

# State leaders hear requests from the people of Levy County



**Rep. Charlie Stone (R-Dist. 22) (left) and Levy County Commissioner Mike Joyner speak before the start of the public hearing. Joyner politely interrupted the hearing just after County Commission Chairman John Meeks spoke, to ask everyone for a moment of silent prayer in recognition of a Texas law enforcement officer who had just been killed. County Commissioner Joyner retired from law enforcement after 38 years, although he is still a member of the Florida Intelligence Unit, which is how he learned about the death of an officer in the line of duty.**

## **Story and Photos**

**By Jeff M. Hardison © Jan. 19, 2017 at 3:07 p.m.**

**BRONSON** -- Elected county and municipal leaders, organizational and church leaders, and members of the general public shared with one member of the Florida House of Representatives and one member of the Florida Senate some thoughts about how the state could help the residents and visitors of Levy County.

The Levy County Legislative Delegation, consisting of Chairman State Rep. Charlie Stone (R-Dist. 22) and State Sen. Rob Bradley (R-Dist. 5), conducted a public hearing in the Dogan Cobb Municipal Building, in Bronson, on Wednesday (Jan. 18).

The delegation accepted input from the people on matters of statewide concern as well as local matters, where the constituents felt the state government might help.



**State Rep. Charlie Stone (R-Dist. 22) (left) and College of Central Florida President James Henningsen, Ed.D., speak before the start of the public hearing on Wednesday (Jan. 18). Rep. Stone was instrumental in CF being funded to build the future campus in Levy County, and Rep. Stone was at the forefront of the state funding the construction of the new Williston Middle High School.**



**State Sen. Rob Bradley (R-Dist. 5) (left) and State Rep. Charlie Stone (R-Dist. 22) listen to their constituents in Bronson on Wednesday (Jan. 18).**

## **INTRODUCTIONS**

Rep. Stone is one member of the Florida House of Representatives. The House is composed of 120 members representing an equal number of districts, with each district having an average population of 156,677.

Connie Mullis is Rep. Stone's staff member at his office located on the campus of the College of Central Florida in Ocala. Dennis Ragosta is Rep. Stone's aide in Tallahassee.

Rep. Stone has served the people of Levy County for one complete four-year term and he is in his second set of a four-year term. His district includes all of Levy County and part of eastern Marion County.

Sen. Bradley has several staff members, including his Chief of Staff Steven Richardson. The 11 counties from whence Sen. Bradley is elected are Levy, Dixie, Gilchrist, Baker, Bradford, Clay, Columbia, Lafayette, Suwannee, Union and part of Marion.

Sen. Bradley is one of the 40 senators who serve the people of Florida.

Bradley was a senator in a district that included part of the area that was redistricted to include Levy County. This will be his first time hearing specifically from the people of Levy County, although every state senator and every member of the Florida House represents every person in Florida.

Bradley was elected to his position as the District 5 state senator with no opposition in the most recent election.

The 2017 Legislative Session is scheduled to convene on March 7 in Tallahassee.

## **LEVY COUNTY COMMISSION**

### **CHAIRMAN JOHN MEEKS**

Levy County Chairman John Meeks was the first speaker to approach the Levy County Legislative Delegation.

Like all presenters, Chairman Meeks said he is thankful to the Town of Bronson for hosting the event.

#### **\* Internet And Other Infrastructure Needs**

Meeks said he appreciates any help the state can give to counties to improve Internet service.

Other infrastructure facilities such as roads and installing or replacing paved roads, and pipes for water and wastewater facilities will make areas like Levy County more attractive to developers.

#### **\* Print Legal Ads**

Doing away with the state requirement for print advertisement of legal ads, including the three weeks of delinquent tax notices, was mentioned by Meeks.

He said that allowing just an online publication to print legal ads, including the three weeks of delinquent tax notices, would be a relief from the budget.

At the same time, Meeks said thanked the state legislators for allowing counties to have a bed tax for tourism development.

By allowing counties to tax tourists for sleeping in motels, camping grounds and the like, that provides revenue for counties to advertise and attract more tourists.

#### **\* Rural County Issues**

He asked the Florida Legislature members to work so that they and their colleagues support all funding for small counties that are fiscally constrained. There are certain state programs which target counties like Levy County.

