$10,500 if sold by the ounce, \$31,500 if sold by the half ounce, and \$80,000 if sold by the gram, Miller said.

Dockery was taken into custody and charged with more serious crimes after being discovered with such a large quantity of drugs: four counts of trafficking methamphetamine, possession of fentanyl, theft by receiving stolen property and two counts of probation violation.

Also arrested on the property was Robert Mathew

Schneider, 35, of the Murphy, North Carolina, area.

Schneider was found to be in possession of 110 fentanyl pills, Miller said. He has been charged with trafficking, manufacturing fentanyl with the intent to distribute, possession of a firearm during the commission of a crime, and illegal possession of a controlled substance.

Regarding the fentanyl pills, they were made using a pill press to resemble a popular prescription opioid medication called Roxicodone, or "Roxy" for short. Miller said such fake pills are known as "Dirty 30s" in reference to the number stamped on them to mimic real Roxicodone pills.

Investigators have started a civil asset forfeiture process to seize the firearm  
See Meth/Fentanyl Bust, Page 3A



Union County Sheriff Mack Mason and Maj. Shawn Dyer holding up drugs and a firearm seized in the major drug bust from July 15. The 2024 Ford Explorer Police Interceptor in the background was paid for and outfitted entirely with drug seizure money.

## Union Co. 4-H Savannah Team competes at nationals



L-R: The State Winning Team was Alex Henson, Joshua Davis, Ricky Maier and Kade Dills.

### News Special

After winning the State Championship Memorial Day weekend in Savannah, the Union County Trap, Skeet and Sporting Clays Team – aka the Savannah Team – was excited to represent Georgia and Union County at the National Championship in Grand Island, Nebraska.

The competition took place at the Heartland Public Shooting Park June 23-28.

Volunteers are a very important part of the 4-H Shooting Sports National Championships. Without the dedicated volunteers, the event would not run as smoothly as

it does each year. It takes more than 300 volunteers to make this National Championship event happen every year.

The Savannah Team members were aware this would be the biggest challenge of any shooting competition they have participated in.

This year, 708 competitors represented 40 states. While the team had several scores in the upper 80s and 90s, it came in 11th in the United States. Coaches, parents and the community are very proud of their accomplishment.

For the past eight years, the Savannah Team has traveled to Gainesville to practice for

one day twice a month at the Cherokee Gun Club. This is the closest location to Union County with a facility for all three disciplines – trap, skeet and sporting clays. Most teams have the opportunity to practice two to three days a week.

On Monday, June 24, the Savannah Team participated in the opening ceremony, carrying the Georgia flag and state sign.

On Tuesday, June 25, the team competed in the Sporting Clays event, and they also attended an evening event exchanging Georgia pins with other states.

On Wednesday, June 26, See Union County 4-H, Page 2A

## Paris accepts funding, amends budget in meetings

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

In his July regular meeting, Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris committed \$105,000 in required local funding to help operate the Union County Senior Center over the next year.

The funding agreement for Fiscal Year 2025 is between the county and Legacy Link, "a non-profit organization that creates and implements programs to supplement community resources and boosts awareness and access to existing initiatives."

"These funds will be used to match and supplement federal and state funds for congregate meals at the Senior Center, home-delivered meals,



Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris in his July regular meeting at the Union County Courthouse. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

wellness programming, County seniors," Paris said July 18.  
See County Meetings, Page 2A

## Gooch exploited relative in nursing home, UCSO says

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

Anyone can be the target of financial crime, but senior citizens are among the most vulnerable when it comes to fraud, scams and exploitation.

The elderly are at increased risk of becoming financial crime victims for multiple reasons. For one, they are less likely to be familiar with the rapidly changing technological world in which criminals operate.

Another reason is that many older people came of

age during a more trusting, less globally connected time so are not as skeptical of others' motivations as perhaps they should be.

And seniors more frequently require assistance in carrying out their day-to-day activities, leaving them open to being taken advantage of by people who are supposed to have their best interests at heart.

