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## U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson meets with constituents



**U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) speaks to the leaders in the Tri-County Area.**

### Story and Photos

**By Jeff M. Hardison © Aug. 31, 2017 at 1:07 a.m., All Rights Reserved  
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**FANNING SPRINGS** -- United States Sen. Clarence William "Bill" Nelson II (D-Fla.), the senior United States senator from Florida, heralded his third in his daily tour in North Central Florida cities Tuesday (Aug. 29) in the City of Fanning Springs.



**Fanning Springs Mayor Trip Lancaster opens the event.**

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**Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks introduces the United States senator.**



**Sen. Bill Nelson talks to Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks.**

Having visited with constituents in Ocala and Gainesville previously that day, Sen. Nelson arrived at the Suwannee River Fair Pavilion at about 4 p.m.

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For the next hour-plus, Nelson, a fifth-generation Floridian who marks his 75th birthday on Sept. 29, entertained and informed a relatively small audience of elected officials and community leaders from Levy, Gilchrist and Dixie counties.

While he was in Gainesville, he met with University of Florida students in regard to student loans, which many of them see as “an increasingly big problem.”

Then, while in Gainesville, Sen. Nelson enjoyed the opportunity to present on behalf of U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) and himself the second resolution passed for The University of Florida as having The National Collegiate Baseball Team.

The early evening program included jokes, family history, Florida history, and discussion about all Americans being from the same country; the desire for a new jail in Gilchrist County; health care costs from county jail inmates; Internet service in rural Florida; dredging at the Suwannee River; rural health care facilities; the cost of modern medicine; the national debt; the trade-off for paying for a wall between the United States and Mexico; and the national crisis from people being addicted to opiates.

Among the local leaders present to hear and speak with Sen. Nelson were the hosts – Fanning Springs Mayor Trip Lancaster, Fanning Springs City Councilman Tommy Darus and other Fanning Springs leaders from the community.

Among the various elected officials were Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks, Levy County Commissioner Lilly Rooks, Gilchrist County Judge Sheree H. Lancaster, Gilchrist County Sheriff Bobby Schultz, Gilchrist County Commissioner Sharon A. Langford, Gilchrist County Commissioner Kenrick Thomas, Gilchrist County Commissioner Todd Gray, Gilchrist County Commissioner D Ray Harrison, Jr., Gilchrist County Commissioner Marion Poitevint, Gilchrist County Clerk Todd Newton, Dixie County Commissioner Mark Hatch and Williston Mayor R. Gerald Hethcoat.

There were several other elected and appointed leaders from the private and public sector from all three counties as well. Still, there were far more empty chairs than people.

A relatively heavy rain just before the start of the event combined with a rather lackluster effort by the City of Fanning Springs to notify the general public helped to keep the audience small.

The meeting was specified to be for elected leaders and community leaders.

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## **Introductions, Family History, Jokes**

Fanning Springs Mayor Lancaster introduced Levy County Commission Chairman Meeks, who introduced Sen. Nelson.

Meeks said he was honored to introduce the senior United States senator from Florida.

Meeks said Sen. Nelson’s family came from the Panhandle of Florida in 1829, even before the territory became part of the United States as a state, which it did in 1845.

When the senator spoke about his roots, he said that his great, great, grandfather on his mother’s side came to Port St. Joe on a boat from New York City because he had been into a barroom fistfight.

That great, great grandfather was a teenager and a sailor and he feared that with his

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Danish accent, having come from Denmark that he would not be understood and he would be arrested for fighting in a bar.

That teen ran and hid on a ship. Then the vessel cast off from New York City to arrive in Port Saint Joe, Florida, in 1829.

From there, the family moved inland. The senator spoke about where the next couple of generations of leaders in the maternal part of the Nelson family are buried in Washington County.

John Wesley Nelson, the senator's maternal grandfather is also buried in Washington County.

"That was my mother's side of the family," Sen. Nelson said. "My mother was a Nelson, and she married a Nelson. So that means I'm a full Nelson."

The joke was understood by many in the audience who wrestled in high school, or who were familiar with that sport. The full nelson (sometimes called a double nelson or a double shoulder lock) is done by performing half nelsons with both arms. In collegiate, high school, middle school (junior high school), and most other forms of amateur wrestling, this wrestling move is illegal.

The senator's father's side of the family came to the East Coast of Florida at the turn of the 19th Century. Under the Homestead Act of 1862, people who worked the land for four continuous years would have 160 acres deeded to the family.

The deed was signed by President Woodrow Wilson to the Nelson family in 1917 (his paternal grandparents), and the senator has a copy of that.

