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Website publisher bids on delinquent tax ads



Interim Levy County Coordinator Wilbur Dean speaks to the County Commission.

By Jeff M. Hardison © Jan. 4, 2017 at 12:07 p.m.

BRONSON -- Interim Levy County Coordinator Wilbur Dean on Tuesday morning (Jan. 3) told the five members of the Levy County Board of County Commissioners -- Chairman John Meeks and commissioners Rock Meeks, Matt Brooks, Lilly Rooks and Mike Joyner -- there was only one qualified bidder for the county's list of delinquent taxpayers and for the county's legal ads.

This subject received no vote, although it was discussed. There could be a rebid, but that is unlikely.

This matter was not listed on the agenda, Dean explained, because the bid opening was Thursday afternoon -- which was beyond the deadline to submit material to be listed on the agenda.

Due to the Florida Statute that requires the delinquent tax list to be published in a paper newspaper with paid subscribers, and other limiting criteria, only the Landmark-owned *Chiefland Citizen* was qualified to bid.

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(from left) County Commissioner Rock Meeks, County Commissioner Matt Brooks and Chairman John Meeks are seen in action on Tuesday morning (Jan. 3).



County Commissioner Lilly Rooks and County Commissioner Mike Joyner listen to interim County Coordinator Wilbur Dean on Tuesday morning (Jan. 3).

The *Chiefland Citizen* is part of the chain owned by Florida Newspapers, LLC (whose sole stockholder is Landmark Community Newspapers, LLC of Shelbyville, Kentucky).

Jeff Hardison, sole proprietor of *HardisonInk.com* submitted a bid for only the delinquent tax list.

Hardison, when he spoke to the County Commission, said it was not so much a bid per se, but an opportunity for the county to go beyond the state's minimum mandatory requirements for advertising delinquent property tax listings.

In his written offer to the county to advertise the delinquent tax list for one year, Hardison noted "You five individuals may choose, however, to accept my offer as noted in IB-08 Reserved Rights, where it is noted "The County reserves the right to accept or reject any and/or all bids, to waive irregularities and technicalities to request resubmission of bids, or to re-bid. Also, the County reserves the right to accept all or any part of a bid and to increase or decrease quantities to meet additional or reduced requirements of the County. Any sole response received may or may not be rejected by the County depending on available competition and timely needs of the County."

Dean said Hardison presented a good argument but the county must follow the state law

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requiring the ad to be in a newspaper.

Of course the phrase “increase or decrease quantities to meet additional or reduced requirements of the County” shows that the county leaders can add this option to what it makes available.

The most recent bid from the weekly *Chiefland Citizen* is from a paper publication that has dropped in circulation since 2011 {2,719 paid circulation} to 2016 {1,859 paid circulation}, according to its own required self-reporting. That newspaper is owned by a corporation based in Kentucky.

The bid on the delinquent tax notices shows 20-cents per line for the tax list.

A few years ago, when the *Levy County Journal* bid 9-cents per line, the *Chiefland Citizen* bid 49-cents per line. However, there was a glitch in the procedure and there had to be a rebid. That is when the *Chiefland Citizen* rebid 9-cents per line. However, the *Levy County Journal* on the second bid went to 6-cents.

Last year, *Levy County Journal* owner Andy Andrews died. There was no person who chose to continue that newspaper, and so it does not exist now.

In speaking with the County Commission, Hardison reminded them that his website is free to view. No person is required to pay for a subscription. It is available to be seen all over the world by any person who connects with the Internet.

He also mentioned there are “no winky-blinky ads” on the website, which refers to some other websites that have pop-up ads or rotating ads that no person can easily see the information.

In the bid form, Hardison noted the site averages 900,000 to one million hits a month and between 9,000 and 10,000 unique visitors a month.

This would be in addition to the ads in the paper, Hardison said, and it is not in competition with that paper. Levy County, he added, is the first county that is being offered this chance.

Dixie County and Gilchrist County are the two other key counties from whence news and human interest stories, photos and videos are put in *HardisonInk.com*, although there is literally a worldwide coverage area potential for that website.

HardisonInk.com is a 6-year-old daily news website that serves North Central Florida, and beyond. It marks the start of the seventh year on Feb. 1.

Hardison is a multiple award-winning writer and editor who has served as a reporter, business writer, bureau chief, managing editor, editor and executive editor for Florida daily and weekly newspapers.

Now as the owner and publisher of a daily news website, Hardison sees a method to offer the opportunity for more people to invest in Levy County via the delinquent property tax procedure.

“I don’t own an offset web press,” Hardison said after the meeting. “I don’t see that as being the thing to buy nowadays, even if the Florida Legislature thinks there is some great need to hang on to that tradition.

“There can be a method to let every person see the list on a government website by people who use the public libraries,” Hardison added. “This subsidizing of paper-based media by the government paying to buy ads to list delinquent taxpayers is not required logistically to make that information available to the people, although the Florida Statutes still require it.”