

Highlands Newspaper

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Thurs., Feb. 19, 2026

The transforming of 4th & Main begins

By Kim Lewicki

Back in January, Joe Nisbett, owner of the property at the corner of Main and 4th streets, announced that the Holt Building that previously housed,

Bill's soda shop, Mrs. Wong's dress shop, Highlands Hill Deli, and Sweetreats, to name a few past businesses, would be coming down in February.

After more than 140 years

of anchoring the corner of South 4th Street and Main Street, the Holt Building had reached the end of its structural life.

Given the building's long

• See **TRANSFORMING** page 15



Kellie Burns



Dylan Castle



David Culpepper



Nick Lofthouse

District 2 BOC candidates participate in Q&A and GOP Forum

By Kim Lewicki

This week, the four District 2 candidates answer this paper's Q&A and the questions asked at the Feb. 7 GOP Forum held in Franklin.

Kellie Burns

Why do you think you are the best person to represent the citizens of District 2 and Macon County as a whole?

I believe it comes down to qualifications, proven service, and a genuine commitment to the people of Macon County.

With 29 years of bank-

ing experience, I will bring the financial expertise necessary to responsibly manage and oversee our county's finances and budget. I will pro-actively work to eliminate waste, identify inefficiencies, and ensure that your taxpayer dollars are used wisely and transparently. For nearly three decades, I have helped businesses, families and organizations make informed, sound financial decisions, and I am ready to put that experience to work for the people of Macon

County.

With that being said, the Lord gave me a heart for service, and it has become an integral part of who I am. I have had the privilege of working alongside friends, family and neighbors to help raise money for nonprofit organizations and families in need. I envisioned and created the Sweet Carolina Music Festival and 828 Treasure Quest, which not only helps raise money for local nonprofits, but also helps

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If a disaster happens, Highlands is ready

By Kim Lewicki

Should a natural disaster befall Highlands, the town and its residents now have two emergency stations – the Civic Center at the Rec Park and the Community Building.

At the January Town Board meeting, commissioners agreed to formally designate the Community Building as a Disaster Response Hub where a community-led disaster response and re-

source coordination team will be located and manned by FEMA liaisons, Pisgah Legal Services, the Community Care Clinic, the International Friendship Center, the Emergency Council as well as area churches and rotaries – who will manage volunteer shifts and the coordination of collected supplies so duplication will be minimized.

In the wake of Hurricane

• See **DISASTER** page 2

Five apply for Dotson's vacated Town Board seat

By Kim Lewicki

As of noon, Monday, Feb. 16, five people have submitted applications to be appointed a Town Board member – Jan Pittman, Bill Grubb, Margot Teed, Daryl Griswold and Marc Hehn.

According to Town Manager Josh Ward, at the Feb. 19 Town Board meeting, commis-

sioners will decide how they want to proceed.

The applicants are being considered to fill the seat vacated by Commissioner John Dotson as of Dec. 31, 2025.

The person chosen to fill the seat will complete Dotson's term until the 2027 municipal election.



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The outcome of county's public hearings

Two weeks ago, the Macon County Board of Commissioners held two hearings. One was on a proposed redistricting of the county. The second was a proposal to replace the county planning board and appoint a new one.

I was delighted to see a nice delegation of Highlanders at the hearings. But more than just Highlanders, there was a good cross-section of residents from all areas of Macon County. Concerned citizens from Franklin, Iotla, Elijah, Cartoogechaye, and Nantahala were there just to name a few. Commissioners Patterson, Weller, and Tate attended and spoke at the hearing, along with Frieda Bennett and John Muir, a member of the Highlands Planning Board.

All the speakers at the redistricting hearing touched on common concerns. First, everyone thought the process should be slowed and be more deliberate. The recurring question was why the rush? Second, the consensus was that options for creating a new districting map needed to be explored. Why just have three districts?



Highlands Mayor
Patrick Taylor

How can the county be redistricted to provide more representation from various districts and different communities in this big county?

Another surprise for me was that many speakers seemed open to the idea of each district electing its representative rather than having a county-wide election of commissioners at large. For example, the state legislature is formed by districts; why can't a county do the same?

I, like other speakers, urged the commissioners to carefully study redistricting options. I suggested that consultants from the NC School of Government advise the county on opinions consistent with state statutes. Others said that the state board of elections might need to weigh in and advise the county. Maybe a task force of consulting advisors could work with a panel of county citizens to develop proposals and options for redistricting.

The county commissioners pointed out that if the proposed redistricting were approved by the board, it would need to go to the local legislative delegation for state approval. That is one way of redistricting, but the residents at the hearing seemed to want to explore the second choice: a county referendum. The referendum option is in the state's general statutes. I suspect our legislative delegation would be happy to defer action to the will of the voters. Several speakers stressed that redistricting was for the voters, not for the benefit of the sitting commissioners.

At the end of the hearing, Chairman Young expressed similar views about creating maps that provided options for redistricting. I hope the county board will now put in place a process to develop options that citizens expressed at the public hearing.

My first idea is to create more districts of smaller populations so more communities like Highlands have a voice on the county board. Why not have a seven-member commission with 6 districts? Each district could elect its representative. The other commissioner could be elected by all voters to serve as chair of the commission, like a mayor in a city council structure. But that is just my idea; I am sure others have their views, which should also be fully reviewed.

The second hearing was for the reor-

...DISASTER continued from page 1

Helene, the Highlands Community Resource Coalition was formed to help with recovery locally and afar. To be more organized, should another disaster arise, the group requested use of the Community Building where "verified" information will be disseminated reducing the strain on emergency dispatchers and town staff; from where food, water, and emergency supplies can be distributed and where overnight shelter can be available for overflow from the Civic Center.

A new generator has been installed at the Community Building as well as Starlink capabilities so there will be a public space for charging devices and accessing the internet when private utilities are down, in addition to the Civic Center which is similarly outfitted.

Long ago, when Buck Trott was mayor, when the hospital upgraded its generator, the Civic Center became the recipient of its old one which was the first step in enabling the Civic Center to become a bona fide Red Cross Center.

According to Rec Park Director, Lester Norris, the Civic Center is the design-

ated Red Cross shelter in Highlands if a natural disaster occurs and it can be used and designated as such if the Red Cross deems it necessary to open it as a shelter.

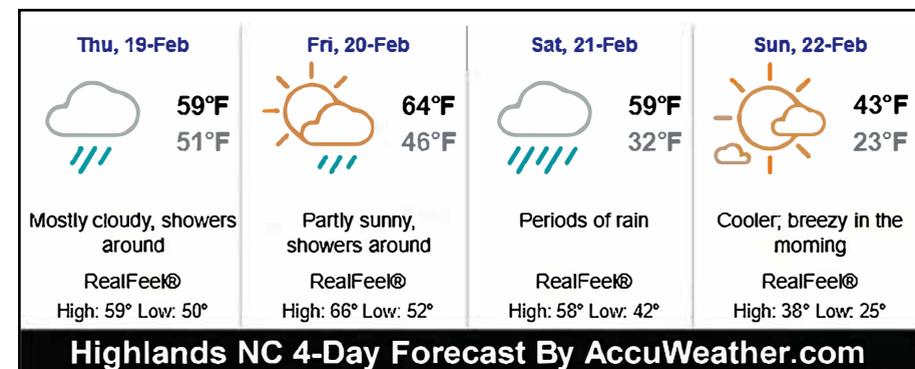
"This would be a place where people can shelter, sleep on cots, have ADA accessible showers, generated electricity during power outages, heat, and Wi-Fi – basically taking care of basic necessities," he said.

Norris said the community building will be a hub for non-profits to come and work together to meet other needs that might arise from the disaster.

"Things like organizing volunteers who might help out at the Rec Department with the shelter, prepare meals, counsel, gather and distribute food, supplies, and offer information about available help," he said.

Though during a disaster, only the Red Cross can officially cite the Rec Park as a disaster hub, Norris said the town can open the Civic Center as a shelter if needed for a local disaster – even if the Red Cross doesn't recognize the event as a disaster.