Sen. Nelson's father's ancestors obtained 160 acres that are now on the northern end of the former Space Shuttle Runway at the Kennedy Space Center.

Meeks mentioned Sen. Nelson's history includes him being an astronaut. And as Astronaut (payload specialist) Nelson looked from the window of the Space Shuttle Columbia, he saw the state of Florida.

Nelson spent six days in space on that space shuttle in 1986.

There were no political divides, no religious divides and no racial divides visible from space, Meeks said Nelson noticed.

"And how important is that in our world today" Meeks asked, "with the things that we are facing as a country, where people are at each other's throats over things that are very trivial and very menial?"

Meeks said Nelson realized that "We are all Floridians, above everything else. And above that, we are all Americans."

When Nelson spoke about the launch of the Space Shuttle Columbia, he mentioned there were four scrubbed launches before the fifth was a "Go."

Just before the successful fifth attempt, Nelson looked to the north from the launch area through the early morning darkness.

"Just three miles away is where the old homestead was from the launch pad," he said. "And it just overwhelmed me that my grandparents never could believe that a grandson was literally going to leave the face of the Earth, almost from the old homestead."

Nelson's political history is shown below from his current standing back to 1972 (45 years):

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- U.S. Senate, elected November 2000-current
- Florida Treasurer, Insurance Commissioner and Fire Marshal 1994-2000
- U.S. House of Representatives 1978-1990
- Florida Legislature 1972-1978

Meeks in introducing Sen. Nelson shared some of the American leader's high points. Nelson stood up to the insurance companies, Wall Street banks and Big Oil, Meeks said.

He exposed the lies of BP Oil about The Gulf Spill, Meeks said.

And he's created a blueprint forward for our nation's space agency. Now in his third term, he's continuing to fight for lower taxes, better education, Medicare and Social Security.

Meeks said Nelson does what he sees is best for the American people and for the state of Florida.

"He's someone who thinks that being a public servant is a noble calling," Meeks said. "That's why he's devoted his life to serving his community, his state and his country."

As he introduced Sen. Nelson, Meeks shared some personal insight about why he sees this man as a true representative of the people.

Meeks said his recent visit to Washington, D.C., gave him a chance to visit with U.S. Rep. (Dr.) Neal Dunn, M.D. (R-District 2 Florida).

"I got my 20 minutes with Rep. Dunn, in and out," Meeks said.

When he reached Sen. Nelson's office, Commission Chairman Meeks said he was welcomed into his office – but it was 4:30 p.m.

"I had all the time I wanted," Meeks said. "We talked, and talked and talked. The gentleman understood the issues that I was there to talk about."

Nelson knew about poor Internet service in rural Florida, Meeks said. Nelson knew about the Valdosta sewer plant having overflows into the Suwannee River, Meeks said. Meeks complimented Nelson's staff as well.

He was very pleased with the treatment he received by Sen. Nelson.

"It wasn't like I was going to meet with a politician," Meeks said. "It was like I was going to meet with a friend. And that will always stay with me."

And as part of his introduction, Chairman Meeks introduced U.S. Sen. Nelson as his friend.

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## A New Gilchrist County Jail

Sen. Nelson said he sees a possibility of a Community Development Block Grant being awarded to Gilchrist County for a new jail.

He mentioned that a CDBG in Marion County was used by the Marion County Commission to construct a Veterans Service Center.

In the City of Miami a CDBG is used to help feed senior citizens, Sen. Nelson said.

He believes a community can decide how to use a CDBG, and he feels this type of grant could be used toward constructing a new jail in Gilchrist County.

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## **Health Care Costs Of County Jail Inmates**

Dixie County Commissioner Mark Hatch, Gilchrist County Manager Bobby Crosby and Gilchrist County Sheriff Bobby Schultz all provided insight for the senator on this matter.

After a certain limit is reached per inmate, then health care costs are no longer borne entirely by the counties.

Sheriff Schultz said if the cap is \$10,000 per inmate, and there are 120 inmates and 15 of them need expensive health care, then that equals \$150,000. Bigger counties have medical staff at the jails, he and County Manager Crosby said.

The Gilchrist County Jail has a nurse now, Crosby said, to help reduce those costs a little. However, for a county that needs a whole new jail, the idea of adding a medical staff is not even something to dream about.

In the meantime, Florida sheriffs – rural and urban – are seeing their budgets significantly impacted by having to provide health care to inmates.

For the rural counties of Levy, Dixie and Gilchrist counties, there is the expense of transportation to Alachua County to the hospitals there. Also, there is the expense of having a deputy around-the-clock with a hospitalized inmate.

