

## Town raises electric rates ahead of Duke hike

### Customers to see 10% increase on May bills

By Melody Spurney  
mspurney@highlandsnews.com

The Highlands Town Board approved a 10 percent increase in electric rates for local cus-

tomers beginning with the May 25 bills at Wednesday night's meeting.

The rate hike comes in advance of a wholesale increase from Duke Power that is ex-

pected to total 16 percent a year for three years, beginning in March 2010.

After May, town electricity customers will not see another rate increase until the 2011 fiscal year, when rates will increase 4 percent. Annual increases of 4 percent will continue through fiscal year 2013, and an increase of 3 percent is proposed for fiscal year 2014.

The money collected ahead of the Duke increases will be used to create a Rate Stabilization Fund, which will help offset the series of steep increases planned for the wholesale rate. The planned increases are the first rate hikes for Highlands since 1996.

Also at Wednesday's meeting, the board approved contributing \$7,000 toward the

salary of an economic development consultant. The county commission and the Town of Franklin are also contributing toward the consultant's \$40,000 salary.

Commissioner Hank Ross told board members that the consultant would help put together a business and marketing plan for the county and help train other economic develop-

ment staff members, in addition to other duties.

Although Ross said it was unclear what Highlands would receive specifically, Town Manager Jim Fatland said he expected to meet with County Manager Jack Horton to discuss how the consultant can benefit Highlands.

See **TOWN BOARD**, Page 3A

## Kindergarten registration set for April 16

From Staff Reports

Highlands School will be holding registration for next year's kindergartners on April 16.

The registration will be held from 10 a.m. to noon at the school and will include lunch for parents and children.

Due to a change in state law, only children who will turn five years old on or before Aug. 31 will be eligible to register for kindergarten for the 2009-2010 school year. Certified birth certificates are required to verify age.

Transportation to the school will be provided for students, and busses will pick up children at pre-school and day care facilities between 10:20 and 10:35 a.m. Registration packets have been delivered to Highlands' area pre-schools. Children not attending one of the pre-schools may pick up a packet at Highlands School or Highlands Community Child Development Center, 89 Church St. Children who do not attend pre-school are also encouraged to ride the bus along with the other students and may meet the bus on April 16 at the child development center. A signed permission slip is necessary for bus riders.

Parents will gather in the school's media center at 10 a.m. for an overview and orientation. Speakers include Princi-

See **KINDERGARTEN**, Page 3A

### Registration schedule

Parents and incoming kindergartners will follow this morning schedule for the April 16 registration day:

- **10-10:10:** Parents arrive at media center
- **10:10-10:40:** Overview and orientation by school administration and staff
- **10:20-10:35:** Busses pick up students at area day cares. Students not enrolled in a local day care should meet the bus at Highlands Community Child Development Center.
- **10:40-10:45 a.m.:** Parents meet their children
- **10:50-11:15:** Parents and children eat lunch
- **11:15-11:35:** Parents and children tour school
- **11:35-11:40:** Children return to busses and parents return to media center
- **11:40-noon:** Parents complete registration forms



## Will April bring more showers?



Photos by Melody Spurney/Staff  
**Daffodils bloom in Village Square on Tuesday morning during a break in the past week's heavy rains. According to WHLC 104.5 FM weather statistics, 4.51 inches of rain fell at the radio station on Highway 64 between March 24 and March 31. That brought the estimated total rainfall for the month to more than 10 inches, well above the March rainfall average of 8.4 inches. However, as of March 26 Macon County remained classified as an area of severe drought by the North Carolina Drought Management Advisory Council. In spite of heavy March rains, precipitation remained about 2 inches below normal for the first three months of 2009.**

By Geoff Slade  
gslade@highlandsnews.com

The planting of a number of chestnut trees off of Buck Creek Road scheduled for April 14 will be the next step in what scientists hope will lead to the restoration of the tree to its native forests.

Earlier this week, Russell Regn-

ery spent some time clearing an area in preparation of the planting of the nuts.

Regnery, a retired microbiologist, said ever since most of the mature chestnut trees in the eastern United States were wiped out, people have been trying to figure out how to either protect trees from the blight or develop

resistant trees. This second option has shown the most progress.

A group of "prominent plant scientists" came together in 1983 and founded The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF). The nonprofit's mission "is to restore the American chestnut tree to its native range within the woodlands of the eastern United States,

using a scientific research and breeding program developed by its founders."