• WEATHER •



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Featured and Fabulous



Prepare to be captivated by sweeping, unobstructed views of iconic Whiteside Mountain from this stunning Highlands Falls CC residence, a home so remarkable it has been featured twice in Architectural Digest. Wormy chestnut accents, open floor plan, screened porch with grilling station and Whiteside Mountain in full view! A spacious lower level with fireplace for guests' privacy plus a whole house generator! Offered for \$2,999,000



Perched above Highland's famed 4,118 feet – this craftsman-style elegant mountain gated residence is newly roofed, with an open concept floor plan, spacious rooms, bonus area, a double-sided fireplace, and gorgeous sunsets from the spacious deck. Just a 5-minute drive to Main Street and offered for \$2,400,000



This fabulous jewel designed by acclaimed modernist architect Jim Fox on the golf course of prestigious Wildcat Cliffs CC has as a focal point, a huge double-sided stone fireplace! Lots of natural light and windows add to the ambiance. Offered furnished at a bargain price of \$1,450,000.



Nestled within the gates of Wildcat Cliffs CC but part of Wildcat Ridge Estates, this new construction estate home by Campagna Homes has all the latest in luxury concepts – elevator, 2 great rooms and a luxurious primary bath ensuite. Club membership is not mandatory. Offered for \$3,500,000



...Q&A continued from page 1

to promote tourism and development in our county.

As commissioner, I will come up with creative, viable solutions to move our county forward and lay a solid foundation for generations to come.

How do you feel about the county's move to redistrict?

Naturally, I want to promote fairness, balance and equal representation across our county. The problem is—how exactly do we do that without marginalizing one or more of our districts? I will say that I find it very strange that no other county in North Carolina has a system like ours. I can definitely see where it could be unfair.

As it stands, we currently allow one district to hold three of the five seats, which gives it the possibility of holding the majority of the vote. District 2 also has the opportunity to put one to two new candidates up for election every two years, whereas the other two districts have to wait every four years.

With that being said, I would like for the board to host a town hall meeting to see what our residents think. Once ideas are compiled, I would like to form a committee to study the voting processes of other counties in our state. We also need to get feedback from our Board of Elections regarding how a change like this might impact them.

Ultimately, it should come down to what the people want.

What do you think the county should focus

on over the next four years?

For starters, I would like to see our technology improve countywide so that our employees can work more effectively and efficiently. The fact that most departments aren't working in the Cloud, do not have Microsoft Teams, and they are still using paper timesheets is very concerning. Our county needs advanced, user-friendly technology that will not only help to enhance our employees' work lives, but that will also help us to create a centralized county government communication system. A system where residents can go to get the latest information about anything and everything relating to our county — from school closings to emergency management information and beyond. I believe this is crucial in moving us forward and keeping our residents informed and safe.

Secondly, I would like to see the county enhance our Emergency Preparedness Plan to include trained volunteers who are willing to be on "standby" in the event of a natural disaster, pandemic, or any other countywide emergency. In addition to promoting preparedness and volunteerism, I hope we can help open up an avenue for our fire departments and nonprofits to recruit people who are willing to serve our community. From what I am hearing, there is a great need for more volunteer fire fighters.

Thirdly, I want to start a "Farming for the Future" initiative that will help

our county return to its farming and agricultural roots. I feel like expanding our farmers' market and having a commercial cannery would be a huge step in the right direction. Farming is not only a profitable industry, but it also promotes sustainability, teaches self-reliance, promotes agri-tourism, and helps to cultivate healthy eating...which will ultimately create a healthier community. The benefits are endless. Imagine tourists and residents, alike, having access to fresh, local, preservative-free foods. Envision young people seeing agriculture not as a thing of the past — but rather — realizing that it can give them a viable, meaningful future right here at home ... To me ... that is a future worth fighting for.

In addition, I want to create a "Remote Job Opportunity Program." I feel like job creation is a huge source of contention amongst our residents. I would like to see the board working with NC Works, FHS, Macon Early College, SCC, WCU and others to identify and promote remote job opportunities that currently exist across our nation. This would allow residents to utilize an industry that we have not yet fully capitalized on. If there is a market for it, we need to find a way to connect, prepare, and train our residents so they can pursue these opportunities.

Last, but certainly not least, I want to address our current housing crisis. I want to partner with realtors, contractors, investors, developers and others to form a "Future Homeowner Advisory Committee" to tackle this issue. It is my hope that we can develop sustainable housing options that may open up the market for this generation and generations to come.

As you can tell, there are a lot of initiatives I would like to get going.

How can the county help remedy the decrease in state and federal funding allocated to the school system?

One of my main initiatives is identifying inefficiencies that may currently exist within our budget. I would like to incentivize teachers and county employees who uncover substantial government waste within their departments. I would also love to host contests encouraging teachers, principals, administrators and other county employees to search for grants that we may not be currently receiving or fully utilizing. The more people we have looking, the greater our chances are of finding opportunities we are missing out on. When we band together and make employees part of the solution — it not only empowers them — but it also gives them a "say" in their future. Identifying

and finding ways to strategically allocate taxpayer dollars is one of the core responsibilities of a county commissioner. Let's help take care of the people who take care of us.

I also want our county to help expand and/or encourage the establishment of a foundation that will actively pursue philanthropic initiatives that will give individuals and businesses the opportunity to directly invest in our county. The foundation could use donated and raised funds to support our parks and recreation, build athletic facilities, enhance our educational system, fund emergency response and public health initiatives, provide school supplies, assist with affordable housing, support public health care, and more.

Many of the buildings you currently see in Highlands — such as the hospital, chamber/visitor center, and the civic center — were made possible by donors like Jane Woodruff, the Williams, the Oxforths, the Eckerds and many others. The Highlands Community Fund has played a significant role in helping to establish support for local organizations and funding much needed projects. I would like to see a similar foundation that established countywide.

What is your stance on increasing the sales tax 1/4 cent?

I believe that there should be no taxation without representation and by putting this issue on the ballot we are allowing the voters to have the final say.

I do think that the tax has not been properly explained, therefore, people are automatically against it. The truth is, if you spent \$10,000 per year in retail sales it would cost you \$25 more per year in taxes. Keep in mind your tax on groceries, medicine, gas, and medical supplies would not see this increase.

The most advantageous part of increasing consumption taxes as opposed to property taxes comes from the fact that local property owners are not required to carry the tax burden alone. Tourists, visitors from neighboring towns, and non-land owners would be helping to alleviate some of the tax burden. That's huge ... since it has been estimated that 40% of Macon County's sales tax revenue comes from non-residents.

My hope is that consumption taxes will eventually take the place of mandatory property taxes on primary residences. This is why I have been lobbying for years to try and get our senators and state representatives to expand and modify the homestead exemption to include all

• See Q&A page 5



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...Q&A continued from page 4

primary residences. I would also like to see them completely eliminate taxation on primary residences for our veterans, retirees, and disabled who fall under a certain income threshold.

What do you see as the fiscal consequences when county departments request funds outside the standard annual budget cycle? (Forum)

I'm a banker, so budgets to me, that's a budget and a budget is a budget and we stick to the budget that's just the way to do it. I have an idea for a philanthropist initiative as a way to find money somewhere else. My philanthropist initiative essentially is we create a foundation that collects money from different people or organizations that want to donate to see our county improve. Improvements like in our school system, our health care, whatever it may be. And we have those funds set aside for those emergency expenditures. Highlands was built that way. If you really look at the hospital in Highlands and you look at their civic center, you look at their library, when you look at those things, they were built on philanthropy. We should have a foundation set aside with funds for discretionary things like we say, "Hey, you can use it for this, this, and this." It's kind of like grants. If every time you readjust your budget, you really don't have a budget, you really just have opened a checkbook for anybody to take money out of and you need to think about that. I run a strict budget at my home. I run a strict budget at the bank and we should run a strict budget for our government.

Where do you draw the line between informal collaboration with fellow commissioners and a violation of the public's right to open transparent meetings? (Forum)

Personnel issues or anything legal cannot be exposed to the public. There's a legality issue there. I believe in transparency. Being in charge of a bank there are things that I discuss in my office with individuals that I will not discuss when we have a team meeting because it's not necessary, it's not pertinent and then it makes me understand what I do need to address with the body as a whole. There will always be meetings that aren't going to be public because you got to have conversations otherwise you get that county commissioner meeting on one Tuesday night a month, so there will be conversations that have to happen.

