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Extension director selection delayed after cattlemen complain



Representing the cattlemen of Levy County and other commercial livestock ranchers on Tuesday morning (July 32), Brad Etheridge (left) says this aspect of agriculture has been underserved by UF/IFAS Extension for decades in Levy County. Presenting the salient points for how the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences' Extension made a selection for a person to be interviewed for consideration as the next Levy County Extension director and 4-H agent is UF/IFAS Extension District Director Dr. Eric H. Simonne.

Photos and Story By Jeff M. Hardison © June 21, 2016 @ 10:57 p.m.

BRONSON – Growth in the livestock aspect of agriculture in Levy County, and the retirement of Albert Fuller from his post as the director of Levy County Extension and as the 4-H agent, fanned the flames of change Monday morning (June 21) in Levy County.

Fuller was county extension director and 4-H agent for 38-plus years.

The Levy County Board of County Commissioners in cooperation with the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension (UF/IFAS Extension) had advertised for a director of Levy County Extension and 4-H agent to replace Fuller.

In the six months since Fuller left, five candidates applied. UF/IFAS Extension found one of those five was qualified. That six months of advertising, screening, interviewing and research was all for naught, though, because one man showed up to complain to the County Commission that livestock interests have been underserved for about four decades now.

Despite a valiant effort by Dr. Eric H. Simonne, a professor and district extension director of UF/IFAS Extension, for the commissioners to at least interview the sole qualified candidate – that interview that had been scheduled for Thursday (June 23) was nixed.

The interview was killed just two days before it was to happen.

Now the County Commission will advertise through UF/IFAS Extension for a county extension director who has a focus on livestock. Dr. Simmone estimated this next round of screening will take at least four or five more months.

In the meantime, the Levy County Extension office is without a full-time director, although an interim director has been serving one day a week for six months.

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Levy County Commissioner Mike Joyner said he is a cattle owner, and he sees the need for a stronger level of service from UF/IFAS Extension to livestock ranchers in Levy County.

The 4-H year begins in August, and Dr. Simonne said he had hoped to start the year off with a new 4-H agent and extension director in Levy County.

Citrus County Extension Director B.J. Jarvis has been coming to Bronson one day a week for the past six months to serve as the Levy County Extension interim director.

As for the 4-H agent aspect of Fuller's job, Brian Estevez, an extension agent who has served as the 4-H/Youth Development Agent for UF/IFAS Suwannee County Extension since 2008, has dedicated one day a week as the 4-H agent in Levy County.

However, Levy County Extension lost a separate agent recently.

Another person who retired from Levy County UF/IFAS Extension is Muriel Turner, who was an extension agent that specialized in Family and Consumer Sciences.

The Levy County Extension office had another employee leave recently.

Former Levy County Extension Office Manager Lacy Harris, a former Levy County employee, was arrested a few months ago for fraudulent use of the county's credit card. She is out on bond and is awaiting trial.

Cattlemen of Levy County, represented by Brad Etheridge, sought more service from Levy County Extension than they have seen.

Etheridge said that his request for a director based in livestock rather than in 4-H will actually benefit 4-H, because the director will not be torn between the daily operations of the office and all that he or she must do to be the 4-H agent.

Anthony Drew, a renowned Levy County Agriculture Extension agent who specializes in row crops, does not have livestock as his area of expertise. Besides, Drew plans to leave UF/IFAS Extension in three or four years, County Coordinator Freddie Moody said.

Brenda Heberling is the 4-H program assistant, employed by Levy County. Heberling would

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assist the next 4-H agent.

Barbara Edmonds, a Levy County employee, is the program assistant for homeowner horticulture. She helps Drew. She is the coordinator of volunteer Master Gardeners in Levy, Dixie and Gilchrist counties.

Here is how the meeting went Tuesday.

Etheridge apologized for coming in literally at the last possible minute for change away from the direction the county and UF/IFAS Extension had been going for six months.

He said the livestock industry – cattle, swine, goats, sheep, chickens and horses – are underserved by UF/IFAS Extension in Levy County. He wants the next Levy County Extension director to be more of a liaison between UF/IFAS and the livestock producers of the county.

Etheridge said the idea of the director being involved with livestock rather than 4-H relates to the salary difference between a director and an extension agent. By having the higher paid person in livestock, Etheridge indicated this would reflect a stronger impact on quality of the employee.

Etheridge recommends hiring a separate 4-H director, who focuses only on 4-H.

Commission Chairman John Meeks said agriculture is among the few industries in the county. Meeks said there has been an increase in cattle ranches in the past 25 years in Levy County.

“We only had one qualified candidate for this extension position,” Meeks said. “And to me, that’s not a very deep pool to select from.”

Chairman Meeks said he sees it as advantageous to the Levy County youth to have a person only involved with 4-H and not being the extension director.

County Coordinator Moody said the five applicants were reduced to one person who was qualified. Moody said the payment for all extension services is 60 percent from UF/IFAS and 40 percent from the County Commission’s budget.

Dr. Simonne said the person to fill this UF faculty position is not chosen out of thin air. There are expectations from the university which must be met by a candidate to be qualified, he said.

“Is this person going to be successful from an academic standpoint?” he said the university reviewers first consider as they screen applicants.

The campus interviews included involvement of Interim Levy County Extension Director Jarvis and Interim Levy County 4-H Agent Estevez, Simonne said.

Simonne reminded listeners that the extension office is a joint venture of UF/IFAS and the Levy County Board of County Commissioners. This is a grassroots organization with a first purpose of serving the local needs.

The issue that was brought to be on the table of a need for a livestock agent is welcomed, Dr. Simonne said.

The university has determined that one person can do the job of extension director and 4-H agent, Simonne said. UF/IFAS Extension can discuss with the County Commission and livestock representatives how to add a livestock agent to the mix, he said.

Chairman Meeks countered that statement by saying through advertising for a person as director with a focus on livestock, Levy County can take care of this need now rather than waiting for change farther down the road of time.

County Commissioner Mike Joyner started the motion toward not interviewing the one candidate and re-advertising with livestock being the focus rather than 4-H.

Simonne said the County Commission should interview the person on Thursday, but the commission chose against listening to his recommendation.

Simonne said the county can choose to add a livestock agent, as well as replace the extension director and the 4-H agent.

In the end, a motion by County Commissioner Danny Stevens to re-advertise for an extension director with a focus on livestock was seconded and passed unanimously.