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Withlacoochee Gulf Area Chamber of Commerce provides feast at annual meeting



(from left) Levy County Visitors Bureau Executive Director Carol McQueen, Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks and Withlacoochee Gulf Area Chamber of Commerce President Jack Schofield pause for a photo opportunity. Schofield accepted the plaque on behalf of the Chamber as one of the award recipients for the Chamber's help in the success of the Hidden Coast Paddling Adventure Event of 2015 (There are more award recipient photos further down in this story.).

Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © Oct. 21, 2016 @ 12:07 p.m.

YANKEETOWN -- The Withlacoochee Gulf Area Chamber of Commerce Annual Dinner Meeting on Tuesday night (Oct. 18) was a feast for the body as well as for the mind.

Members, associate members and guests of this Chamber, which focuses primarily on Yankeetown and Inglis, enjoyed a low country boil meal for free.

That shrimp, potatoes and sausage dish was enhanced to be the complete meal with bread, coleslaw and cheesecake.

There was beer and wine, tea and water available for the diners as well.

Beyond the suppertime enjoyment, the speakers of the night gave everyone a chance to think about the current blessings of the local business community and to look to the future, where planned growth shows great promise.

Chamber President Jack Schofield, Nature Coast Business Development Council Director David Pieklik, Drinda Merritt of the Withlacoochee River Basin Economic Development Compact and Levy County Tourism Development Council Executive Director Carol McQueen all shared ideas about the local business arena.

McQueen and Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks, who is on the Tourism Development Council, also presented awards to individuals on behalf of the Withlacoochee Gulf Area Chamber of Commerce in appreciation of outstanding support to the Hidden Coast

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Padding Adventure 2015 Event.

JACK SCHOFIELD

Chamber President Schofield serves among the eight-member group of volunteer Chamber leaders with Vice President James Castle, Secretary Cery Logeman, Treasurer Richard Streeter and board members Marilyn Ladner, Helen Ciallella, Laurie Winn and a currently vacant post.

That group had been 11 members, but one of the actions of the Chamber meeting was to revise its bylaws to reduce the number to eight.

Schofield reminded all of the members that dues help pay for operating expenses, because even though the Chamber is volunteers, there are costs.

Another form of revenue is from the Central Florida Electric Cooperative, which pays rent on the building the Chamber owns in Inglis, as does the Mid-Florida Agency.

There were 49 individuals who reserved seats for the dinner and the Withlacoochee Gulf Area Chamber of Commerce appears to be gaining strength as its members network with each other.



David Pieklik speaks about current and future business in Levy County.

DAVID PIEKLIK

Pieklik spoke about a “business alliance” he is forming to go with the NCBDC.

He said he planned to meet with 30 interested people the following evening at the Williston Municipal Airport.

Improving Internet service is a high priority as is increasing central water and sewer service as utilities to help business growth in the area, Pieklik said.

Construction of the new College of Central Florida Campus on U.S. Highway 19 in the Fanning Springs area is seen as a positive component for economic growth by Pieklik.

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Drinda Merritt speaks about the power that comes from being part of a compact.

DRINDA MERRITT

While Pieklik is creating an alliance so that people can have more meetings to talk about business, Merritt, who is also the mayor of Inglis, has become involved in gathering together rural entities to form a compact.

The Withlacoochee River Basin Economic Development Compact provides a venue for interests in Levy, Citrus and Marion counties to approach state legislators.

This partnership meets each two months, Merritt said.

One positive project it is endorsing is a bike path extension from Inglis to Dunnellon, which Merritt says is anticipated to attract another 50,000 visitors to the Yankeetown-Inglis Area annually.

The Withlacoochee River Basin Economic Development Compact agreed during its last meeting to county and municipal governments in the Suwannee River Basin to work together, Merritt said.

Certainly every member of every group in this new conglomerate will not agree on every concept, however, on those matters where the entire group can concur, this new larger compact can approach the Florida Legislature and say "Here we are state. This is what we are working on as a region."

Merritt invited government entities, non-profit groups and individuals to join the Withlacoochee River Basin Economic Development Compact.

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Carol McQueen tells about how tourism helps fund the promotion of more tourism in Levy County.

CAROL McQUEEN

With those three opening commentators – Schofield, Pieklik and Merritt, the keynote speaker of the night was McQueen.

Her PowerPoint presentation efficiently and effectively helped everyone understand the role of Tourist Development Councils and other forms of Destination Marketing Organizations that are all over the state of Florida.

Tourism is a relatively large industry in the state.

McQueen explained that she is a county employee with a county office. Her job is to bring people to Levy County to spend the night as they enjoy the many attractions in this area.

The Levy County Visitors Bureau is funded by a 2 percent fee that is collected from people who stay in motels, hotels, RV parks and campsites for fewer than six months.

That fee generates about \$150,000 annually now in Levy County. The single purpose of this user-fee is to go toward marketing the county as a tourist destination. There are some ad valorem tax dollars spent on the office, such as for electricity.

The economic impact of tourism dollars on Levy County, however, far outweighs the slight investment by taxpayers, and even from the larger investment that comes from tourists who come to enjoy Levy County.

The economic impact to Levy County from the \$150,000, McQueen explained, comes from the \$7.6 million that is collected by the accommodation industry in Levy County annually.

The impact on the county is \$58 million a year from those visitors, she said.

“The employer impact,” McQueen continued, “for every \$1 million in spending equals about 22 jobs. So you take that \$58.2 million and you get about 1,200 jobs.”

She continued by telling the audience that the recirculated dollars from those tourism industry employees purchasing goods and services creates a multiplier effect in the local economy.

Even the people who just visit the area but do not spend the night – the day trippers – generate \$5 million a year in revenue in Levy County annually, she said.

McQueen told about various organizations with which the Levy County Visitors Bureau works, including Natural North Florida, which includes 12 North Florida counties, and Visit

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Florida, which is the statewide agency for tourism.

She shared with the group that her office promotes Levy County internationally, and this draws visitors from all over the world, including England and Germany.

The Kayak Fishing Show with Jim Sammons was in the Yankeetown area a couple of years ago, she said. This program helped generate traffic to the south Levy County coast as fishermen were drawn to that natural resource.

A new project that McQueen is involved with is the creation of the Regional Big Bend Shellfish Trail Map.

McQueen obtained a \$20,000 grant to create this tourist-attracting tool. This medium will provide people with one map to show Levy, Dixie, Taylor and Jefferson counties as they are next to the Gulf of Mexico.

It will show viewers where six species – stone crab, blue crab, shrimp, clam, oysters and scallops – can be located in those four counties, as well as retail outlets for those locally harvested seafood products.

This map that is still in its production stage will show where to go to restaurants and find these dishes as well.

This map will include environmental information from University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension Agent (and aquaculture specialist) Leslie Sturmer, McQueen said.

This will be the first shellfish trail map of its kind in the state of Florida, McQueen said.

After completing her presentation about local tourism and the natural resources in Levy County, McQueen presented awards with County Commission Chairman John Meeks.

AWARDS

Awards were presented to individuals on behalf of the Withlacoochee Gulf Area Chamber of Commerce in appreciation of outstanding support to the Hidden Coast Paddling Adventure 2015 Event. Those helpful people are:



Howard and Mona Beach of Tuckaho RV Campground

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Ellen Klee for the Friends of the Withlacoochee Gulf Preserve



Inglis Mayor Drinda Merritt for the city



Yankeetown Mayor Debra Weiss for the city

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Capt. Rick LeFiles of Nature Coast Tours



Michael Flanders, accepting on behalf of his wife Lisa Flanders and Shrimp Landing Restaurant

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and Lynne Tate for the Yankeetown-Inglis Woman's Club, which is where the annual dinner was held too.

Helen Ciallella and Lisa Van Horn of B's Marina & Campground were unable to be present to accept their award.

ROCKING THE RIVER

Other than Halloween fun, the next really big show for the Withlacoochee Gulf Area Chamber of Commerce is when it presents the Withlacoochee Gulf Area Rocks The River Music Festival – featuring the bands Karmic Revenge, Cutler Spur and Craig Hand.

This Nov. 12 free, fun, family-oriented musical event is from 2 p.m. to 8 p.m. at Inglis Central Park on Levy County Road 40, west of U.S. Highway 19. Everyone is invited to please bring their own lawn chairs.

There are going to be food vendors, arts and crafts for show and sale, a kid zone and a 50-50 raffle.