Would you support a hiring freeze on non-essential vacancies or do you believe all current positions must be main-

tained? (Forum)

A couple weeks ago, I posted on my election page a plan to incentivize employees for finding waste. I think with the \$64 million budget, we can all agree that there's probably some waste, a lot of waste, worked into that. We did this at my bank. They went through and said, "Hey, we'll give you a bonus if you find in your department a certain amount of waste." And we had a lady, she was like, "Hey, we've been using this software for insurance and we paid, if I'm not mistaken, it was like \$68,000 a year for it and we hadn't used it in like 5 years." And they were like, "What? Why didn't you tell us?" And she was like, "Nobody asked me." So, for me, I would want to engage our employees and make them part of the solution. I'm going to disagree [with others] a little bit. When we started out in banking, we had eight customer service representatives. But when technology came around and things changed, we went down to three, then two now. That's a huge transition. It's hard for me to believe there's not some places where there's people that we might not need them and we could pay more to the other people in those departments and get more out of them.

We have a \$60 million fund balance reserve on the books. What is your strategy for these funds? Should they stay put or be used to offset property taxes or some other purpose? (Forum)

I'm a banker and I would say you're supposed to put away 20% of your budget, that's the maximum you really need and the state of North Carolina says that as well. That's what they recommend. If you have additional funds, though, we've got to fix the problems. We need a new jail. We need improvements at our courthouse and at our schools. Why are we holding on to this money and it's going to cost us more in the future to fix all these things and we're just holding on to money. I work at a bank, so I know you're not going to make that much interest on that money. You're probably making nothing honestly. We don't need to be holding on to things and letting our buildings fall to the ground and we need to be finding government waste.

Dylan Castle

Why do you think you are the best person to represent citizens of District 2 and Macon County as a whole?

There are a number of titles that describe what I have done in my life: a husband, father, conservative, youth pas-

• See Q&A page 7



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Real estate investment in Highlands: A mountain market worth watching

Highlands has long been a coveted destination for luxury real estate investors seeking natural beauty and strong market fundamentals. Highlands' population of 1,000 year-round residents swells to 20,000+ during peak summer months, creating unique investment dynamics that are evolving in buyers' favor.

Q4 2025 revealed a local market transitioning toward greater balance. While closed sales declined 25% compared to Q4 2024, listings increased 12%, offering buyers more choice after years of severe inventory constraints. Days on market decreased 36% to 119 days, demonstrating that well-priced properties continue to attract serious buyers. The median sale price surged to \$830,000, reflecting our community's enduring appeal even as the market shifts.

With months' supply of inventory at 4.5 months, investors are discovering improved negotiating positions without sacrificing appreciation potential. Properties are selling at 92% of list price, indicating pricing remains strong while buyers gain leverage that was virtually nonexistent during the pandemic.

Our market distinguishes itself through scarcity and exclusivity. Limited buildable land due to mountainous terrain and strict zoning keeps new inventory constrained. This supply-demand dynamic has historically supported steady appreciation, with local luxury properties holding value even during broader market corrections. Unlike coastal second-home markets that can experience volatility, Highlands benefits from diverse investors from Atlanta; Charlotte professionals seeking weekend retreats; and retirees establishing permanent residences.

Investment opportunities fall into several categories. Single-family luxury homes range from charming Main Street



Gary Scott
President
Howard Hanna Allen Tate
Howard Hanna Virginia

cottages to sprawling estates with acreage and waterfalls. Many investors purchase for personal use during summer months while generating rental income during shoulder seasons. The area's robust culture of events, art galleries, and farm-to-table dining ensures consistent demand from affluent vacationers.

Condominium investments offer lower-maintenance alternatives with built-in amenities, appealing to investors seeking turnkey rentals or lock-and-leave second homes.

Land banking represents another strategy gaining traction. As buildable lots become increasingly scarce, raw land purchases with mountain views, water features, or proximity to town have shown strong appreciation potential for patient investors.

Investors should understand our seasonal nature. Many businesses close during winter months, affecting rental income potential. Additionally, our elevation means unpredictable winter weather, impacting property maintenance and accessibility.

For investors considering Highlands, current market conditions present a compelling entry point. The 12% increase in inventory provides selection previously unavailable, while the \$830,000 median price and strong list-to-close ratios confirm underlying value.

Whether you're looking to invest in Highlands real estate or make this mountain paradise your home, Highlands Realtors are here to guide you through every step. Our knowledgeable advisors understand the local market and provide comprehensive services including mortgage, insurance, title, and relocation.

• Gary Scott is president of the recently rebranded Howard Hanna Allen Tate Real Estate of the Highlands-Cashiers Plateau

...SPIRITUALLY from page 14

but the one time Christ was asked whether many would be saved, He responded: Strive to enter through the narrow door, for many,

I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24). Let us, then, deny ourselves and strive!

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...Q&A continued from page 5

tor, middle school/high school teacher, constitutionalist, coach, athletic director, volunteer/leader, chaplain, manager, carpenter, business consultant, however, what I am most excited to bring to the Board of County Commissioners is a Pastor's heart. Ultimately, a commissioner deals with people 100% of the time and you must have a heart for people. Showing respect, compassion, hearing all perspectives, bringing ideas together are all necessary traits for a county commissioner. There are a number of opportunities on the horizon for Macon County and I believe having a heart for people will ensure the best choices moving forward.

How do you feel about the county's move to redistrict?

I believe the conversation is worth having, however, this should not be

rushed and needs to be explained clearly and thoroughly to all of Macon County to ensure the best decision is made.

What do you think the county should focus on over the next four years?

I believe a big problem with a number of elected officials is looking so short sighted. Focusing on just the time of your term, limits good decisions that truly sets the future generations up for success. So ultimately, my answer is in the next four years, we need to set things in motion that sustain Macon County 50 years from now. Of the current needs, the landfill discussion needs to be at the top end of the list, a senior center facility to meet the growing senior population, overall maintenance or expansion of county facilities to ensure sustainable services.

How can the county help remedy the decrease in state and federal funding allocated to the school

system?

I am very curious to see how the School Board presents their budget this year. Due to the fact that the school system receives funding from the federal, state, and local levels, there are specific needs that those funds go to. It is difficult to guarantee county funding to fill all gaps created by the lack of federal or state funding. While a temporary solution may be optional, I would be concerned that any prolonged funding from the county to fill these gaps, would burden the citizens of Macon County beyond reason. However, I see being a county commissioner as more than just approving funds. I would work with our state representatives and agencies to ensure that the funding would be filled by the appropriate funds.

What is your stance on increasing the sales tax 1/4 cent.

A county commissioner's responsibility in regards to the .25% sales tax increase,

is to educate the voters, not attempt to sway their votes. Since I am seeking that office, I believe that I should hold myself to that same standard. The number one fact, and greatest part of the story, is that this is on the ballot. The citizens of Macon County have the choice for a tax increase or not. This should be celebrated as we would normally be at the mercy of elected officials. If the citizens vote to approve the increase, the county commissioners have the choice to implement that tax or not. If passed, I would vote in favor of implementing the tax. Another fact we should consider: there are always pros and cons to tax increases. They can fund needed projects, but they likely never go away. Another fact: if implemented, a citizen could avoid the tax a number of ways as it would not apply to unprepared food, gas, prescription medications, certain agricultural supplies,

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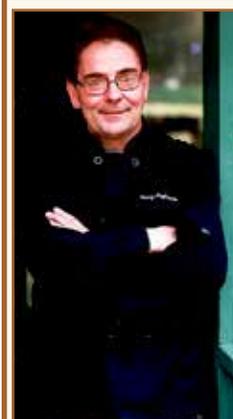
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• LETTER •

Why didn't the commission rein in Shearl?

Dear Editor,

The clear purpose of County Commissioner's meetings is governance and working for the betterment of Macon County and its citizens. County Commissioners are elected official with the sacred responsibility of upholding these duties. Their office requires the highest standards of decorum and integrity. County Commission meetings are decidedly not a campaign forum.

John Shearl's behavior in the February 10th meeting was a disgrace to his office and

violated these tenants. Mr. Shearl misused the announcements section of the meeting to deliver an 8 minute plus soliloquy detailing his purported accomplishments in office. Although he did give mention of other commissioners, the delivery was largely self-aggrandizing. Near the end of his lengthy speech Mr. Shearl announced he was running for re-election. I see promoting his candidacy in an official meeting as a gross abuse of his elected office.

That this action continued unchecked raises concerns about the standards of conduct of the commission in general. Are blatant misuses of time and gross electioneering acceptable behaviors?

Meetings are available on video and I encourage citizens to view this event and form your own conclusions. I remain frankly appalled.

Joanne Roesner, DVM, DABVP
Scaly Mountain

JOEY WILSON

FOR MACON COUNTY COMMISSIONER

A VOTE IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION FOR THE FUTURE OF MACON COUNTY

Joey Wilson is a lifelong resident of Macon County, a proud husband, father, and son, a firm believer that good government means balancing fiscal responsibility with forward-looking growth.