A Web page that shows these topics is

[http://smallcountycoalition.org/legislative\\_agenda.html](http://smallcountycoalition.org/legislative_agenda.html).

Meeks said Levy County Transit was hit hard fiscally by federal funding being cut for people transported for Medicaid and Medicare purposes.

The Levy County Board of County Commissioners cannot use enough General Fund revenue to offset the loss, and the county may need to stop public transportation services as a result. Levy County is among the largest Florida counties geographically, and if public transit disappears here, some individuals and families will be hit with a crippling loss.

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### **\* State Rural Hospital System**

Meeks said small rural Florida hospitals like Regional General Hospital of Williston can use some support from the state. It is not just RGH, but all rural Florida hospitals are being affected as a result of the state's choice to stop allowing the Florida Department of Health's county units to serve as a primary treatment care center.

With the loss of the Levy County Health Department for that purposes, Meeks said, the elderly and poor all over rural Florida are going to rural hospitals.

If Levy County loses its rural hospital Williston, that would put the burden back onto the taxpayers, because instead of being able to walk into the emergency room at RGH, those people will call 9-1-1 for a transport to Gainesville to go to an ER there.

### **\* Placing All Of Levy County In SRWMD**

Meeks said the division in Levy County, where some of its eastern and southern area are in the Southwest Florida Water Management District (Swiftmud) rather than being like the rest of the county in the Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD).

Permitting and tax collection are a couple of the areas he noted where having two separate districts in one county presents a problem.

Meeks mentioned that with agriculture being a major industry in Levy County, he knows farmers see more advantages from being in the SRWMD rather than in Swiftmud.

By changing the boundary line so that Levy County is all in SRWMD rather than 12 percent or so it being in Swiftmud will provide for a more level playing field for all farmers and ranchers, as well as providing all of Levy County with the same services.

SRWMD Governmental Affairs Director Steve Minnis answered questions posed by Rep. Stone and Sen. Bradley.

The SRWMD does not endorse or oppose the proposition to put all of Levy County in the Suwannee River district, Minnis said. SRWMD will provide any technical assistance the Florida Legislature requires if it chooses to do this, Minnis said.

As for whether the Office of Gov. Rick Scott had any concern about granting this request from Levy County, Minnis said he does not know as he answered Stone.

What determines the water management districts' lines? Bradley asked.

Minnis said he believes hydrologists helped create the line based on water basins in the region.

Bradley asked if there was any Swiftmud staff in the room. There was not. Minnis quickly said he had told that water management district that he would cover for them when they asked.

"I don't want to bash them (Swiftmud)," Sen. Bradley said, "but that should never be a question that a representative of the water management district should be coming to the Legislative Delegation meeting.

"There should never be a phone call between the two districts," Bradley said, "see 'would you cover for me.'"

### **LEVY COUNTY SHERIFF ROBERT B. "BOBBY" McCALLUM**

Levy County Sheriff Robert B. "Bobby" McCallum Jr. asked the state for help with a communications problem.

Radio signals in the 800 megahertz range in eastern Levy County, especially around Williston, are not working for the Levy County Sheriff's Office, he said.

The sheriff said there is an event known as "Crab Fest" in the county near Williston each year and that draws crowds of 8,000 to 15,000 people within a very confined area. In 2013, there were five people shot and one killed at "Crab Fest," he said, and the LCSO and other emergency responders were unable to communicate over radios.

One unofficial estimate of \$1 million for a radio tower was mentioned.

Sheriff McCallum said Rep. Stone succeeded in having the state provide a mobile communications system for that weekend now, however this same area is seeing crowds of 500

to 1,000 people every weekend.

The sheriff said this radio blackout dilemma presents a significant danger to the safety of deputies and all other first responders in that area every day.

Rep. Stone asked Sen. Bradley to meet with him and the sheriff to further attend to solving this problem.

Another issue the sheriff mentioned is the state considering allowing inmates to stay in county jails for 18 months. Right now, when a person is sentenced to a year or more, he or she is sent to the Florida Department of Corrections for housing.

