

HardisonInk.com

***HardisonInk.com* offers to start trend to help investors and Florida taxpayers**



Linda Cooper suggests that constituents contact their county commissioners and provide their input on this idea about extra marketing to sell tax certificates. Standing to her right is Sheriff Bobby McCallum and to the right of the sheriff is Levy County Tax Collector Linda Fugate.

Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © Feb. 25, 2017 @ 8:37 p.m.

CHIEFLAND -- The Levy County Commission on Tuesday morning (Feb. 21) chose to wait until the March 7 meeting before deciding whether to accept or reject an offer from *HardisonInk.com* publisher and owner Jeff M. Hardison.

HardisonInk.com is offering Levy County the chance to start a trend to help investors and Florida taxpayers.

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Dale Bowen of the *Chiefland Citizen* speaks to the County Commission.

Levy County is being given the opportunity to better market the upcoming list of delinquent tax certificates for sale from the office of Levy County Tax Collector Linda Fugate.

While the *Chiefland Citizen* is anticipated to collect in excess of \$20,000 to publish the list in three weekly editions (May 11, 18 and 25) of that tabloid-sized weekly newspaper with a circulation of fewer than 2,000 paid subscribers, Hardison is offering to publish the list for a whole year on the website that has an average of 10,000 unique visitors a month -- with the January count being at 14,547 unique visitors for that month.

The Speech

Following is the presentation Hardison gave to the Levy County Board of County Commissioners on Tuesday:

Why pay \$5,000 to advertise delinquent tax notices on HardisonInk.com?

My name is Jeff Hardison. I own the 7-year-old daily news website named *HardisonInk.com*. I primarily cover news in Levy, Dixie and Gilchrist counties.

I am offering the County Commission an opportunity to increase the odds of selling delinquent property tax certificates by reaching a much larger audience than through just the *Chiefland Citizen*.

For the past two years, my website has averaged one million hits a month. It has seen an average of 10,000 unique visitors. A unique visitor is an IP address – or think of it as one computer. Often, more than one person uses the same computer.

This action increases the marketing of sales of delinquent tax certificates to possible buyers. It will be visible to all people via the internet for free for one year.

There is no subscription purchase required.

This ad will be promoted on *HardisonInk.com*.

If approved, Levy County potentially would be the first Florida county to go beyond the mandatory minimum for this form of advertisement via an independent daily news

HardisonInk.com

website.

The weekly newspaper's representatives may note it is required to place legal ads on a website. This is better than that.

Those ads are not easily found, and these ads will be much better promoted. These ads are on HardisonInk.com itself – not some separate place.

Another reason to accept my offer to go beyond the mandatory minimum required by law is because I am a local vendor. The weekly newspaper is owned by a Florida corporation, which is owned solely by a Kentucky corporation. I am a resident of Levy County, and my daily news website is owned by me.

You may be asking why do more people visit *HardisonInk.com* than any of the weeklies in the three counties I cover?

First, it is instant news. People don't want to wait a week to read about something that happened two weeks ago. And they don't have to now.

Second, the readers know they can trust my coverage. For the past 45 years, since 1971, I have covered the news all over Florida. I have earned seven awards in competition with other Florida journalists.

Third, not only can people trust me, they are immediately informed. For instance, when the 9-1-1 system failed, I was able to reach the market quickly.

So with the reach I have beyond the county lines, the odds of having more buyers of these tax deeds is increased enough to buy this ad space.

All five of you should know that I say what I mean and I do what I say. This is a good deal. I recommend accepting it.



Levy County Attorney Anne Brown

County Commissioner Rock Meeks asked about reducing the price.

Hardison said he would be speaking with Tax Collector Fugate and that potential exists, however the \$5,000 price is based on what the current plan is to create this ad space for the county, with all of the information.

On Wednesday (Feb. 22), Hardison said he did not see any method to reduce the price

he offered to Levy County.

County Commissioner Mike Joyner said he has used *HardisonInk.com* for his political ads, and he believes Hardison does “a wonderful job.”

Joyner asked County Attorney Anne Brown, though, whether the weekly newspaper has exclusive rights to this ad space.

Attorney Brown said that she needs to review and make sure the county has not given

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exclusive rights to the weekly newspaper to publish the delinquent tax notices.

Joyner made a motion to wait until Brown finds if there is an exclusive contract to only allow the Chiefland Citizen to publish the delinquent tax certificates. That was seconded by County Commission Lilly Rooks and met with a 5-0 vote.

On that evening, Brown sent an email to County Coordinator Wilbur Dean.

She said Chapter 50 of Florida Statutes and Section 12D-13.036 of the Florida Administrative Code requires the County Commission to select one newspaper for placement of the annual ads.

“I find it interesting that I am excluded from being able to bid on this advertisement, because *HardisonInk.com* is not a newspaper,” Hardison said. “But in the same breath, *HardisonInk.com* is being considered to be a newspaper so that it is excluded from ‘printing’ the delinquent tax certificate ads.”

The publisher said he is going to have to disagree with the attorney in regard to defining his publication as being two different forms of media just to fit the *Chiefland Citizen’s* agenda.

This is a business decision to be made by Levy County to make more money from investors who buy tax certificates, Hardison said, based on the offer that he is presenting.

Levy County Tax Collector Fugate said historically, there have been 5,000 to 8,000 parcels listed for delinquent taxes. From that approximately 2,500 remain unsold each year, she said.

This additional ad would increase the marketing of those tax certificates.

Chairman John Meeks on Tuesday said there is legislation currently proposed to do away with the requirement to publish these ads in print newspapers.

A couple of people complained Tuesday morning that there is not the best Internet access in Levy County.

However, the people buying the certificates noted via *HardisonInk.com* would be those people who do have Internet access and money to invest, and they may not live in Levy County – yet.

The idea of buying the ad in *HardisonInk.com* is to expand the reach of the marketing of this investment item beyond the four corners of Levy County, and so while some people might complain about their lack of Internet service in some parts of the county, that is not very relevant.

In fact, too, every single Levy County resident has access to one of the five county libraries, where Internet service is provided for free.

Dale Bowen, an employee of the Florida corporation that owns the *Chiefland Citizen* and is wholly owned by a Kentucky corporation did what he could to Tuesday to influence the County Commission to not accept the offer from *HardisonInk.com*.

Although that Kentucky-based group already captured the mandatory ad sale, since it has a monopoly as the only qualified bidder – which Bowen himself noted in his bid proposal, Bowen still felt compelled to attempt to crush Hardison’s (an independent business owner) offer to help the county.

Bowen said people who want to search for public notices can go to <http://www.floridapublicnotices.com/search/>. This site is every legal notice from every newspaper in Florida.

HardisonInk.com

BEYOND THAT POINT

Bowen said people who are motivated to want these certificates will do what they need to find them.

Linda Cooper, the former office manager of the *Levy County Journal*, said she prefers *HardisonInk.com* because it is a free publication and it is better than the *Chiefland Citizen*.

Cooper suggested that to determine what the commissioners' constituents want in this regard, perhaps they should contact the County Commission by email, telephone or in person.

"The county is not paying *HardisonInk.com* \$5,000," Hardison said. "The tax certificate buyers are paying for the ads. If there are 5,000 certificates sold, then that is \$1 per certificate buyer for this added advertisement."

"I have to laugh at the weekly newspaper," Hardison said. "One of its former editors noted *HardisonInk.com* is a blog. It's a daily news website. It is not a newspaper and it is not a blog. I find it interesting that an attorney is trying to define *HardisonInk.com* as a newspaper.

"If it is defined as a newspaper," Hardison said. "Then, it is the place to advertise these ads because it has a much higher circulation. However, even if it was a newspaper, it is not something that someone has to pay for, which is a requirement to bid.

"Therefore," Hardison added, "as I have repeatedly noted in writing and verbally, this is not a bid to advertise the delinquent tax notices in competition with the weekly tabloid. This is an offer beyond that. And the law that precludes other newspapers does not exclude the county from accepting my offer."

By the way for people who do not know what a blog is, it is a regularly updated website or web page, typically one run by an individual or small group that is written in an informal or conversational style. It's an online journal.

"*HardisonInk.com* is a daily news website," Hardison said. "News websites are recognized by professional journalism societies all over the world. Back when I worked for newspapers that were in print, I earned two awards for investigative reporting (1983 and 2007). I earned one for environmental reporting (1990). I earned one for community service (1989). I earned one for best public service (1989). I earned one for front page layout (1989). And I earned one for best use of full color (1984)."