He's seen firsthand how smart planning and responsible spending can create opportunity - for local businesses, for our children, and for our parents who helped build this community.

As County Commissioner, Joey will work to ensure that every tax dollar is used wisely, while making sure our county continues to grow in a way that preserves our small-town values and secures a strong future for the next generation.

PRIMARY ELECTION DAY
TUESDAY, MARCH 3, 2026

THE BEST PERSON TO REPRESENT DISTRICT 1
ELLIJAY, FLATS, HIGHLANDS AND SUGARFORK

FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

Every dollar counts. Joey believes in transparent, efficient budgeting - prioritizing essential services while eliminating waste. County government should live within its means, just like families do.

SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

Growth should bring opportunity, not problems. Joey will promote smart development that strengthens our economy, supports local businesses, and protects what makes Macon County special.

IMPROVED PUBLIC SERVICES

Backing investments in emergency services, education, and critical infrastructure.



• OBITUARY •

Brandon David O'Brien



Brandon David O'Brien, 37, of Scaly Mountain, NC, passed away after a brief illness. Born in Maricopa County, AZ, Brandon brought a gentle spirit and a bright presence to everyone who knew him.

He moved from Fort Wayne, IN, to Scaly Mountain in 2015, where he worked at Old Edwards Inn. Brandon loved the outdoors—hiking with friends, fishing, and loved all animals, these were among his greatest joys. He was a beautiful, precious soul whose kindness and warmth touched many lives, and he will be deeply missed.

Brandon was preceded in death by his grandparents Katherine Gillie, Gene Friar, and Martha O'Brien; two uncles, Mike and Daniel O'Brien.

He is survived by his mother, Cheryl Friar (Gary Enyeart) of Fort Wayne, IN; his father, David O'Brien (Sheri) of Scaly Mountain; uncle, Gene Friar (Lisa); cousin, Adam Friar (Lydia); and several other cousins who loved him dearly.

A private family service will be held at a later date.

In lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to Macon Funeral Home to assist with arrangements.

Online condolences can be made at www.maconfuneralhome.com.

Macon Funeral Home is handling the arrangements.

PAID FOR BY FRIENDS OF JOEY WILSON

...Q&A continued from page 7

motor vehicles, etc. Lastly, the impact is simple to understand: for every \$100 spent (specific retail items), there would be an increase of \$0.25.

What do you see as the fiscal consequences when county departments request funds outside the standard annual budget cycle? (Forum)

First and foremost, I think it sets a tone. If a county commission board were to say yes, every time an unexpected expense comes up, then it sets a tone, so where do we draw the line? It creates a slippery slope. My immediate response would be that there would be a huge fiscal

consequence. I think when you're in a position like this, absolutes can become very dangerous. If you say, "I will never say yes to a budget request outside of the budget cycle," that could be very, very dangerous. Just as dangerous as you say, yes, I will always approve any budget request outside the budget cycle. I have to respect and represent you as the taxpayer. If I'm a commissioner that spends money every time a request comes up, then I'm betraying the trust that you've given to me. But, you're not the only taxpayer out there. County employees are also taxpayers and if they

have a need and they work hard and they tell us this is a guaranteed need and they make their case and it makes sense and benefits the services you're already being taxed for, then it would be foolish to just automatically say no just because it's outside of the cycle.

Where do you draw the line between informal collaboration with fellow commissioners and a violation of the public's right to open transparent meetings? (Forum)

I think the best way to get ahead of any sort of transparency question, any sort of ethics question is to make sure that we're communicating to you as clearly as possible.

That's another component of voice

for the people. I've already talked to some in the county about what can we do to bolster this PR relationship to the public so that you're not left wondering. Whether it's something as informal as a Facebook post or social media post, bolstering the website, utilizing YouTube to its greater degree, whatever, there's plenty of things to do. I'm big into communicating to people. It does come down to personal choice. Each candidate when they become county commissioner is going to live their life differently because personal integrity is different for each individual. Mine's pretty high, so I'm going to do everything out in the open.

Would you support a hiring freeze on non-essential vacancies or do you believe all current positions must be maintained? (Forum)

Talking to the folks at the county, the county manager, the HR department, I asked them straight up I said, are we overstaffed or not? Because you hear those comments floating around. They said they're not overstaffed, and they're the experts. The other question I asked is, I hear that most of our employees are wearing multiple hats. Is that true? The answer was yes. Freezing seems like a pretty risky decision. Then their pay needs to be addressed. They're wearing multiple hats, pulling multiple roles, not always getting paid for those additional roles and then we say, "Oh, by the way, those people that help supplement and support you in different areas, they're not going to exist. What's going to happen? Who's going to pick up the slack? I know it's not essential, but those are still services. Those are still things being provided. So, I would be very cautious to say that I would support a hiring freeze. People like to say, conservatives like to say, that government is not a business, but we provide services and we have employees. So, I would argue it is a business. And if I'm going to go in there as a de facto business owner representing you, I'm going to treat my employees well. And so we need to make sure that we're doing the best that we can.

We have a \$60 million fund balance reserve on the books. What is your strategy for these funds? Should they stay put or be used to offset property taxes or some other purpose? (Forum)

Utilizing the fund balance is the most common sense approach. I would agree 20% seems pretty reasonable. My biggest concern would be when we start to build new things, everybody gets excited about that. I think it's awesome. It's a good way to, you know, have a good vision for the future. What good does it



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- May 17** **Chef's Circle: Celebrating the Flavors of Highlands**
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A portion of the Chef's Circle ticket sales will benefit The Giving Kitchen
- Jul 14** **14th Annual Champagne Dinner featuring Pol Roger**
- Sep 27** **8th Annual Oyster & Seafood Fest with Lowcountry Oyster Co.**
- Nov 13** **16th Annual Farm Harvest Dinner & Barn Dance**
- Nov 14** **Fall Fête at Half-Mile Farm with Chef Craig Richards**

Tickets Starting at \$198
Includes dinner, drinks, shuttle and gratuity.

BOOK ONLINE



...Q&A continued from page 10

do us if in 15 years it starts deteriorating and falling apart? We need to make sure when we start to unleash some of these funds and we start creating some of these awesome things that are years in the making and should have been done years ago, that we also can sustain the maintenance of any sort of new buildings, new projects, and new facilities.

David Culpepper

Why do you think you are the best person to represent citizens of District 2 and Macon County as a whole?

I'll not claim being the best person, but I am an extremely well qualified candidate with a vision for Macon County that can produce long term positive outcomes. I don't consider myself as representing District 2 only, rather I think the county should be looked at as a whole system. A high tide rises all boats and a bad apple really does spoil the bunch. Quality of life is a big issue for me and advocating for and accentuating that quality, sometimes by getting out of the way, is a legitimate function of county government. We need people voluntarily, not coercively, working together to make our communities better. We need a livability mix that is desirable enough that professional folks (ex: medical) anchor here and raise families here. We need people to want to live here, work here, and play here. It really is a holistic approach that starts with recognizing the ideals that brought forth the enlightenment and that anchor western philosophy. The dichotomy of being self-employed for 25 years and serving on the Franklin Town Council for eight years gives me a unique perspective from two very different angles.

How do you feel about the county's move to redistrict?

It will offer more access for Districts 1 and 3 candidates, but it will change the size and composition of the districts to make populations similar across all three districts. It appears positives and negatives mostly negate each other on this issue. I think it's a fallacy for a candidate, or commissioner, to envision themselves representing a district specifically.

What do you think the county should focus on over the next four years?

Providing better opportunities for the youth, focus on livability, and advocating for more outdoor recreation access. If we want good jobs, we need to foster an environment where it's easy to start a business. If we want more affordable housing, we need to foster an

environment in which it is easier and less expensive to build housing stock. If we want professional people to live here -- providing needed services -- we have to have schools that offer excellent academic opportunities for their kids. If we want resilient youth, we have to foster and advocate for outlets where they can build resiliency through self-esteem wins and accomplishments. We're all hooked on cheap dopamine hits and we need to get back to accomplishing tangible goals for our chemical rewards. This manifests itself in many ways like jumping a bike, kick-flipping a skateboard, climbing a crag, floating a rapid or doing summer research in an upland bog.

Our focus needs to be on an economically viable Macon County that recognizes healthy and successful individuals are what constitute a healthy and successful community. We have to fortify our youth with resilience, intelligence and opportunities so they can grow and thrive as individuals. This idea cannot be top-down regulated, nor forced into existence. Rather we have to advocate for and work toward creating an environment in which individuals can thrive and become assets in our community. A bolstered community then benefits future individuals.

How can the county help remedy the decrease in state and federal funding allocated to the school system?

The NC education budget has evolved from being part of general funding to being lottery funded. I'm not a lotto type of guy, but I know what was sold to NC regarding the lottery and its positive impact on education isn't what's happening. The percentage of lottery funds directed to NC schools has steadily decreased. Let's find out why and how we can reverse that course. Ill-prepared youth are more likely to become ill-functioning adults and the corollary is also true; well educated youth are better equipped to become successful and productive adults.

What is your stance on increasing the sales tax 1/4 cent?

Honestly, I think I voted for it once and voted against it once. I dislike taxes as much as the next net producer, but we have to fund services that are within our wheelhouse. It's a pretty benign change that has the potential to have a decent impact if used correctly. I would rather see it earmarked for education, teachers and assistants specifically, but I don't believe that's the current direction.

What do you see as the fiscal consequences

when county departments request funds outside the standard annual budget cycle? (Forum)

We painstakingly set budgets for a reason and we should try to stick to those uh as best as we possibly can. It should definitely not be the norm to step outside of the budget. There are certain circumstances where we can get a better product by doing that, for example when unanticipated grants come up. So, I'm not 100% opposed to it, but there's a lot of time spent on that budget process and it's important that we try to stick as closely as possible to that.

Where do you draw the line between informal collaboration with fellow commissioners and a violation of the public's right to open transparent meetings? (Forum)

There are these things called Sunshine Laws and I believe in them deeply. I had a good friend of mine years ago when I first got elected. He said, "Well, you guys should have all that stuff sorted out. You should know how everybody's going to vote before the meeting because if you don't and there's too much debate and banter, it'll be embarrassing and y'all look bad." Look, I don't care if I look bad. There's no such thing as a stupid question. It's the people's government. It's not my government. It's your government. And if I don't understand something, I don't think the people understand it. It's our job to ask questions in debate, have back and forth banter that doesn't make somebody else my enemy when we're debating up there, it means we're having open dialogue. Sometimes you got to think through things and really get to the bottom of it so that everybody has full understanding, us and y'all included. It's absolutely imperative that we have transparency and that everything is above board. It's like the old saying, when you turn a light on, all the bugs scatter. It's important that people's business is done in front of the people.

Would you support a hiring freeze on non-essential vacancies or do you believe all current positions must be maintained? (Forum)

Attrition doesn't have to be a bad thing. Attrition can actually be good. You can get more with less. There's no silver bullet to that answer though. You need as many employees as you need and you really don't need more. That being said, some employees are worth three employees and so that should be recognized in some type of merit-based way. That's hard to do in the current pay scale system. We talk a lot about employees and I think the focus is a lot of times on the upper-level positions, but it's our foot soldiers that get kind of the worst end of the stick. It's our

bus drivers, our jailers, teacher assistants. They're the ones that probably need the most attention in this matter. They're the ones that are where the rubber meets the road.

We have a \$60 million fund balance reserve on the books. What is your strategy for these funds? Should they stay put or be used to offset property taxes or some other purpose? (Forum)

\$60 million is too much. A few years ago the town passed a resolution that we would not go over a certain threshold. This board of commissioners is working on spending some of that money-wise. This park we're in right here right now is slated for redevelopment. I believe there's three phases. Phase 1 is happening right now over here for some pickle ball courts. Phase two involves the amphitheater and redoing some courts on that side and phase three is to cover pool. I'd like to see that moved up. I believe our swim teams are maybe the greatest teams we've ever had as far as championships in the conference and they can use a little bit of love. I'd like to see the covered pool as a year-round recreational opportunity for us and to give something back to that team that works really hard in a rented space. So, the fund balance does need to be drawn down. The problem is, when you tell politicians there's \$40 million to spend and we save 20 million, everybody's eyes light up and we have a whole bunch of different projects in mind. It doesn't need to be spent irresponsibly or quickly. It needs to be spent methodically to make this entire place, the entire county, a better place to live, work, and play.

Nick Lofthouse

Why do you think you are the best person to represent citizens of District 2 and Macon County as a whole?

I believe I'm the best person to represent District 2 and Macon County because I've spent my life in public service and understand how county government works from the inside out. Working for the Macon County Sheriff's Office for the past 17 years, I've seen firsthand how county decisions affect public safety, families, and daily life. I understand budgets, regulations, and the responsibilities that come with this role. People deserve someone who will be accessible, informed, and engaged every day, not just during meetings. I am committed to being that person.

How do you feel about the county's move to redistrict?

Redistricting is a major decision that should be handled with full transparency

The Best Is Now Even Better.

Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices Meadows Mountain Realty is proud to announce the acquisition of Highlands Cove Realty, bringing together two of the plateau's most respected names in luxury real estate.

Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices Meadows Mountain Realty (BHHSMMR), the leading luxury real estate brokerage on the Highlands-Cashiers plateau, announces the completed acquisition of Highlands Cove Realty (HCR). The acquisition expands BHHSMMR's footprint to four office locations and adds a team of seasoned real estate professionals with deep roots in the area's most prestigious communities.

As part of the acquisition, BHHSMMR assumes operation of HCR's office at 175 Highlands Cove Drive, located at the entrance to Old Edwards Club, one of the region's most sought-after private club communities. The office joins BHHSMMR's existing locations at 488 Main Street in Highlands, 2334 Cashiers Road in Highlands, and 196 Burns Street in Cashiers.

Jennifer Blake, who will serve as Broker in Charge of the Highlands Cove Drive office, brings more than 13 years of experience and established relationships within Old Edwards Club and the broader Highlands community. Joining her are agents Ed Hillis, Suzie Sinclair, Letty Murphy, and Danny Howell, each of whom brings a loyal client base and a wealth of local market knowledge to the combined firm.

With the addition of the Highlands Cove Realty team, BHHSMMR further solidifies its position as the plateau's premier real estate brokerage, backed by the strength and prestige of the Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices brand – one of the most trusted names in real estate worldwide.



President and owner Judy Michaud and Jennifer Blake, Broker In Charge



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• SPIRITUALLY SPEAKING



Why do Catholics observe Lent?

Fr. Jason Barone
Our Lady of the Mountains
Catholic Church

We have arrived at the season of Lent, a spiritual practice shared by numerous denominations. Much can be written about this sacred season, but here I would like to share with the town what I usually share with my parishioners.

The Lord stresses the importance of penance throughout his ministry. “Repent and believe in the Gospel” are his opening words (Mk 1:15). “Unless you do penance, you shall likewise perish” (Lk 13:5).

Lent is a time for penance. Penance means addressing the damage caused by sin. By sin 1) we harm our relationship with God, 2) we harm ourselves, and 3) we harm our relationship with others. Yes, we can beg God for mercy—and, yes, He forgives. But just as we strive to make up for our failings with others even after they forgive us (e.g. paying for a broken window), so by penance we strive, with the help of grace, to remedy the effects of sin.

Traditionally, there were three aspects of penance that address those three damages (see Mt 6). By prayer we restore our wounded relationship with God. Lent is a time of greater prayer, deeper prayer, and nurturing the silence needed for fruitful prayer. Some examples include daily scripture reading or meditation on the scriptures. For instance, find a paragraph from the gospels that resonates, read it slowly several times, implore the Holy Spirit to bring something to mind, reflect upon it, and rest in God’s presence.

Prayer can be quite difficult, especially with our busy lives, short attention spans that grow shorter with constant screens and stimulation. Our Lord said His disciples would fast upon His departure (see Mt 9:15) and that some demons “can only be driven out by prayer and fasting” (Mt 17:21). By voluntary self denial, we grow in virtue and have greater self possession and thus self control. It makes temptation easier to address. Further, it elevates the mind and makes deeper prayer noticeably easier. And so, with greater virtue and prayer, our relationship with God is healed and strengthened.

Lastly, by almsgiving, we give of ourselves to others as a selfless, gratuitous gift. Such a gift can manifest in the oft heard phrase: time, talent, or treasure. If a rod is bent, the way to straighten it is by bending it the opposite direction. By sin, we turn in and prioritize ourselves. By almsgiving, we bend the opposite direction and serve others with no expectation of return.