The proposal to keep inmates in county jails for another six months, without added funding from the state, presents a significant cost for the county taxpayers, the sheriff said.

Sen. Bradley said he would not endorse any new legislation where the county would have to absorb that cost. With some number of empty cells in county jails, however, and the crowded state prisons, the placement of state prisoners in county jails is being considered.

#### **JOHN LOTT**

Levy County Assistant Superintendent of Schools John Lott and Assist Assistant Superintendent of Schools Candy Dean appeared on behalf of Superintendent of Schools Jeff Edison.

Lott thanked Rep. Stone for his work leading to the funding and construction of the new Williston Middle High School.

#### **SCHOOL BOARD CHAIRMAN CHRIS COWART**

Levy County School Board Chairman Chris Cowart thanked both Rep. Stone and Sen. Bradley for their person donations to the Levy County Schools Foundation.

He also thanked Rep. Stone for improving the ability of the school district to have more digital equipment.

Cowart asked the county by providing more funding for school bus transportation, due to the large geographical area.

#### **BRONSON MAYOR BRUCE GREENLEE**

Bronson Mayor Bruce Greenlee welcomed the leaders to Bronson.

He thanked Rep. Stone and Sen. Bradley for their support of the Small County Outreach Program, which helps counties with roads.

Greenlee mentioned that Bronson's expansion of its wastewater treatment collection system has helped its infrastructure to be more inviting to commercial development.

#### **INGLIS MAYOR DRINDA MERRITT**

Inglis Mayor Drinda Merritt said a wastewater treatment facility is needed for the area of southern Levy County, not only for economic development but it is vital for the health of the Withlacoochee River and Gulf of Mexico.

She said a business is interested in coming to Inglis to help tourism, but that business owner needs municipal sewer service.

#### **WILLISTON CITY MANAGER SCOTT LIPPMANN**

Williston City Manager Scott Lippmann mentioned to the state leaders that there are sewer pipes in that city that were built in the 1940s, and they require replacement.

As for the old water pipes, the city is losing as much as 18 to 20 percent of the water it pumps to structures, Lippmann said.

Needing water and sewer pipes are infrastructure issues that affect economic development, he said.

Williston and other areas need a high speed Internet provider, he said.

There are business interests at the Williston Municipal Airport Industrial Park "who are crying for high speed Internet," Lippmann said, because they need to be able to communicate and conduct business with interests nearby and around the globe.

Having an inventory of shovel-ready sites that can be quickly developed is an area, too, where the state may be able to help the city, Lippmann said.

The city manager mentioned another matter that is more from the public education realm.

There is a problem with not having people in skilled trades – like plumbers, electricians and welders. Lippmann said he has seen a report that shows as many as 70 to 80 percent of the high school graduates are not able to read a tape measure.

### **OTHER REQUESTS**

Other elected officials who spoke with the legislators included Levy County Property Appraiser Osborn “Oz” Barker and Levy County Supervisor of Elections Tammy Jones.

### **PASTOR JOHNNIE JONES III**

Pastor Johnnie Jones III President of the Ministerial Faith Alliance Inc. said this group is currently organizing a community coalition of public and private partners to acquire the campus of the former Williston Middle School so that it can be repurposed as the Williston Civic Center.

“Our vision is that the Williston Civic Center will include community, youth and senior centers as well as educational, cultural and recreational programming and economic development activities,” Pastor Jones said. “The proposed Williston Civic Center has the potential to become a statewide model for repurposing abandoned public facilities to create one-stop community resource centers.”

The construction of the new Williston Middle High School made a major impact on the Williston community, Jones said, and what happens to the vacated properties of the two schools stands to be equally as impactful either negatively or positively.

Jones made three requests of the state.

- \* Become familiar with this group’s plans.

- \* Support this endeavor and bring all of the resources that the state has to bear on the project.

- \* “Use your knowledge and network to assist our coalition in any way that you can.”

### **OTHER SPEAKERS**

Other people who approached the state leaders were Joan Walker of the Archer Family Health Care Clinic; Brian Graham, the director of development for the Quit Doc Foundation; Kristen Griffis, executive director of Elder Options; and Juanita Melchoir, who spoke about trees being planted by the Florida Department of Transportation between Chiefland and Williston.