There was some discussion about asking for help from the Florida Department of Corrections and for the Tri-County Area sheriffs to share deputies to reduce the impact from guarding a hospitalized inmate.

There was no clear answer to show any relief from this issue.

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## **Internet Service In Rural Florida**

Nelson referred to the issue of few choices of adequate Internet Service Providers in rural Florida as an expansion of broadband.

From that starting point, he spoke about infrastructural needs such as bridges, roads, seaports, airports, sewer plants, water plants and schools that need to be built and rebuilt in America.

Just on the matter of bridges, Nelson said there are 50,000 structurally unsound bridges in America right now. He reminded the audience of a disaster.

The Interstate-35W Mississippi River Bridge was an eight-lane, steel truss arch bridge that carried I-35W across the Saint Anthony Falls of the Mississippi River in Minneapolis.

During the evening rush hour on Aug. 1, 2007, it suddenly collapsed, killing 13 people and injuring 145. The National Traffic Safety Board cited a design flaw as the reason for that failure, according to records.

Expansion of Internet and cellphone service in rural areas, he said, is like all of the other infrastructure needs in the nation. Everyone is in favor of improving what needs to be improved, however no one wants to fund the work.

The only hope of improving the nation's infrastructure, he said, is for bipartisan agreement. The Republicans and the Democrats are going to have to agree on income tax reform for corporate and individual taxpayers, he said.

A current \$1 trillion budget proposal that would cover 10 years, he said, includes \$20

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billion for expansion of broadband in the underserved areas.

Taking away IRS tax loopholes, he said, will produce the needed revenue to improve the nation's infrastructure.

Gilchrist County Commissioner D. Ray Harrison Jr. reminded Sen. Nelson to take great care with whomever the federal government trusts with a \$20 billion expansion of broadband service in the underserved area.

Commissioner Harrison said Floridians saw a boondoggle of an Internet Service Provider expansion plan. There were \$32 million wasted with no improvement in service, he said.

Nelson said he is one of the two leaders on the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee with jurisdiction over telecommunications.

Nelson heard Harrison tell him that grants previously provided for rural areas to improve Internet service were not spent properly. Sen. Nelson asked Harrison to have someone give him the specific information about this Internet Boondoggle and scam.

Fanning Springs City Councilman Tommy Darus told Sen. Nelson that he sees it as being unfair for people in Levy, Dixie and Gilchrist counties to pay Verizon the same fees as people pay Verizon when those people live in Miami.

In the Tri-County Area, he said, the level of service is not nearly as good as it is in Miami, and yet folks here pay the fee as if it was the same level of service.

Nelson said SpaceX plans to send 2,000 satellites into space to create a complete network so that cell towers will be outmoded. It will be a couple of years, he said, but that plan is moving forward for better satellite service.

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## **Dredging The Suwannee River**

Dredging at the mouth of the Suwannee River where it enters the Gulf of Mexico and at Horseshoe Beach in Dixie County was mentioned.

Sen. Nelson said he intends to become "the squeaky wheel" to help the United States Army Corps of Engineers understand the importance of this improvement for maritime interests.

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## **Rural Health Care Facilities**

Levy County Commission Chairman Meeks brought up the need for federal assistance with rural health care facilities.

Meeks said if there was a rural health care provider closer than the hospitals in Gainesville, then the cost of inmate hospitalization would be reduced.

He took the cost of inmate health as being a starting point to mention this part of the state's infrastructure that needs help too – hospitals in rural Florida.

Sen. Nelson took the rural healthcare issue to the point of an economic and political set of facts.

Most people in rural America, he said, are relatively poor. Those folks who are qualified, he continued, use Medicaid.

He noted that Florida, in contrast with the majority of the nation, "has a very low bar for getting eligibility for Medicaid."

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By this, Nelson means that Florida residents must be poorer than most Americans before they qualify for Medicaid. This is a result of state leaders who chose against accepting federal help with healthcare costs.

There was intent at one point to make all states have the same level – 138 percent of the poverty level to qualify for Medicaid. Translated to annual income, Nelson said, that would show that an individual who earns \$24,000 a year or less would have been eligible for Medicaid in Florida.

Florida is not one of the 31 states, Nelson said, that allowed for the expansion primarily for the first three years would have been 100 percent federal money; and then a 90 percent federal and 10 percent state funding method.

“Florida has chosen not to expand Medicaid,” Nelson said, “so that makes it harder to serve this (low-income rural) population.”

Community health service centers, like Palms Medical Group, have seen an expansion, he said. Of course, PMG cannot help alleviate hospitalization costs from inmates.