The ongoing Winter Olympics can serve as inspiration as we enter Lent. St. Paul, undoubtedly familiar with the athletic games of ancient Greece, likens the spiritual life to a race where like the athletes who deprive their bodies to win a perishable crown, he chastens and subjugates his body to win eternity (see 1 Cor 9). God desires the salvation of all,

• See SPIRITUALLY page 6

• PLACES TO WORSHIP •

BLUE VALLEY BAPTIST CHURCH

Rev. Oliver Rice. Pastor 706-782-3965
Sundays: School: 10 a.m., Worship: 11
Sunday night services every 2nd & 4th Sunday at 7
Wednesdays: Mid-week prayer meeting: 7 p.m.

BUCK CREEK BAPTIST CHURCH

828-269-3546 • Rev. Jamie Passmore. Pastor
Sundays: School: 10 a.m.; Worship: 11

CASHIERS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Rev. Aryn Williams-Reubel. Pastor 828-743-5298
Sundays: School at 9:30; Worship 10:30
GRACE CHAPEL ON HIGH HOLLY
9615 Dillard Rd Scaly Mountain, N.C.

Pastor Steve Kerhoulas. <http://www.Graceonhighholly.com>
Sunday School 9:45; Worship 11; Prayer Service Wed 5:30p
Men's and Women's Bible Study throughout the week

CHRIST ANGLICAN CHURCH

The Rev'd Dr. Marc Robertson & Rev. Nick McGee
464 U.S. Hwy. 64E, Cashiers, NC
CAC@christanglicancashiers.org • 828-743-1701

Sunday: Adult Christian Ed, 9:15a; Holy Eucharist, 10:30a;
Fellowship 11:45a; Wed: Bible Study/Contemplative Prayer, 5p

CHRIST CHURCH OF THE VALLEY, CASHIERS

Pastor Jacob Tedder • Jacob@cashiers.church • 743-5470
www.cashiers.church

Sun. 10:45a; Wed Study 5:15p supper and childcare.

CLEAR CREEK BAPTIST CHURCH

Pastor Jim Kinard
Sundays: School: 10 a.m.; Worship: 11 a.m.
1st & 3rd Sunday night Service: 7 p.m.
Wednesdays—Supper at 6 p.m.

COMMUNITY BIBLE CHURCH

www.cbchighlands.com • 526-4685
3645 Cashiers Rd. Highlands, NC • Sr. Pastor Gary Hewins
Sun: Service 10:45am, Children's 10:30am
Wed.: Youth 5:30-7pm; Women's Bible Study: Mon. 4:30pm, Tues.
10am; Men's Bible Study: Wed. & Thurs. 7am @ Zookeeper
Bistro

EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF THE INCARNATION

Rev. W. Bentley Manning, Rector • 526-2968
5th and Main streets • www.incarnationwnc.org
Sunday: Rite I, spoken, 8 am in Chapel, Rite II with Choir 10:30
am in Sanctuary, Wed: Healing Eucharist 12 pm in Chapel,
Morning Prayer: Mon-Thurs 8:30 am in Chapel

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH HIGHLANDS

828-526-4153 • www.fbchighlands.org
Dr. Mark Ford, Pastor • 220 Main Street, Highlands
Sun.: Worship 10:45 am; Sun.: Bible Study 9:30 am
Wed.: Men's Bible Study 8:30 am; Women's 10:30 am

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rev. Emily Wilmarth, pastor; Rev. Kelley Connelly Asso. Pastor
828-526-3175 • fpchighlands.org
Sun.: Adult Ed.: 10a; Worship 11a.; Tues: Men's Group 10a;
Wed: Bell Choir 4p. Chancel Choir: 5:30p

GOLDMINE BAPTIST CHURCH

(Off Franklin/Highlands Rd)

Sunday School: 10 am. Worship Service: 11 am
GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH OF CASHIERS
Non-Denominational-Contemporary Worship
242 Hwy 107N. 1/4 miles from Crossroads in Cashiers
www.gracecashiers.com • Pastor Steve Doerter 743-9814
Services: Sundays 10am - Wed. - 7pm; Dinner - Wed. 6pm

HAMBURG BAPTIST CHURCH

Hwy 107N. • Glenville, NC • 743-2729 • Nathan Johnson

Sunday: School 9:45a. Worship 11a & 7p. Bible Study 6p
Wed. Kidsquest 6p.; Worship 7p.

HIGHLANDS ASSEMBLY OF GOD

Randy Reed. Pastor 828-421-9172 • 165 S. Sixth Street
Wed. Bible Study: 6 p.m.; Sundays: Worship: 11

HIGHLANDS CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH

Pastor Dan Robinson • 11339 Buck Creek Road
The Highlands Central Baptist Church is temporarily
sharing the facilities of the Shortoff Baptist Church.
Sunday Worship is at 9a. & 6p. Wednesday Worship is 6p

HIGHLANDS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Rev. Dr. Randy Lucas. Pastor 526-3376
In-Person and live-streamed Worship Services
909a Bluegrass and 11a Traditional
www.highlandsmethodist.org

HOLY FAMILY LUTHERAN CHURCH: ELCA

2152 Dillard Road • 526-9741
Rev. Ken Langsdorf

Worship/Communion: 10:30 All are welcome.
Visit our website: Holy Family Lutheran Highlands NC

MACEDONIA BAPTIST CHURCH

8 miles south of Highlands on N.C. 28 S in Satolah
Pastor Zane Talley

Sundays: School: 10 a.m.; Worship: 11. Choir: 6 p.m.
Wed: Bible Study and Youth Mtg.: 7 p.m.

MOUNTAIN SYNAGOGUE

Franklin • 828-634-1312 • mountainsynagoguenc.com.
Services: 1st Fri. and 3rd Sat. and Rosh Hashanah & Yom
Kippur.

MOUNTAIN BIBLE CHURCH

743-2583 • Independent Bible Church
Sun: 10:30 a.m. at Big Ridge Baptist Church. 4224 Big Ridge
(4.5 miles from NC 107)

Weds: Youth Group 6 p.m.; Bible Study 6:30 p.m.;

OUR LADY OF THE MOUNTAINS CATHOLIC CHURCH

Rev. Fr. Jason K. Barone – 526-2418
Sat. 4pm 5/24/25-10/25/25; Sun. - 11am

SCALY MOUNTAIN BAPTIST CHURCH

Rev. Marty Kilby
Sundays: School – 10 a.m.; Worship – 11 a.m. & 7
Wednesdays: Prayer Mtg.: 7 p.m.

SCALY MOUNTAIN CHURCH OF GOD

290 Buck Knob Road; Pastor Donald G. Bates • 526-3212
Sun.: School: 10 a.m.; Worship: 10:45 a.m.; Worship: 6 p.m.

SHORTOFF BAPTIST CHURCH

Pastor Rev. Richard Salmonson
Sundays: School: 10 a.m.; Worship: 11 a.m.
ST. JUDE'S CATHOLIC CHURCH
Mass: Sun. 9a (English); Mon. 9:30a (Vatican II in Latin); Tues.
7p (Spanish); Wed., 9:30a (English)

THE CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

1448 Highway 107 S.. Office: • 743-2359 • Rev. Rob Wood
Sunday Service (summer): 9am & 11am
Visit our website: www.goodshepherdofcashiers.com
Our Bazaar Barn supports outreach in the community.
Open Fri & Sat. 11am-3pm

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP

85 Sierra Drive. Franklin • ufranklin.org
Sunday Worship - 11 a.m.

WHITESIDE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rev. Sam Forrester/Cashiers • 828-743-2122
Sunday School: 10 am. Worship Service: 11 am

• POLICE & FIRE REPORTS •

Highlands Police entries from Feb. 7. Only the names of persons arrested, issued a summons/citation, issued a Class-3 misdemeanor or those of public officials have been used.

Feb. 7

• At 5:24 p.m., officers received a call for service over banning a person from an establishment on 230 S. 4th Street.

Feb. 11

• Accident: VI was traveling

north on US 64. VI crossed the center line and went into the opposite lane. VI crossed onto the sidewalk on the opposite side of the road. VI continued on to an embankment hitting some bushes and then struck a tree. The vehicle rolled over and came to rest on its passenger side.

Feb. 12

• At 1:32 p.m., officers received a call for service regarding water damage at a residence on Bowery Road.

Feb. 13

• At 12:37 p.m., officers received a report of shoplifting at Highlands Pharmacy.