It is this last vulnerability that prompted the Union County Sheriff's Office to arrest Rebecca Leigh Gooch,

See Elder Exploitation, Page 3A



Rebecca Leigh Gooch

## School Board readies for return of classes next week

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The Union County Board of Education held its regular meeting on Thursday, July 25, to approve policy updates and preview what to expect for the 2024-25 school year as 3,088

locally enrolled students gear up for their journeys to campus.

Superintendent John Hill shared that Meet Your Teacher will be held on Aug. 6 – or Aug. 7 by appointment for primary students – before the system's first day of classes on Aug. 9. Teachers return to work a bit

earlier on Aug. 1.

The two lanes behind the Primary School are "almost ready to be paved" and will be ready for school to start. The road running behind the new High School track down to Shaw Road has been packed  
See School Board, Page 2A



L-R: Union County School Board Members Janna Akins, Julia Barnett, Tony Hunter, Jason McCarter and Patrick White in their July 25 regular meeting. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## DUI driver sends elderly Blairsville woman to hospital

### News Special

On Saturday, July 27, at 10:34 a.m., troopers with the Georgia State Patrol responded to a vehicle crash on US 129 North near Georgia 325.

During the investigation, it was revealed that an Acura RDX driven by Mark Landis, 66, of Mineral Bluff, was traveling south on US 129 approaching the intersection with Georgia 325 as a BMW X1 traveled north on US 129 toward the same intersection,

according to GSP.

The Acura failed to maintain its lane of travel and crossed over into the northbound lane, striking the BMW X1, according to GSP.

Landis was found to be driving under the influence and arrested. He was charged with DUI, driving in a gore, reckless driving, failure to maintain lane, and serious injury by vehicle, according to GSP.

The passenger of the See DUI Wreck, Page 2A



Mark Alan Landis



Vol. 115 No. 32

Arrests - 2B Legals - 9B  
Church - 3B Obits - 4B  
Classifieds - 9B Sports - 8A  
Opinion - 4A

VFW Announces Scholarship Essay Contest See Page 2A

S.A.F.E. Fashion Show Fundraiser Aug. 3 See Page 6B

BHR Annual Maters & Music Festival Aug. 10 See Page 6A



You work hard for your money.  
Shouldn't it be working hard for you?

BLAIR BURCH | LPL FINANCIAL ADVISOR  
BLAIRSVILLE | 177 Highway 515 East | 706-745-0435

United  
Community  
Advisors

Securities and advisory services offered through LPL Financial, a registered investment advisor and broker-dealer (member FINRA/SIPC). Investment and insurance products are not FDIC insured, are not bank guaranteed, and may lose value.

## Union County 4-H...from Page 1A

the team competed in the Skeet event, and each of the states was invited to donate at least one basket for the silent auction representing their state. The Union County 4-H basket was filled with jams, grits, honey, peanuts, and many other items donated by local businesses. Families from Grand Island attended and bid on the baskets. The Georgia Basket was a big success!

On Thursday, June 27, the team competed in the Trap event and was invited to attend the Island Oasis Water Park. Union County 4-H is proud of each of their accomplishments, from qualifying for this event to representing Georgia at the highest level.

The team is written up

in the July issue of Georgia Outdoor News magazine under the title 4-H Shooting Sports Recap.

On July 25, the team members were honored at a 4-H banquet at the Crown Plaza Ravinia in Atlanta. This event was the 4-H State Congress that recognizes the top state winners who have achieved a Master 4-H'er status. Students sat at the head table and were recognized individually.

Most importantly, Union County 4-H wants to thank the 40-plus companies and individuals who supported the team trip to Nebraska. Several are former students, families and coaches. Thank you for your donations, it is greatly appreciated.

Special thanks to coaches Gene Margelli, Shannon Rankin, Stan Lunsford and Aaron Dills, for their dedication to preparing the team for this year's competition. The parents, family members and coaches are very proud of the students' accomplishments.

The Georgia 4-H Shooting Awareness, Fun and Education Program (S.A.F.E.) is sponsored by The Georgia 4-H Foundation. 4-H is the Youth Development Program of the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.

For more information about this or any other 4-H activity, call the Union County Extension Office at 706-439-6030.

## County Meetings...from Page 1A

Continuing, "As most of y'all know, we have an excellent community Senior Center. The seniors that go to that are so excited about what's going on there, and we're blessed to have them. They do a great job down there."

Immediately prior to the county meeting, the commissioner held a public hearing to discuss the abandonment of two county roads that "no longer serve a useful public purpose": Old Lows Mill Road and Old Ivy Log Road.

Both roads are old sections of currently used county roads, however, the old sections have not been used by the public or maintained by the county for many years, and the hearing was part of an abandonment process that is expected to be finalized in an upcoming meeting.

One hearing attendee whose mother owns property on Old Ivy Log Road objected to abandonment, expressing his concern that the old road section would be cut off to use by his family's farm when it reverts to exclusively private use.

County Attorney William Mercer told the attendee that the Commissioner's Office would be looking into his concern before the completion of the abandonment process.

During last month's regular meeting, Paris held a "first notice" to abandon both the 0.55-acre road section known as Old Ivy Log Road and the 0.27-acre road section known as Old Lows Mill Road.

Also in June, the

commissioner adopted a resolution amending the Fiscal Year 2023 County Budget "from \$25,458,054 to \$28,477,518, as per state and federal reporting requirements."

This was a sizeable budget amendment totaling roughly \$3 million in balanced revenues and expenditures increases. Both Paris and County Finance Director Laura Driskell said amending the budget is "something that we do every year."

"We amend the budget based on the actual figures once the (annual) audit is complete," Driskell said after the meeting. "We usually try to budget on the low side for our revenues in case we cannot collect the full amount."

"Most of the excess revenue we received was in property taxes and proceeds of capital assets distributions (sale of assets, trade-ins, etc.)."

"On the expenditure side, a majority of the expense was for salaries – raises to retain employees, hiring of additional needed employees, etc."

"Another portion of the amendment was for professional services – necessary services supporting government operations and administration. These include the services of lawyers, architects, engineers, surveyors, auditors, etc."

"Things always arise during the year that are not budgeted for, and we do our absolute best to keep the costs down and make sure that we can afford the necessary expenditures."

Among other business conducted in his June 20

meeting, Paris accepted a \$7,500 agreement with Geo-Hydro Engineers Inc. for "subsurface exploration and engineering reports for the bridge replacement on Old Bald Mountain Road."

Additionally, Paris accepted a \$10,000 agreement with Carter Engineering Consultants for a site development plan and topographic survey for the county-owned property at 296 Shoe Factory Road, and a \$4,220 agreement with Hibernia Enterprises to remove and dispose of asbestos in the old factory building.

The commissioner authorized the old shoe factory property purchase in 2020 as a future site for a new jail, as the 54-bed Union County Jail has experienced above-capacity inmate housing issues in recent years due largely to area growth.

Paris has said that, while there are currently no active plans to build a new jail, he wants to get started on preparing the site for construction – to include building demolition – in anticipation of future inmate housing needs.

He also accepted a \$158,250 grant from the Georgia Department of Transportation to fund the Union County Transportation System.

Union County Commission meetings take place the third Thursday of each month starting at 6 p.m. inside the Union County Courthouse. Members of the public are invited and encouraged to attend.

## School Board...from Page 1A

down and is also due for paving.

Construction at the new Elementary School is ahead of schedule – set for a 2025-26 school year debut – and is on target with the budget. Most of the masonry work has been completed, and the roof is now on; Hill shared a brief video touring the site with specific rooms labeled.

Department heads shared progress that has been made over the summer to prepare for the upcoming school year. For example, emergency services have undergone active shooter training, and custodial staff have deep-cleaned each school.

Woody Gap bathrooms are still being remodeled, but the school is overall "ready to go," according to Principal Wendy Reynolds.

Principal Debby Decubellis revealed that the Primary School is ready for their "best year yet." The playground was recently sodded and will soon feature a new piece of equipment thanks to parent fundraising. Rather than relying on social media for announcements, Decubellis said a new online "Parent Hub" will be established.