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## **Cost Of Modern Medicine**

Levy County Property Appraiser Osborn “Oz” Barker said he has staff members who are paying for health insurance to cover their family members, effective Oct. 1 that is creating such a significant increase in cost that it is untenable, although he fully supports what the Levy County Board of County Commissioners did.

An employee will be paying \$1,784 per month, Barker said. There is \$902 of that expense being borne by the county because it will pay for the employee’s coverage, but the employee with a spouse, or children, or a spouse and children on that health insurance plan are seeing a big change in their family budget from Oct. 1 through Sept. 30, 2018.

Therefore, a \$10,584 previously not imposed expense could hit the family whose county worker will earn about \$25,000.

Health insurance rate hikes combined with the Levy County Commission’s choice to not take from its reserve funds as much as it did in the past 10 years or so, has created a hardship for families that have breadwinners working in the county offices.

Before the meeting, County Commissioner Lilly Rooks mentioned that a \$20 annual increase in taxes could adversely affect a taxpayer on a fixed income. Of course, this is a bit less of an impact than the \$8,000 to \$10,000 hit that several families with workers in county government offices are going to see.

Nelson said he sees the insurance rate hikes. Back when he was the commissioner of insurance in Florida, he had a method to reel in those corporate interests.

One insurance researcher noted the following about Florida Blue – the health insurance company for Levy County.

“Florida’s largest health insurer—Blue Cross Blue Shield of Florida, or ‘Florida Blue’—posted a \$471 million profit in 2015.

This will be the second year Florida Blue will post a profit for Florida exchange plans.

The health insurer’s financial filings show that the carrier posted a \$124 million profit in

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2014. As Aetna and United Healthcare leave the Florida health exchange, Blue Cross stands in line to acquire potentially hundreds of thousands of new clients in 2017.”

Nelson said the annual increase of health insurance rates nowadays is “hugely less” than it was years ago.

Nelson said health insurance costs are at least partially reflexive of the cost of scientific research and development of miraculous drugs.

The cancer-fighting drug made by Merck -- Keytruda -- that saved former President Jimmy Carter from death from a brain cancer is among the expensive drugs.

This drug allows the body’s auto-immune system to break through that particular cancer cell’s outer hard shell, and to kill those cancer cells, Nelson said.

The cost of research to create these modern science miracles is high, he said.

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## **The National Debt**

Levy County Property Appraiser Barker brought up the point of a significant national debt.

“It is true we have a big national debt,” Nelson said. “What you probably don’t know is that over the last dozen years, the annual deficit has been brought down, and cut in half.”

Nelson conceded the federal leaders have “a long way to go to get the budget back into balance.”

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## **The Walling Off From Mexico**

Border protection to stop the influx of illegal drugs, human trafficking and the importation of terrorists is a federal matter.

Nelson said a proposed wall across the United States’ land border with Mexico, in a budget offered by President Donald Trump, shows a cut to the United States Coast Guard of 13 percent.

The USCG, Nelson reminded listeners, is the water border (or shoreline border) protection most used by Florida, which is a peninsula surrounded on three sides by water.

The increased Mexican-American Border Wall budget shows, too, cuts to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

“Who’s going to cut FEMA,” Nelson asked, “particularly now that – and thank you for your (opening) prayer for the people of Texas. Who’s going to pay for that, and that, by the way, is going to be a huge cost to the taxpayers of the United States.”

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## **The Plague of Opiate Addicts**

Nelson said the over-prescription of pain medicines that are opioids is creating addicts.

He spoke about a baby that was born addicted to opiate types of drugs. The doctors have to ween then babies off of this by reducing doses of morphine over a 60-day period.

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Sen. Nelson spoke about other matters of national concern as well. After the meeting,