• Accident: Vehicle 1 was stopped at the stop sign facing west on Oak St. Vehicle 2 was stopped at the stop sign facing North on 1st St. Vehicle 1 took a left turn hitting vehicle 2. Vehicle 2 stayed stopped at the stop sign and Vehicle 2 came to a rest on a turn off and they contacted law enforcement.

The Highlands Fire & Rescue log from Feb. 10

Feb. 10

• At 5:11 p.m., the dept. responded to a fire alarm at a residence on Blue Valley Road. It was cancelled en route.

• At 5:25 p.m., the dept. responded to a motor vehicle accident on US 64 east (Cashiers Road).

Feb. 11

• At 5:18 p.m., the dept. was first-responders to a residence on Big Pine Lane.

• At 6:41 p.m., the dept. responded to a motor vehicle accident on N. 4th Street.

Feb. 12

• At 8:09 a.m., the dept. provided mutual aid to Cashiers FD.

• At 2:47 p.m., the dept. was first-responders to a residence on US 64 west (Franklin Road).

• At 8:33 p.m., the dept. provided public assistance at a residence on Cullasaja Drive.

Feb. 13

• At 10:02 a.m., the dept. responded to a motor vehicle accident at Oak and 1st streets.

• At 11:08 a.m., the dept. was first-responders to a residence on Poplar Street.

Feb. 14

• At 3:23 a.m., the dept. responded to a fire alarm at a residence on Kelsey Court.

• At 8:46 a.m., the dept. was first-responders to a residence on Clubhouse Trail.

• At 2:09 p.m., the dept. provided mutual aid to Glenville Rescue on Whiteside Mountain Trail

• At 5:59 p.m., the dept. was first-responders to a location on Church Street.

Feb. 15

• At 5:32 a.m., the dept. responded to a motor vehicle accident on NC 106 (Dillard Road).

• At 10:32 a.m., the dept. provided traffic control on NC 106 (Dillard Road).

• At 11:15 a.m., the dept. was first-responders to a residence on Maple Way.

• At 5:29 p.m., the dept. provided mutual aid to Cashiers FD.

• At 5:54 p.m., the dept. responded to a fire alarm at a residence on Brushy Face Road.

...MAYOR continued from page 2

organization of the county planning board. I was one of two speakers at this hearing. I urged the commissioners to continue to allow the towns of Franklin and Highlands to appoint a voting member for the county planning board. I emphasized that our towns have high-density residential areas and are centers of county businesses and jobs. What happens in county areas affects the towns. The towns need a voice in county land use and planning. When it was stated that the county does not

have members on the Highlands' planning board, I pointed out that town residents pay both municipal and county taxes. Both towns' planning boards have members who do not live inside the towns.

Regrettably, the county commissioners voted to reconstitute the county planning board with five voting members from the county. The towns will have the option to have liaisons to the planning board. One county commissioner pointed out that the plan-

ning board did not need to have voting members from the towns where restrictive zoning ordinances were in place. I got the message that fewer land use restrictions are preferred, like the idea of filling in flood plain areas for commercial and private development.

On Thursday night, February 19, a Town workshop will be held at 6 pm, followed by a board meeting at 7 pm. The meeting has a full agenda. See you there; it can also be viewed on the town website.

...TRANSFORMING continued from page 1

significance to the community, Nisbett felt it was important to clearly and thoughtfully explain how the decision to demolish the Holt Building came to fruition. (See <https://www.highlandsinfo.com/PDFs/26jan22.pdf>)

In addition to the Holt Building, last week the old Stone Lantern building and the building housing Bijou Jewelry and previously White Oak Realty also came down.

"All three properties on that corner were included as part of a unified redevelopment plan for the full corner assemblage," said Nisbett. "The structures adjacent to the Holt Building were not part of January's historical narrative, but they were part of the broader property that was assembled and evaluated together."

Nisbett said from the outset, the intent was to consider the entire corner comprehensively rather than in pieces.



The corner of 4th and Main streets has been re-imagined.

Photo by Kim Lewicki

"As demolition progressed, it became clear that moving forward with a cohesive plan across all three structures was the appropriate path," he said.

Nisbett said he is about a month away from sharing the full redevelopment plans publicly, which will help provide context for how the new building will occupy and enhance the entire site.

"We will be sharing more in the coming months showing a new redevelopment plan that

reflects WNC's architectural heritage and honors the importance of this corner for downtown Highlands, including final floor plans and elevation renderings of the new building," he said.

When the new building is complete, it will have ground-floor retail space on both Main and 4th streets, second-floor office space, and luxury residences for nightly rental on the third floor.

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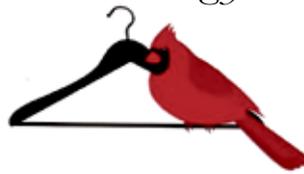
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• BIZ/ORG NEWS •

Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices Meadows Mountain Realty acquires Highlands Cove Realty

Strategic acquisition strengthens market presence on the Highlands-Cashiers plateau, adds fourth office location and expands team of experienced agents

Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices Meadows Mountain Realty (BHHSMMR), the leading luxury real estate brokerage on the Highlands-Cashiers plateau, today announced the completed acquisition of Highlands Cove Realty (HCR). The acquisition expands BHHSMMR's footprint to four office locations and adds a team of seasoned real estate professionals with deep roots in the area's most prestigious communities.

"This acquisition represents a natural coming together of two firms that share a commitment to exceptional client service and an intimate knowledge of the Highlands-Cashiers market," said Judy Michaud, President and Owner of Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices Meadows Mountain Realty. "Highlands Cove Realty has built a strong reputation, particularly within the Old Edwards Club community, and we are thrilled to welcome their talented team into our family."

As part of the acquisition, BHHSMMR assumes operation of HCR's office at 175 Highlands Cove Drive, located at the entrance to Old Edwards Club, one of the region's most sought-after private club communities. The office joins BHHSMMR's existing locations at 488 Main Street in Highlands, 2334 Cashiers Road in Highlands, and 196 Burns Street in Cashiers.

Jennifer Blake, who will serve as Broker in Charge of the Highlands Cove Drive office, brings over 13 years of experience and established relationships within Old Edwards Club and the broader Highlands community. Joining her are agents Ed Hillis, Suzie Sinclair, Letty Murphy, and Danny Howell, each of whom brings a loyal client base and a wealth of local market knowledge to the combined firm.

"Joining Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices Meadows Mountain Realty gives our clients access to an unparalleled combination of local expertise and global brand power," said Jennifer Blake. "We are excited about this next chapter and the enhanced resources we can now offer to buyers and sellers throughout the plateau."

The Highlands-Cashiers plateau continues to attract discerning buyers seeking luxury mountain properties in one of the Southeast's most desirable destinations. The combined firm is positioned to serve clients across the full spectrum of the market, from distinctive homes in established neighborhoods to premier properties within the area's most exclusive private club communities.

With the addition of the Highlands Cove Realty team, BHHSMMR further solidifies its position as the plateau's premier real estate brokerage, backed by the strength and prestige of the Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices brand — one of the most trusted names in real estate worldwide.



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...Q&A continued from page 12

and public involvement. I believe the way it was introduced and pushed forward was rushed and did not give citizens the opportunity to fully understand or weigh in on the proposal. Any change to how people are represented should come after open discussion, public hearings, and clear communication. Representation matters, and the public deserves to be part of that conversation from the beginning.

What do you think the county should focus on over the next four years?

The county's priorities over the next four years should center on responsible budgeting and smart growth. We need to

maintain fiscal discipline while continuing to invest in the services people rely on every day. Being good stewards of our county tax dollars does not mean simply spending less. It means investing wisely in what we actually need. We need to manage growth in a way that protects the character of Macon County while supporting local business and workforce development.

How can the county help remedy the decrease in state and federal funding allocated to the school system?

The county cannot replace every dollar lost from state and federal funding, but it can be a strong partner. That includes careful budgeting to prioritize

education, supporting the school system in pursuing grants and alternative funding sources, and advocating at the state level for fair funding formulas that recognize the challenges rural counties face. With good planning and fiscal discipline, we can continue to support our schools without placing an unnecessary burden on taxpayers.

What is your stance on increasing the sales tax 1/4 cent?

