

Local charitable agencies see influx of people needing help

By Quintin Ellison

On a recent Friday afternoon a handful of people perused the shelves at The Community Table's food pantry, choosing various canned goods, bread, meats and more.

Among them was Laura Leal, a single mother of three who works at a local plant. This was Leal's second time this year at the food pantry. The 34-year-old's hours were cut recently to about five hours a week.

"That does not do it," Leal said. "So I come here when it's a necessity, when there's no other way."

Things have gotten tough enough that Leal is hesitant to switch on the heater that warms her home. She doesn't know how she'll pay the heating bill.

Leal isn't alone. Service agencies in Jackson County are experiencing record numbers of requests for assistance. From food for the table to help with paying for heat, the dour economy has forced many to seek help.

Ronzel Davis and his wife, Renada, work as volunteers at The Community Table. Davis has been taken aback by the number of people coming through the door.

"We've been seeing a lot more lately," Davis said. "A lot of new people are coming in that I've never seen before."

Among them is Crystale Williamson, 31, who has been to the food pantry three times. Williamson is from Murphy. She landed in Sylva through Clean Slate,

which offers transitional housing to women.

"Food stamps sometimes are not enough," Williamson said.

Amy Grimes, director of The Community Table, said the soup kitchen is seeing many new faces such as Williamson. With about a month left in the year she said the Table has surpassed 2011's numbers: 16,741 dinners served and 2,008 food boxes handed out.

"We're slammed," Grimes said. "We keep setting new records every month."

It's not just people needing food. Agencies offering heating assistance are experiencing the same human flood.

Rhonda Monteith, income maintenance su-

pervisor for the Jackson County Department of Social Services, said money available in a crisis intervention program for heating and cooling has been exhausted. The agency received \$127,529.74 in July.

Starting Dec. 3 on a first-come, first-served basis, \$56,279 will be available to help with heating bills for the elderly (60 years old or more) and disabled individuals who meet certain requirements.

Beginning Feb. 1, if there's any money left, anyone – not just the elderly or disabled – can apply for help.

However, Randall Moss, DSS income maintenance supervisor, said this year's funding was cut \$14,580 from last year – and that

money, in 2011, lasted just a month.

Jackson County Neighbors in Need, which provides heating assistance, is also experiencing increased numbers of people seeking help.

"It's more than we've had in the past," said Charlie McConnell of Neighbors in Need. "I see a real need out there right now."

United Christian Ministries, which has helped, too, with heating assistance, is feeling particularly pressed to keep its food pantry supplied.

"It's tough to keep the shelves stocked," said UCM Director Kathy Cross.

The groups accept cash donations or donations of canned goods, baby diapers, laundry soap, toilet paper and more.

Tuckasegee from East LaPorte to Cullowhee named 'Blueway'

By Quintin Ellison

The stretch of Tuckasegee River from East LaPorte to Cullowhee will gain federal distinction after being named a National Blueways Trail, a designation that should help promote visibility of the river.

Blueways Trails are part of the Obama administration's America's Great Outdoors initiative. Being named a Blueway affords no new protections or added regulations, but it could help funnel federal, state and private resources into the region. The Tuckasegee from East LaPorte to Cullowhee is serving as a national pilot project.

Ultimately other rivers

Live nativity scene set at Old Savannah

Old Savannah Baptist Church will present "The First Christmas." A live nativity will be held at the church Friday and Saturday, Dec. 14 and 15, from 7 until 8:30 p.m.

and lakes in the state's westernmost counties will be included in the National Blueways Trails. Signs will direct people to the area's rivers and lakes.

"We'll be telling the world what we have, where it is and how to get access to that information," said Betty Huskins of Ridgetop Associates, which holds the management contract for Smoky Mountain Host, a regional tourism agency.

The announcement about the designation was made Thursday (Nov. 29) at a Smoky Mountain Host annual members meeting in Bryson City. Steve Jester, a vice president with Duke Energy, told tourism leaders gathered for the event that the electric company was making a \$75,000 economic development grant to undergird the National Blueways effort.

Western Carolina University will receive \$5,000 from the grant for students to produce photos and video of the Tuckasegee River from East LaPorte to Cullowhee. The material will be used to promote that stretch of the river, said Fred Alexander, district manager for

Duke Energy, who added that discussions with WCU about the project are in a very early stage.

Alexander said that this particular stretch of river was selected for convenience.

"We picked it because it would be easier to engage the Western students logistically," he said.

Another \$5,000 of the Duke grant will go to Southwestern Commission (Region A), a state planning council for the region, to help develop a map designating the area's recreational opportunities.

Ryan Sherby, interim Region A director, said the map would be all encompassing, including rivers and lakes but also trailheads, campgrounds, trails and more.

The remainder of the grant, \$65,000, will go to Smoky Mountain Hosts to develop and implement a marketing plan for promoting public recreation opportunities on the area's rivers and lakes.

New Cherokee hospital planned on portion of former Walmart site

By Quintin Ellison

A new hospital will be built in Cherokee on a site adjacent to the tribe's current one.

Casey Cooper, CEO of the Cherokee Indian Hospital, said the new hospital would be roughly 140,000 square feet. The current facility is about 85,000 square feet.

Tribal Council last month approved a tract of land on the north side of the land originally intended and prepared for a Walmart for a new hospital.

Principal Chief Michell Hicks praised the work that helped lay the groundwork for a new hospital.

"The Cherokee Indian Hospital Authority has done a tremendous job in improv-

ing health care services to our people," he said. "I believe with the new facility their care can continue to improve and to become a leader in health care services throughout the region."

Cooper said a master plan of hospital services that was first completed in 2007 and updated last year "documented the obvious – the services have outgrown the space."