This breeding program involves crossing the American and Chinese species of chestnuts.

The blight is an Asian fungus, to which Chinese chestnuts have de-

See **CHESTNUTS**, Page 3A

## Scientists plan chestnut tree planting in April

## Administrative fees on room tax raise concerns for committee

By Brian O'Shea  
boshea@highlandsnews.com

The Highlands Tourism and Development Commission raised concerns at Tuesday's meeting over the 15 percent that Macon County withholds from occupancy tax collections for administrative fees.

The county charges a 3 percent tax on all room rentals in Highlands, Franklin and Nantahala. Most of that money is returned to the communities where it is collected. However, the county withholds a portion of all tax collections to cover administrative costs.

Several years ago, Macon County raised the amount it would withhold from the occupancy tax to pay for consultant Gary Nicholson, who was evaluating the use and collection of occupancy tax within the county. Nicholson's contract was ended prematurely, yet the 15 percent was never re-evaluated.

Macon County has hired another consultant to determine the actual administrative cost of processing the occupancy tax. The consultant is from Tim McKinney and Associates and was hired for an indirect study for the county and is doing the occupancy tax study at no extra cost. Jack Horton, county manager, said the consultant has come up with a dollar amount, but he does not want to release that figure until more details are known about how it is being spent.

"We've had a consultant come up with an actual cost over the past year," said Horton. "We want to get more detail before we release that number. I want to get more of a breakdown of exactly how that money is spent so I can tell people when they ask."

He added that he believes the actual administrative cost will be lower than the current 15 percent of the total collected.

"I think it will be less than 15 percent," said Horton. "We want to have a dollar amount for the staff time and specifically identify what our expenses are. We're not a profit center, we just want to cover our expenses."

Jerry Moore, member of the Highlands Tourism Development Commission, said that the county has collected approximately \$228,000 for administration fees over the last four years. At Tuesday's TDC meeting, the question was raised of how the county has spent that \$228,000. If the county's administration cost of processing the occupancy tax over the past four years does not equal \$228,000, TDC members questioned whether the towns should receive some of that money back.

Horton said he could not verify how much the county has collected over the past four years; but that it was unlikely the county would give money back to municipalities.

"I don't know where that number (\$228,000) came from or how reliable it is," said Horton. "The changes (determining actual cost of administration) will take place July 1 of this year. We're not going to dredge up the past and rehash what's happened in the past."

Evelyn Southard, Macon County finance director, said that since 2006 the county has collected approximately \$240,000 in administrative fees from the occupancy tax. That money has helped fund the salary for a staff member who spends 50 percent of her time in collections, includ-

See **ROOM TAX**, Page 6A

**Subscribe today!**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Mail to: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_ The Highlander  
City \_\_\_\_\_ P.O. Box 249,  
State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_ Highlands, N.C.  
Phone \_\_\_\_\_ 28741  
(828) 526-4114

**Rates:** \$23 - 1 year full-time in Macon County & Cashiers  
\$29 - seasonal (May-October) • \$35 - 1 year out-of-county

**SOAR**  
Plans begin for summer Special Ops fundraiser. **Page 1B**

**Our TOWN**

**D.A.R.E.**  
Kids pledge to stay off drugs. **Page 8A**

**Rants & Raves**  
526-2962 after 5 p.m.

**Pick of the week:** Does a town the size of Highlands need a full-time canine cop? Is there a way to realistically evaluate the school resource officer's performance? If there could be any reductions in the police force it might reflect a smaller increase in future tax bills.



Photo by Eric NeSmith/Staff

**Hillrie Quin and Town Manager Jim Fatland pose in front of a picture of a white squirrel after Wednesday's town board meeting.**

### White squirrels fool commissioners

Highlands Greenway chairman Hillrie Quin and Town Manager Jim Fatland made a special April Fool's Day proposal to the town board at Wednesday's meeting.

Quin told commissioners that he wanted to use \$13,000 of the remaining greenway funds to bring white squirrels from Brevard to turn loose on Recreation Park property, where they could enhance tourism and add interest to the greenway trail.

Commissioner Amy Patterson asked Quin if Brevard

was OK with Highlands' use of the squirrels.

Quin responded, "No, they really are not." He then unveiled a final photo of a white squirrel and the label "April Fool's."