I believe any tax increase should be approached carefully and with full transparency to the public. I believe this is the fairest tax (if there is any such thing) we could implement. A quarter-cent sales tax spreads the burden beyond property owners and includes visitors and part-time residents who benefit from county services. I support the Article 46 one-quarter cent sales tax because it allows for a conservative approach to generate a small, fair contribution that can produce a strong return for our county. It's a practical tool that helps us protect essential services and plan responsibly for the future while keeping property taxes low. However, before asking taxpayers for more, the county must show it is using existing resources wisely, controlling spending, and prioritizing needs over wants.

What do you see as the fiscal consequences when county departments request funds outside the standard annual budget cycle? (Forum)

I've worked with the county budget for a long time now with the sheriff's office so I understand the budget cycle. One thing that I think should always be considered is if we have to push it off to the next budget cycle, how much more does that cost the county in the next budget? If we're kicking that can down the road, essentially if prices go up, things change, that's going to cost us more in the long run. So having those conversations with those department heads shouldn't always be a hard no. You should have the forethought to understand that when some-

body comes to you, they're not coming because they want more money, they're coming because there's a problem. They're put into those positions to make those decisions and we need to listen to them.

Where do you draw the line between informal collaboration with fellow commissioners and a violation of the public's right to open transparent meetings? (Forum)

Being a county employee, one of the things that I see that we should do better is we should upgrade the equipment that we have in those boardrooms. The audio and the video, I think we need to upgrade that. We can talk about transparency, but we need to put our money where our mouth is. Some of the people who watch those videos are sitting at home. They can't make it to those meetings, maybe they're working, so, to really be transparent, we need to provide them the best access possible. I think one of the things that the county fails at right now is having one place for all county information to come from. The other day when it snowed, the schools were out or things were closed. You had to check 9 or 10 different social media pages to find out if court was closed, or if the dump was open or if Macon Transit was running. If we are going to talk about being transparent, we need to have a better system. We need to put it on our website. We need to update it to where the people that come to our area understand everything that's going on from the pool schedule all the way down to the transit stop locations. All of that should be in one location and easy access.

Would you support a hiring freeze on non-essential vacancies or do you believe all current positions must be maintained? (Forum)

Being a county employee for 17 years, I can speak to this one pretty well. The biggest thing we've talked about the pay. We've spent tons and tons of money on these pay stud-

ies. We were told that they were implemented, but they were only implemented on phase one. We left the rest of it out. County employees are still wanting to know where's step two, where's step three. Years down the road, we're looking at paying for another pay study. If we're going to keep doing pay studies and keep wasting money, let's at least see it all the way through. If we pay our employees better, we're going to have better retention. How much are we spending to train people just for them to go next door to a different county for a dollar more an hour? We're wasting our money training people we can't keep because our pay isn't competitive. Pay the people what they need to be paid. Our county employees matter and we need to treat them as such.

We have a \$60 million fund balance reserve on the books. What is your strategy for these funds? Should they stay put or be used to offset property taxes or some other purpose? (Forum)

The county's fund balance is essentially a savings account and I'd like to commend the previous boards that have put us in the situation that we have in order to make these decisions. We've all got savings accounts and when you go to the bank when you're trying to get a loan on a house, they look at your savings, and say, "Okay, they're trustworthy." That goes a long way for the county, too. The amount that we have in our fund balance, it isn't a scratch off ticket where we just won \$60 million. We got here because of the steps that our previous boards have taken. We need to keep some of that in place. But we do need to lower it. We shouldn't just be walking past roofs that need fixed because we keep that money inside of our savings account. But we need to do it smart because the banks that we use for loans or the bonds that we have all rely on a strong fund balance.

• HIGHLANDS AREA EVENTS •

NOTE:

• No Senior Luncheon at Rec Park the month of February.

POOL SCHEDULE

• Lap Swim: Mon.-Fri. 6am-9:45am, and Saturday 10am-11pm - 6 lanes. Water Aerobics: 18 y+ Mon.-Fri. 10-11am with Karen Chambers. Adult Swim: 18y+ Mon.-Thurs. 11am-3:30pm, Friday 11am-1:30pm. Public Swim: Mon. thru Thurs. 3:30-7pm, Saturday 11am-6pm and Sunday 1-6pm

PICKLE BALL

• At the Recreation Dept. every Monday - Friday 10am-1pm indoors for the winter (notice the days and time has changed),

MOUNTAIN FINDINGS

• **Winter Hours:** Friday & Saturdays. Open: 10 am - 1 pm. Spruce Street. www.mountainfindings.org

ICE SKATING IN PARK

• Thurs., 3:30-8p; Fri. 3:30-10p; Sat. 1-10p, Sun. 1-5p \$8 with or without skates.

ALL WEEK

• Scaly Mountain/Highlands/Cashiers Alcoholics Anonymous "Open Meetings" are for anyone who thinks they may have a drinking problem or for anyone interested in the

A.A. recovery program. Open meetings are held at Scaly Mountain @ Grace Chapel, 9915 Dillard Rd., Scaly Mountain each Tues at 5:30 pm and Highlands @ the 1st Presbyterian Church, 471 Main St., on Monday at 5:30 p.m. and on Wednesday & Fridays @ 12:00 noon. Open in-person meetings are also held in Cashiers @ the Albert Carlton Cashiers Community Library, 249 Frank Allen Rd. on Sunday at 5pm, on Tuesday @ 7 pm, on Friday at 5 pm and on Saturday at 9 am. For more information please visit our website www.aawnc80.org or to speak with a member of A.A. 24/7 call our HELP Line 828 349-4357

Sat., Feb 21

Greenway Workday, 9am. Blowdowns and wash on upper Bear Pen, bridge on Coker Trail, replacing post at 5th and Main, Start on Steps if time. RSVP (706) 202-3033, or billgrubb1@gmail.com

Thurs., Feb, 26

• At Highlander Mountain House, Valley James is performing at 8:30 p.m. Tickets are \$35 (excluding taxes and fees).

Wed., March 4

• At PAC, March Live Presents: A Taste of Ireland at 7:30 p.m. For tickets, call 828-526-9047.

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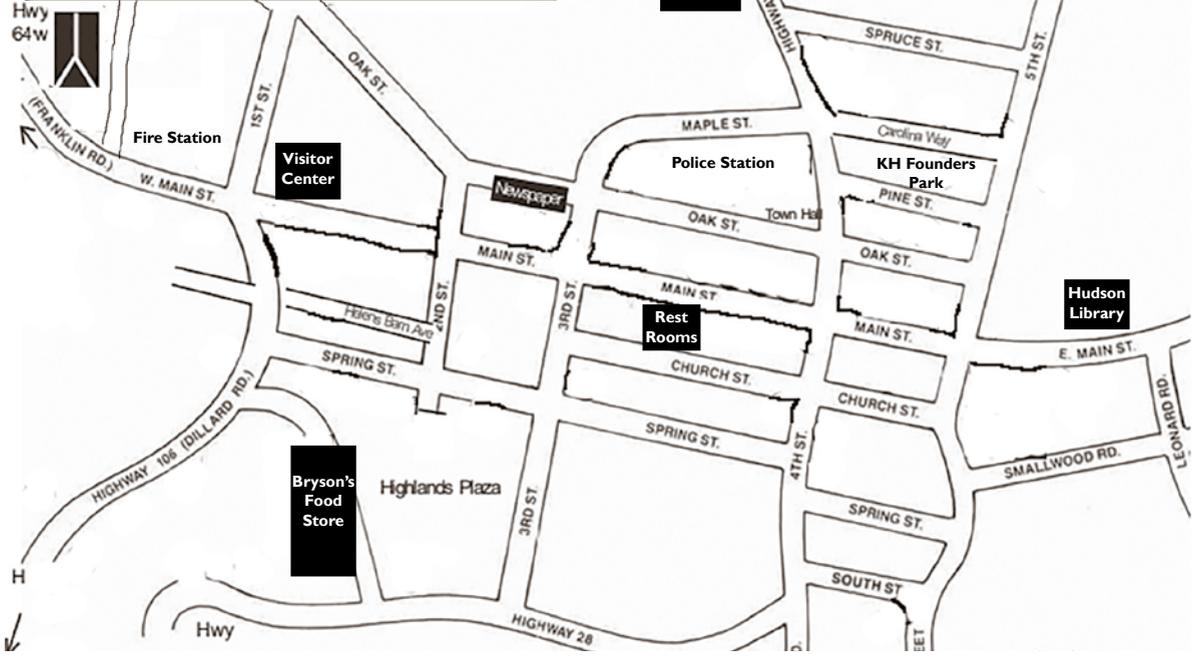
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