

Using seized drug assets in Union a wise choice

Union County Sheriff Mack Mason made changes that resulted in his office 'bringing home the bacon' with a positive impact on the community.

Union and three other counties operated in the Appalachian Drug Task Force prior to Sheriff Mason's election. A short time after taking office, he made the decision to drop out of the task force, which has proven to be a wise choice. Before, if the sheriff got a tip about someone involved with drug activity, he would pass it on to the local narcotics investigators. A majority of the time, they were already aware of those individuals. The sheriff would notify the task force who would ultimately come into Union County and make the arrest.

The task force would seize assets, and when they were forfeited, the task force got 90% percent, the office of the district attorney got 10%, and the sheriff's office got 0% percent.

Sheriff Mason had a better idea. "If we get those same tips and we work the case ourselves, if there is a seizure awarded, our office gets 90% and the district attorney gets 10%. That was the basis for getting out of it."

For every 100 arrests the two local narcotics officers were mak-

ing, the other three counties averaged about 46 each. Union learned at the task force meeting that federal funding was decreasing and drying up. That meant the four counties would pay 100% of the cost to operate the task force. "That was telling me to get out," said Sheriff Mason.

"We were paying for the investigators that was not bringing any return to our county," said Chief Deputy John George. Other decisions and plans by the task force were questionable by Sheriff Mason, including one that would require a local deputy to work another county. "It appeared that it was going to be more problems than what it was worth," said Sheriff Mason.

Since leaving the task force, the courts have awarded the sheriff's office more than \$150,000 in seized funds, with much more in the works. That money was used to purchase nine used Crown Victoria vehicles, two new 4WD trucks for animal control and many more vehicles. In addition, equipment, recording devices and other items have been purchased. Using the seized drug money, the only expense to the taxpayers has been about \$12,000. The sheriff is able to take seized vehicles and his worn out cars and make trades for better equipment.

Union County drug investigators have a wealth of knowledge and

a better grasp of the crimes in Union County than detectives in the other counties, noted Chief Deputy George. He added that at quarterly meetings and reviewing task force reports that "it did not appear they were doing proactive investigations, making arrests, rolling informants, the things our drug guys are doing on a regular basis."

Recently, local officers received training to learn how to identify and break down meth labs. The cost to county taxpayers was virtually zero because expenses were covered by seized funds. Currently, the biggest drug problems are meth and illegal use of prescription pills, with marijuana still in the county. Burglaries are a problem with a lot of those directly related to people stealing to get money to purchase drugs.

The sheriff's office created an interdiction unit to work cross roads in the county with the intent to cease the transportation of drugs through the county. A local resident donated \$7,500 to purchase a drug-detection dog to be used with that unit. The vehicle for the officer and dog was purchased with drug seizure money.

A tag reader device is being explored that can be used to identify stolen vehicles and vehicles associated with individuals that are fugitives and those who are not properly licensed.

Sheriff Mason has a message for those who wish to deal in drugs or commit other crimes, "Go somewhere else."



Sheriff Mason

Union County Drug Arrests				
	Total	Male	Female	
-----2013-----				
Jan	20	14	6	C
Feb	4	2	2	C
Mar	8	4	4	C
Apr	4	3	1	C
May	4	3	1	C
June	15	12	3	C
July	8	6	2	C
Aug	10	7	3	C
Sept	9	6	3	C
Oct	5	3	2	C
Nov	4	3	1	C
Dec	9	4	5	C
Total	100	70	30	
-----2014-----				
Jan	8	3	5	
Feb	18	9	9	
Mar	3	1	2	
Apr	8	7	1	
Total	37	16	21	

Farmers' Market home for selling home grown & hand made products



Agricultural roots run deep for generations in Union County and the tradition lives in farms that produce a lot of small gardens throughout the community.

For several years the place for those who grow to sell and the place for those who want to buy fresh foods and fruits is the Union County Farmers' Market on Old Smokey Road. The market also has local artists and crafters selling their items.

The crowds are tremendous and the demand for more space for vendors booth has resulted in a current expansion of the facility. The Farmers' Market has a canning plant on site for local people to use. Overseeing the market and canning plant operation is Mickey Cummings.

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Farmers' Market Hours

Tue 3 pm - 7 pm | Fri 8 am - 1 pm
Wed 8 am - 1 pm | Sat 7 am - 1 pm

Canning Plant Hours

Tuesday & Thursday, 6 am to Noon

148 Old Smokey Road, Blairsville
(Some maps: Old Smokey Mountain Rd.)
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