The tribe analyzed three or four possible locations before settling on the current tract, he said. Some of the sites were ruled out because they could be used for economic development, others had traffic congestion.

The site selected, he said, is already prepped and is accessible – emergency

vehicles and others needing hospital services will have easy access to U.S. 19 and U.S. 441.

Additionally, he said, the new hospital would be "relatively central" in the community.

The cost of the hospital hasn't been determined, but Cooper roughly estimated that it would be between \$50 and \$75 million.

Cooper praised the tribe's foresight in building the new hospital and supporting medical services. He said the tribe funnels \$8 to \$9 million a year into health care services for the community.

Cooper said he found it impressive that the tribe has used gaming money to benefit the entire community instead of a select few.

school lunch menu

Lunch menus for Jackson County Public Schools for Dec. 10-14 are as follows:

Monday, Dec. 10 – Chicken cordon bleu, toasted ham and cheese, whole grain rice, steamed spinach, mandarin oranges.

Tuesday, Dec. 11 – Spaghetti with meat sauce, steamed carrots, tossed salad, Texas toast, fresh banana.

Wednesday, Dec. 12 – Chicken fajita with fixings, whole grain tortilla, Mexican rice, refried beans, pineapple.

Thursday, Dec. 13 – Hamburger on bun, lettuce and tomato, baked beans, sweet potato fries, pickles, peach crisp.

Friday, Dec. 14 – Barbecue chicken bites, whole kernel corn, coleslaw, whole grain roll, diced pears.

Everyday choice: Peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich, chef salad or yogurt plate.

Breakfast and lunch menus include a choice of skim or 1-percent white milk, or 1-percent chocolate, strawberry or vanilla milk. Assorted juices will also be offered.

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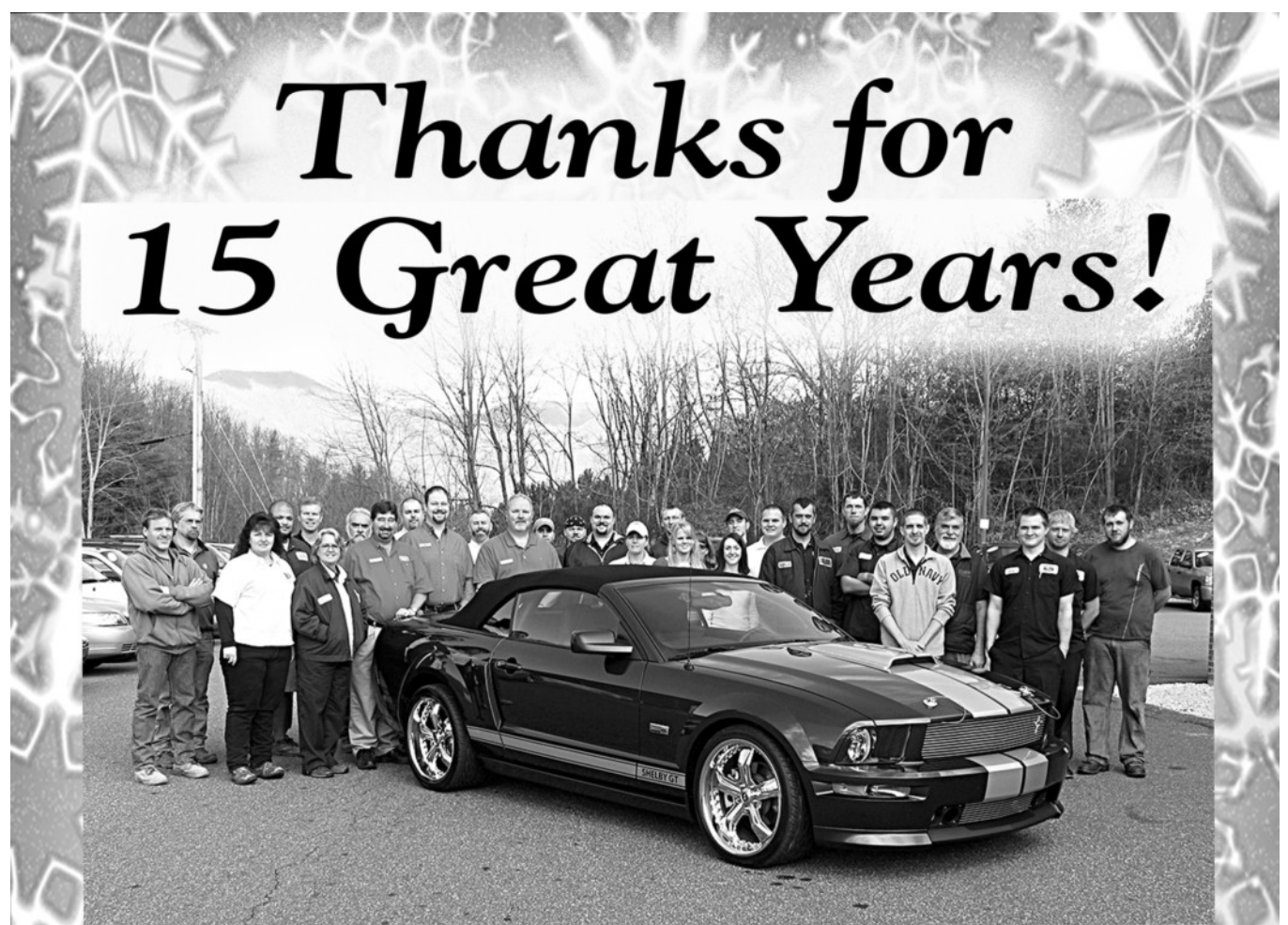
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