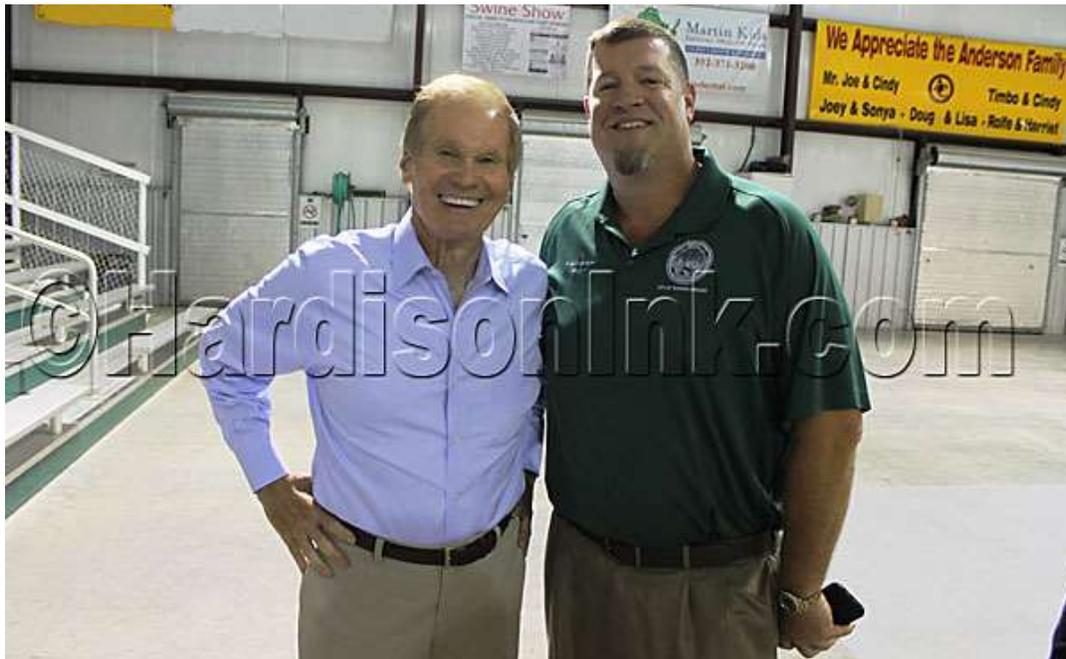
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he spent several minutes letting people take pictures with him.



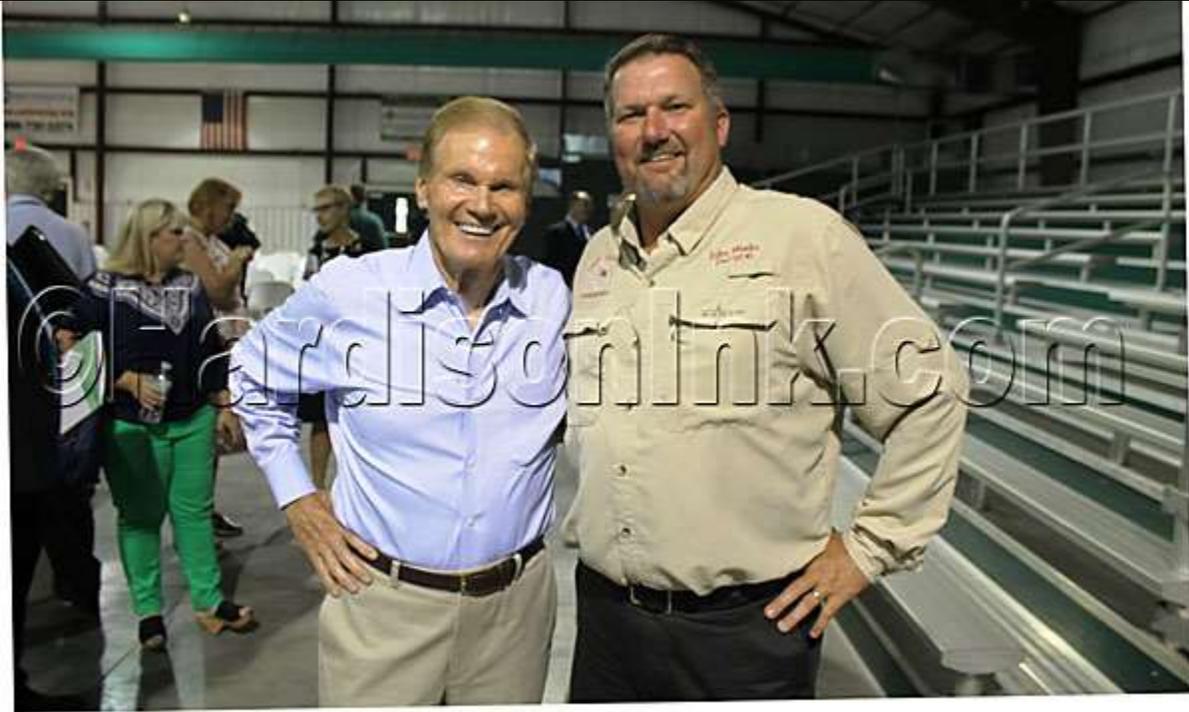
**Sen. Bill Nelson speaks with Williston Mayor R. Gerald Hethcoat immediately after the meeting.**



**Sen. Bill Nelson (left) and Fanning Springs Mayor Trip Lancaster**

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**Sen. Bill Nelson (left) and Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks**