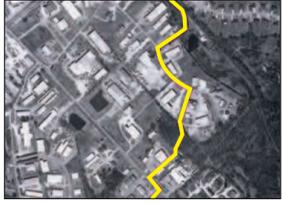




The Oconee Enterprise



City and county work together

Industrial Park to get sewer line. Business, **B3**



Relay for Life gets creative

UNG raises funds for research. Lifestyles, **A3**



Lady Titans' offense rolling

Lady Titans roll past SCHS. Sports, **B1**

Coming next week

We'll report on the Bishop bypass and roundabouts.

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This issue was mailed Wednesday, March 13, from Watkinsville and Athens, GA. Please inform your post office if it arrives late.



During the Oconee Fire Rescue banquet last Friday, 35-year service pins were given to Ed Carson, from left, Chris Higginbotham and Joe Palmer. [Photo by Michael Prochaska]

Heroes honored

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

Among the dozens of firefighters and medical responders recognized last Friday at Oconee Fire Rescue's annual Appreciation Dinner, everyone had the honor of being Karla Hulsey's "favorite."

The loving sentiment, of course, is reciprocated. Hulsey, who is the Oconee County EMA/EMS coordinator, is in the prayers of 182 volunteers and the handful of paid employees after being diagnosed with breast cancer in December. Hulsey spent Saturday raising money for the department's Relay for Life team. "Every penny makes a difference," she said. "Thank you Oconee County for having such giving hearts."

In honor of Hulsey's strength and resilience and to raise awareness for breast cancer, the hundreds of people who attended the banquet wore pink ribbons.

During the banquet, 35-year service pins were given to Ed Carson, Chris Higginbotham and Joe Palmer.

The following seven firefighters were recognized as firefighters of the year (there is no Station 3):

- Station 1: Daniel Culbertson
- Station 2: Mark Capobianco
- Station 4: Chris Higginbotham
- Station 5: Josh Griffin
- Station 6: Jaron Queen
- Station 7: Jim Rollison
- Station 8: Dick Farrington

The following medical responders were honored as medical responders of the year:

- Station 1: Dennis Luckey
- Station 2: Mark Capobianco
- Station 4: Ricky Hayes
- Station 5: Joe Lockman
- Station 6: Jaron Queen
- Station 7: Tim Crowe
- Station 8: Riley Olson

SEE FIREFIGHTER PAGE A3



Mark Thomas, left, presented Ricky Hayes, right, with the Jim Thaxton/Howard "Hot" Thomas Golden Axe Award. [Photo by Michael Prochaska]



Karla Hulsey presented The Quinton Still/Andra Dickens Golden Stethoscope Award to Derek Edwards. [Photo by Michael Prochaska]



Oconee Fire Rescue's Lara Crowe, left and Bruce Thaxton, right, honor Retired Athens-Clarke County Battalion Chief David Smith and his wife Charlene. Smith is the firefighter instructor for Oconee Fire Rescue. [Photo by Michael Prochaska]

City police under attack before vote

Trust damaged between agencies

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

The relationship between the Watkinsville Police Department and the Oconee Sheriff's Office has, in the past, been "rocky," Mayor Dave Shearon said last Thursday at a council meeting, before asking whether trust and cooperation can be restored.

During a question-and-answer session between the council and the Public Safety Commission, Oconee Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy Lee Weems wrongly claimed that the Watkinsville Police Department violated Georgia law last week by revealing a suspect's out-of-county arrest record in a press release.

The suspect had allegedly threatened a female employee of a Watkinsville gas station. The press release informed the public that the arrestee had "a long and violent criminal history." Public response to the press release was overwhelmingly positive with several people stating that the arrest was another reason to keep, rather than dismantle, the Watkinsville Police Department.

In September, the Sheriff's Office faced public scrutiny after posting on Facebook a photo of a deputy comforting a girl who had been abandoned. Although the picture did not show the front of the girl's face, many people argued that the side of her face and her hairstyle could be recognized. The Division of Family and Children Services does not permit the publishing of photos or records of alleged victims of child abuse or neglect, licensed social workers Dawn DeLay Lamprecht and Ashley Benton Robinson said at the time.

Both the Watkinsville Police Department and the Sheriff's Office use the Georgia Crime Information Center, a digital repository of criminal records, but the Sheriff's Office maintains terminal access. Compliance in GCIC includes non-disclosure statutes, as records in the database are intended to be viewed only by law-enforcement officers who have undergone training in the system.

Georgia code "establishes criminal penalties for specific offenses involving obtaining, using or disseminating criminal history record information except as permitted by law," according to a GCIC awareness statement available on the website of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. State code defines one type of violation as "any person who communicates or attempts to communicate criminal history record information in a negligent manner..."

In responding to the allegation, Watkinsville Acting Police Chief William Horton said, "That was not the case."

"You disclosed the information," said Weems.

City Administrator Sharyn Dickerson said GCIC records were never shown to the public. Dickerson signed the press release that was sent to The Oconee Enterprise.

"Since there was no indication of the subject's name or the fact the general information was obtained specifically from the GBI/ GCIC [Criminal Justice Information Services] network, there is not an issue with the press release," Melissa Casto-Mefferd, CJIS compliance program manager, informed city officials via email this week.

Deanna Smith, who is the assistant 911 director for the Sheriff's Office, said that under the leadership of Lee O'Dillon, Watkinsville officers were not trained to use GCIC.

"We've had accountability issues with GCIC," said Weems. "I am

extremely livid over the GCIC disclosure. ... We could lose our GCIC access for something we didn't do; that's the consequence here."

Smith added, "You had officers who were supposed to take training, and they hadn't. We were going on blind faith that they had. We won't go on blind faith anymore."

"I don't doubt the magnitude of this circumstance," said Shearon, before asking if trust can be rebuilt.

Weems said that if the Watkinsville Police Department continues to contract with the Sheriff's Office for GCIC services, the agreement will have strong language in its compliance clause.

"We will get past this," said Weems.

Budget unknown

The Sheriff's Office has presented the city of Watkinsville a \$350,000 preliminary contract for law-enforcement services. The offer provides for only four deputies, ensuring 24/7 protection but with only one patrolling deputy per shift.

The Watkinsville Police Department's budget for fiscal year 2019 was \$704,019, although that figure is contingent on a full staff of eight officers, one clerk and capital expenditures, such as a new vehicle and technology purchases.

The department is expected to be under budget this year, said Dickerson, who was unavailable to provide specific budgetary figures as of deadline.

For the three years preceding the current fiscal year, the approved budget for Public Safety, which includes fire, was between \$623,510 and \$661,482. At the end of those years, however, the actual budgets were between \$491,108 and \$600,805. In fiscal year 2016, for example, Public Safety finished the year under budget by \$132,402. In fiscal year 2017, it was under budget by \$105,652. And in fiscal year 2018, it was under budget by \$60,576.

At a previous meeting, Public Safety Commission Chairman Chuck Horton halted discussion over determining the number of officers to patrol Watkinsville, saying that that is a City Council decision.

With no clear answer on how many people to employ, there has been no cost estimate other than the \$350,000 offer.

"If you wanted additional traffic enforcement, we could add that in," said Weems.

Jobs on the line

Chuck Horton said that if the city of Watkinsville eliminates its Police Department, the city does not have control over the hiring of the deputies that would patrol the city.

Sheriff Scott Berry has made no promise to hire Watkinsville's four officers if the city decides to dissolve its police force. At a previous meeting, however, he did say that the city can negotiate terms of a contract and that he will honor a council-approved contract.

"This is probably the No. 1 decision this mayor and council will have to make," said Chuck Horton.

"I told my kids that this is a big thing," said City Councilwoman Christine Tucker. "It's not easy. It's not clear-cut. ... It's people's jobs. That's real."

Retention

Tucker said that while a low-crime rate is good for Watkinsville, it also means that officers will have less on-the-job experience when they do encounter a serious crime.

SEE POLICE PAGE A2