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Business consultant: positive signs of economic recovery, growth opportunities in Barrow Co.

Chamber hears presentation on local impact of pandemic, current population, business trends

By Scott Thompson

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Barrow County has not been exempt from the economic toll of the coronavirus pandemic, but there are strong indicators of recovery and growth opportunities in the county that are mirroring national trends, an area business strategy consultant said last week.

Mark Kooyman, CEO and discovery chief of Athens-based Experience Insight Group, told the Barrow County Chamber of Commerce — at its monthly “First Tuesday” luncheon March 2 — that as coronavirus in-

fection levels have sharply declined in both the county and in much of the country over the last several weeks, and as prospects are increasing that there will be enough COVID-10 vaccine supply for all Americans by late spring, the national marketplace outlook also has continued a strong improvement.

But that positivity hasn’t necessarily been reflected in local perception of where things stand, Kooyman said. In a survey of around 40 chamber members and business owners in Barrow County conducted by Experience during the last two weeks of February, just over 50 percent of respondents said the national marketplace is “in the same place” as it was prior to the November elections, with 24 percent saying it was “better and improving” and another 24 percent saying it was “worse and getting worse.”

When asked the same question about the local marketplace in Barrow, 68 percent of respondents said conditions were “in the same place,” and 27 percent said things were better and improving.

“It’s a hell of a lot better today than it was (in November),” Kooyman said, noting that a third of business owners



Photo by Scott Thompson/

Mark Kooyman, CEO and discovery chief of Experience Insight Group, speaks during the Barrow County Chamber of Commerce’s monthly “First Tuesday” luncheon March 2.

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More than 1K BCSS employees set to be vaccinated

Through a collaboration with the Northeast Health District, the Barrow County School System will be holding a coronavirus vaccination event for all pre-registered teachers and staff to receive their first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine on Thursday, March 11, marking the single-largest vaccination event the Barrow County Health Department has ever conducted.

As of Tuesday afternoon, March 9, 1,057 school district employees had booked an appointment to receive the vaccine — including teachers, school support staff, substitute teachers, custodians and student teachers. District officials were still hoping to reach their goal to administer 1,200 doses Thursday at Apalachee High School. Those who sign up are scheduled to receive their second dose April 1. The school

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MAILING LABEL

National recognition



Courtesy City of Winder/

The old Martin Marietta rock quarry off Parks Mill Road in Auburn is the site of the joint raw water reservoir project by the cities of Auburn and Winder. The site is projected to be fully operational by January 2024.

Winder-Auburn joint water quarry project nominated, makes final 16 in national contest

The Winder-Auburn joint water reservoir project has been nominated and is among the final 16 projects in contention for a national award in a contest that is being driven by online voting.

The project was one of 85 nominated by local governments across the country for the Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL) Knope Award, intended to “showcase and celebrate essential local government services.”

According to its website, ELGL is a local government outreach nonprofit and was founded in Portland, Oregon, in 2012 and now has over 4,800 members from all U.S. states, plus Canada, the United Kingdom, Israel and Australia.

The award contest is formatted similar to the NCAA’s “March Madness” basketball tournament, and the Winder-Auburn project has made the “Sweet Sixteen.” It received more votes than a water tank project in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and is now in contention with a water distribution system project in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Voting for the Sweet Sixteen closes at noon Monday, March 15, and the “Elite Eight” will be announced Tuesday, March 16. Voting and a list of all the “matchups” can be found at <https://elgl.org/knope>.

Anyone can vote (one vote per email address). The link

to vote is <https://elgl.org/elgknope-winder-ga-vs-stillwater-ok/>.

The reservoir project, located at the old Martin Marietta rock quarry off Parks Mill Road in Auburn, is aimed at addressing a raw water storage shortage in northeast Georgia. The 78-acre site will be converted into a 1.1 billion-gallon raw water storage pond with three water intake points and more than 13 miles of pipeline.

The massive, multi-phase, multi-million-dollar project has been years in the making, and water withdrawal permits have been issued by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division, with a current permitted yield of 4.59 million gallons per day on an annual average.

The reservoir is projected to be fully operational by January 2024.

The Auburn and Winder city councils last year approved a dewatering contract for a quarry, and workers have been actively pumping the site over the last month. Roger Wilhelm, utilities director for the City of Winder, told the city council during a Feb. 25 work session that workers were pumping out an average of 3 million gallons per day and were “60-90 days” away from being able to access the bottom of the quarry for site work.

The city is also working on easement acquisitions for the pipeline and intake work, Wilhelm said.

2 suspects killed in attempted armed robbery

Two suspects were killed and two suspects have been arrested in connection with an attempted armed robbery in a Winder subdivision early March 2, according to the Barrow County Sheriff’s Office.

Sheriff Jud Smith has said the killing of two suspects appears to have been an act of self-defense.

Julio Rivera, 20, and Alphonzo Gonzalez, 19, both of Athens, have been charged with criminal attempt to commit armed robbery and aggravated assault with the intent to rob following the incident in Beech Creek Estates off Highway 82 and are in custody at the Barrow County Detention Center. The two other suspects, Jose Barrera, 19, and Erika Contreras, 19, also of Athens, were killed in the confrontation with the person the suspects tried to rob, who was in a car and also armed, according to a BCSO news release.

Deputies were called to the scene on Beech Creek Circle just before 1:30 a.m. Tuesday following a report of suspicious people wearing masks and standing around a residence.

After deputies responded to the location, they found Contreras dead from a gunshot wound in a car about 100 yards away. Winder police alerted deputies that Barrera was found dead further up the road, and it was determined that Contreras and Barrera were both connected to the incident.

The sheriff’s office declined to release further information Friday, March 5, as the investigation remained ongoing and other charges were possible, according to the release.

County, Braselton to create joint economic development authority

By Scott Thompson

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Barrow County and the Town of Braselton are set to establish a joint economic development authority together in a move aimed at coordinating growth in and attracting developments to the Barrow portion of the town near Interstate 85.

The Braselton Town Council approved a resolution to create the authority at its Monday, March 8 meeting, and the county board of commissioners followed suit at its voting session Tuesday, March 9. The authority will consist of a sev-

en-member board with four county appointments and three town appointments.

The initial county appointments include four-year terms for BOC chairman Pat Graham and interim county manager Kevin Little (or any successors to the chairmanship and county manager position) and two-year terms for Auburn city administrator Alex Mitchem and Holt Persinger, owner of Ridgeline Land Planning in Winder and a Winder resident who ran unsuccessfully for a city council seat in 2019.

Persinger was the applicant last

fall on a proposed large development about a mile south of the intersection of highways 211 and 124 in the Braselton-Hoschton area of the county that would have allowed for the construction of 280 apartment units, 158 townhomes and 8.5 acres of commercial space. The BOC rejected the rezoning request for the property on Lec Stone Road, citing concerns raised by residents over the impact the development would have on traffic in the area, stormwater issues and property values for nearby neighborhoods.

The three Braselton appointments

will include the mayor or mayor’s designee and the town manager for four-year terms, as well as a resident of or business owner in the town for a two-year term.

Officials are eyeing the authority as a funding vehicle for attracting development to the area, and the authority would not replace, but would complement, the similar groups the county already has in place, Graham said.

Braselton town manager Jennifer Scott said the county had reached out to the town about creating a joint development authority.

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