After the board acknowledged the joke, Dennis DeWolf asked Quin, "Have you had an expert interview the native squirrels to see if they resent the white squirrels?"

And Commissioner Buz Dotson added after the meeting, "I've had planned comments for a week that I didn't want to make."

### Town Board

Ross said that he understood the \$7,000 was a one-time contribution, and that the town would not be asked to help fund salaries for other economic development staff members in the future.

The board also voted unanimously to change its meeting schedule beginning in May. The next meeting will be held April 15 at the Community Building next to the baseball field. However, in May the board will begin a once-a-month meeting schedule, with regular meetings to be held on the second Wednesday of each month at the Community Building. The May meeting will be held May 13. Additionally, the board also voted to take over operations of the Community Building, which had been the responsibility of the Rotary Club of Highlands. The board granted Fatland permission to negotiate a long-term lease for use with both local Rotary Clubs, which meet in the building.

Bob Houston of the Highlands Fire Department presented the department's budget for approval, which includes funds for a full-time firefighter and \$200,000 toward the cost of a ladder truck.

Currently, the department has two part-time employees. Houston performs office duties 18 hours a week, and Robbie Forrester works up to 20 hours a week as a part-time fireman.

The proposed budget includes a \$45,050 salary package for a full-time firefighter with benefits and insurance.

Houston said the \$200,000 requested for the ladder truck would cover one-third to one-half of the cost in a lease-purchase type of agreement. He said the truck would be beneficial in case of a fire in the downtown business district, particularly on Main Street or at the Old Edwards Inn complex. He estimated the truck would reach about four stories.

"Just about the only way you could fight a fire there would be from above," he said.

The total proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year is \$334,800, an increase of about \$35,000 over last year. The board unanimously approved the budget, which will be sent to the county's emergency management department and later to the county commission.

In other business: Fatland reported that the town had received necessary permitting and easements for the Mirror Lake Sewer Project and that the grant application had been submitted by the deadline. The town could potentially receive a \$1.5 million grant and a \$1.5 million interest-free loan to cover the expected expenses of \$3.8 million.

The board set the 2009 An-

From page 1A

nual Spring Cleanup for the week of May 26.

Residents Pat Taylor and Helene Siegel told the board that a group of local dog owners wanted to see a place approved for dogs to run supervised with proper waste disposal. Taylor said that several dog owners had been using the ballfields for such an activity on Sunday afternoons. He asked that if dogs are banned from that field that the town consider establishing a dog park or dog-friendly area elsewhere.

**Rita's Cottage**  
makeup so pure you can sleep in it™

**bareMinerals** COMPLEXION PERFECTION | **id|HANE** ESSENTIALS

**Hair & Skin Care**  
435 N. 5th St. • Highlands, NC  
526-3742

### Law Enforcement reports

#### Macon County Sheriff's Department

**March 23**  
• A burglary was reported at a residence on Webb Branch Road. There was no sign of forced entry and only the television was missing. The matter is still under investigation.

#### Highlands Police Department

**March 23**  
• An officer responded to a call of subjects looking through a window into a residence on Pierson Drive at approximately 2:30 p.m. The caller said three people were visible when the officer arrived but no one was found. The report indicated an officer would return to check on resi-

dents later in the day.

#### March 24

• An officer investigated an open door after hours at a business and determined it was not the result of a break in. He found the key still in the lock, secured the building and left a note to pick up the key at the police station.

#### March 27

• A Highlands man and an Atlanta man were in a minor auto accident at the entrance to Highlands Plaza and Highway 106. No injuries were reported, and damages totaled approximately \$700.

#### March 28

• An officer answered a noise complaint by a neighbor about construction workers at a site on Satulah Road.

• Jesse Boyd Coffeen, 29, of 111 Crabtree Lane, Franklin, was arrested and charged with simple assault on a female and driving with a revoked license on Main Street at Second Street at approximately 8 p.m. While on patrol downtown, an officer passed a vehicle driven by Coffeen with its front passenger door open, according to the report. The officer stopped the vehicle and spoke to the passenger, a 37-year-old Franklin woman. The woman told the officer that Coffeen had hit her in the mouth. She was taken to Highlands-Cashiers Hospital, where she was treated and released.

According to the report, Coffeen admitted to the officer that he had hit the woman with his

hand. He was transferred to the Macon Detention Center and held on a \$1,000 secured bond. He is scheduled to appear in court April 9.