According to Elementary School Principal Jerry Bavero, the new reading curriculum has been delivered to all classrooms, and the grounds have been properly spruced. Special kudos were offered to those who maintained the school over the summer.

The Middle School has a new principal in Tammy Hughes, who said that the biggest update for her school is the CarRiderPro system. The program is software that "streamlines" the pickup process by using a specialized car tag that identifies students and their guardians.

As for Union County High School, Josh Davis has taken the reins as the new principal. Counselors have already returned to work and are putting schedules together, while teams and organizations

active in the fall are getting ready to come back.

Most of the system's schools are steadily phasing out of the technology-dominated learning that came about during the age of COVID-19. Chromebooks will no longer be sent home with students and will remain in the classroom for learning during the day. That said, they can be sent home to continue studies during inclement weather.

On the subject of technology, there's a new crackdown at the High School when it comes to cellphones. Phones cannot be out during the day and must be kept in a pocket or bag on silent.

A new policy across the board ensures that if any teacher sees a phone, he or she must take it up for the day. Exceptions will be made for students who need to contact parents or have apps that check blood sugar or other medical conditions.

## DUI Wreck...from Page 1A

BMW, Pamela Parker, 81, of Blairsville, was seriously injured and transported to Northeast Georgia Medical Center in Gainesville for treatment, according to GSP.

Parker's condition was not known by the newspaper at press time.

Landis is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

## Attention all High School Students! VFW announces Kick-Off of Annual \$30,000 Scholarship Competition



**VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS**

**NO ONE DOES MORE FOR VETERANS.**

Commander Chuck Honaker of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Post 7394 announced the kick-off of this year's VFW's Voice of Democracy Scholarship competition.

Local high school students have the opportunity to compete for thousands of dollars in scholarships and a trip to Washington, D.C. Students must write and record a three-to-five minute essay on the selected theme using an audio CD or flash drive and present their recording, typed essay and

completed entry form to their local VFW Post by October 31. The theme selected is "Is America Today Our Forefathers' Vision?"

Students begin by competing at the local Post level, then Post winners compete at the District level with the winner advancing to the state competition. All state first-place winners receive a four day trip to Washington, D.C., and the chance to compete for their share of more than \$150,000 in scholarships. The first-place winner receives a \$30,000 college scholarship.

The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) started the Voice of Democracy Scholarship program in

1947. The VFW became a national sponsor in the late 1950s and assumed sole responsibility for the program in 1961. The competition was created to provide students grades 9-12 the opportunity to express themselves in regard to democratic ideas and principles. Around 40,000 students participate in the competition each year and VFW awards more than \$2.1 million in educational scholarships every year.

Interested students and teachers should contact the Voice of Democracy Chairman at VFW Post 7394 by email at vfw7394@outlook.com for more information. For details, visit: www.vfw.org/VOD

# Elder Exploitation...from Page 1A

54, of Blairsville, this month on allegations that she had committed the felony of financial exploitation of an elder.

The investigation started in early July when the Union County Nursing Home contacted the Sheriff's Office about suspicious bank account activity discovered during a financial aid check, UCSO

Financial Crimes Inv. Bob Calamari said.

An aging relative of Gooch's had been admitted to the nursing home for health reasons in April 2023, and the relative was paying to stay there with monthly retirement income. Suddenly, the nursing home payments stopped coming in about five months ago, Calamari said.

Gooch had power of attorney over the relative and was responsible for making the payments, and when a nursing home financial aid specialist requested bank statements to look into the matter, it came to light that two dozen checks had been written from the relative to Gooch, Calamari said.

When Gooch learned of the lapsed payments, she

went to the nursing home with a \$4,740 check to cover the backpay, but another family member provided the bank statements to the nursing home, raising suspicions over the account activity and prompting a call to UCSO, Calamari said.

A deputy responded to the nursing home to file a report, and Georgia's Adult Protective Services was notified as well.

When Calamari took on the case for the Criminal Investigations Division, he interviewed the financial aid specialist and retrieved copies of the bank statements, which showed that more than 90% of the resident's monthly income was supposed to be earmarked for the nursing home.

Despite operating on such a tight budget, the nursing home resident appeared to have written \$7,285 worth of checks that Gooch cashed over roughly the last year, Calamari said, noting that an analysis of the 24 checks written to Gooch demonstrated elements of forgery.

Included in the mix were five checks totaling about \$1,500 written to another family member, and Calamari believes Gooch forged both the endorsing and account holder's

signatures before cashing them.

Calamari said that, in her role as power of attorney, Gooch seemed to have appropriately signed all the checks made out to the nursing home – a stark difference from the checks that he said contained evidence of forgery to commit theft.

He then met with Gooch, interviewing her once about a week into July and then again on July 18, after which Calamari took warrants for her arrest, he said.

Gooch turned herself into the Union County Jail on Friday, July 19, and posted bond for release the same day.

She has been charged only and is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

The power of attorney for the resident was turned over to a different family member after the nursing home started asking questions about the missed payments, so Gooch no longer holds that status for her relative, Calamari said.

"To have accountability, family members need to have more than one person watching over their elderly relatives' accounts," said UCSO Capt. Daren "Bear" Osborn, who oversees the Criminal Investigations Division.

# Meth/Fentanyl Bust...from Page 1A

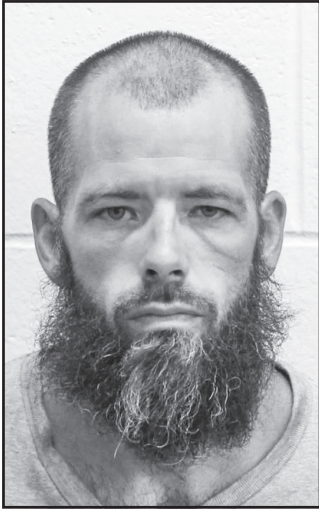


**Jesse Dockery**

belonging to Schneider, a Dodge pickup truck and \$871 in cash confiscated during the arrests.

The investigation remains active, Miller said, noting that UCSO is working with multiple agencies to make additional arrests and trace the drugs back to their source, believed to be somewhere in Atlanta.

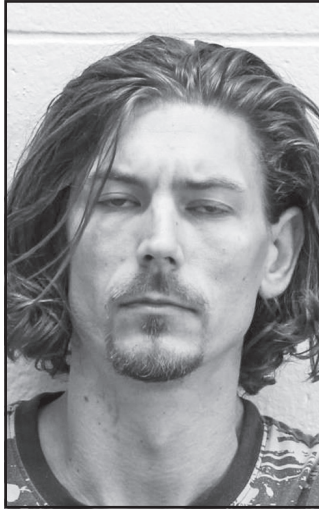
Assisting in the ongoing



**Robert Mathew Schneider**

case are the sheriff's offices of Fannin County and Cherokee County, North Carolina, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's Appalachian Regional Drug Enforcement Office, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Safe Streets Task Force.

Cody Alan Boaz, 34, of Blairsville, was arrested on the property as well on multiple failure to appear warrants.



**Cody Alan Boaz**

As of press time, both Dockery and Schneider had been denied bond, and Boaz did not have a bond amount set.

The above individuals are presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

"We're just continuing to work hard to get the drugs off the street," UCSO Maj. Shawn Dyer said, commending the interdiction efforts of the county's deputies and investigators.

# Union County Rotary Club offers Free American Flags to businesses

Do you fly an American Flag in front of your business? Let us upgrade your flag for FREE! The club's community project of the month is to up-

grade any flag poles for businesses in our community. We will cover the cost of a new flag, the correct rope, and provide education to your staff on

flag etiquette!

Contact Madison Urquiola at [murquiola@yhc.edu](mailto:murquiola@yhc.edu) to apply. If you'd like to learn more about our project, contact Jimmy Nichols at [jimmy\\_nichols@ucbi.com](mailto:jimmy_nichols@ucbi.com). There is no better time than now to showcase your pride for our great nation.

The knowledge behind our project is from Russ Williams, owner of All About Flags. If you would like to know more about flag etiquette contact Russ at [allaboutflags@gmail.com](mailto:allaboutflags@gmail.com)!