#### March 30

• Two diamond rings valued at approximately \$2,900 were reportedly stolen from a residence on Shelby Court. The matter is under investigation.

In addition, according to reports available through March 31, in the past week, Highlands police responded to three alarm activations, all of which were determined secure and cleared soon after arrival. The department also issued nine traffic citations to motorists on March 20 and 21.

From page 1A

### Kindergarten

pal Brian Jetter, Assistant Principal Jim Draheim, Guidance Counselor Thomas Jessup, Media Specialist Carol Bowen, Nurse Jennifer Garret, Cafeteria Manager June Zachary and PTO President Susan Coram.

Parents will meet their children at the school at 10:40 a.m. and will eat lunch together and tour the school. At 11:35 a.m., children will return to the buses, and parents will return to the media center to complete registration forms.

Parents are asked to fill out the following registration forms and bring them on April 16:

• Student Information Management Sheet (pink), both sides

• Macon County Schools Consent Form and Internet Policy (golden)

• Home Language Survey (white, triplicate)

• New Student Library/Lunch form

• Kindergarten Admission Information — Parent rating

• North Carolina Kindergarten Health Assessment Report (blue)

• Highlands School Transportation (salmon)

• Macon County Schools Child Nutrition Services Diet Modification Request (if applicable; requires physician's signature)

Any forms, except for the health assessment, that are not returned will need to be com-

pleted that day.

The Kindergarten Health Assessment is mandated by law for all children entering kindergarten.

In addition to the completed forms, parents should bring the following items to be copied at the school:

• Social security card  
• Certified birth certificate  
• Proof of residency (i.e. electric bill, lease agreement or water bill that includes a physical address. Post office boxes are not acceptable.)

• Any legal documents necessary if you are not the biological parent of a child enrolling. (i.e. custody papers, name change documents, adoption

From page 1A

### Chestnuts

veloped a resistance. They are not, however, adequate replacements for the American species throughout its native range because they are low-growing and sprawl, Regnery said. American chestnut trees grow fast, straight and strong.

Crossing the two species

creates half-American, half-Chinese hybrids with characteristics of both. Those determined to be resistant to blight are then "backcrossed" with American chestnuts creating trees that are only one-quarter Chinese. These are then backcrossed with American chestnuts again, and the process is

repeated to forward only the characteristic of blight resistance from the Chinese species while retaining all of the traits of the American trees. Along the way any progeny that are not resistant are killed off.

"The trees we're planting are one cog in an ongoing process," Regnery said.

**12 CHESTNUT SQUARE**

consignment market

*It's nothing to do with luck...*

*I found it at the Consignment Market!!!*

**507-3325**  
WE ARE LOCATED AT #12 CHESTNUT SQUARE  
TURN IN DIRECTLY ACROSS FROM  
CASHIERS FARMERS MARKET

**IS THERE SOMETHING YOU WANT TO CHANGE ABOUT YOUR HOME?**

**KOENIG HOMEBUILDERS**

CALL OUR HOME IMPROVEMENT DIVISION  
**(828) 787-1000**

**The Rocking Chair**  
CONSIGNMENT FURNITURE & HOME ACCESSORIES

April Hours  
Open Tuesday - Saturday, from 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

*Stop by and pick up a consignment guide brochure. Feel free to give us a call with any questions or to schedule an appointment to drop off items.*

**(828) 526-9590**  
Located 2 miles from Main Street on the Cashiers Road  
2437 Cashiers Road • Highlands, NC 28741

- Carol Criminger, Owner -  
**A great place to recycle your treasures!**



#### Join Us for Easter Brunch

Come experience the new relaxed dining ambiance at Madison's and enjoy the new dinner menu featuring a focus on simplicity, freshness and value.

**Madison's Wine Garden Opening April 3**  
RESTAURANT AND WINE GARDEN 445 Main St., Highlands 828.526.2525

### Wine and Dine on the Mountain

May 1-3, 2009 | Highlands, NC

Special lodging, spa and shopping events & rates. Thomas Arvid painting live at these events:

Shafer Wine Dinner at Wolfgang's  
Caymus Wine Dinner at Madison's  
New Orleans Brunch at Wolfgang's

866-526-800 | www.olderdwardsinn.com



All Images © 2008 Thomas Arvid. All Rights Reserved.

