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## Levy County legislators hear requests, accept award



**State Sen. Robert “Rob” Bradley (R-Fleming Island, Dist. 5) and State Rep. Charlie Stone (R-Ocala, Dist. 22) confer before the start of the hearing.**

### Story, Photos and Video

**By Jeff M. Hardison © Sept. 30, 2017 at 4:17 p.m., All Rights Reserved**

**BRONSON** -- State Sen. Robert “Rob” Bradley (R-Fleming Island, Dist. 5), chairman of the Levy County Legislative Delegation this year, State Rep. Charlie Stone (R-Ocala, Dist. 22) to hear requests from elected officials and constituents on Wednesday (Sept. 27) from 9:30 a.m. to noon.



**Bronson Mayor Bruce Greenlee speaks to the Levy County Legislative Delegation.**

The hearing was again in the Dogan S. Cobb Municipal Building located at 660 E Hathaway Ave. (U.S. Alt. 27) in Bronson. Sen.

Bradley and Rep. Stone thanked Bronson Mayor Bruce Greenlee for the town hosting the event again this year, and Sen. Bradley mentioned that he is grateful for the effort to help everyone feel comfortable.

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**In this video, State Rep. Charlie Stone and State Sen. Rob Bradley conclude their statements after a two-hour Legislative Delegation in which they communicated with elected officials and other constituents from Levy County.**

Early in the meeting, Rep. Stone switched chairs because the one he had was squeaky. And while the squeaky wheel sometimes gets the grease, in this instance the squeaky chair got replaced.

The legislative delegation for each of Florida's 67 counties holds a public hearing each year to afford local officials, members of the public, and other interested parties the opportunity to present legislative proposals or express opinions on state issues.

The next Regular 60-day Session of the Florida Legislature will convene on Jan. 9, 2018 in Tallahassee. Like last year, the Florida Legislature chose to move its session forward from the traditional sessions that used to start in the spring.

Sen. Bradley is the state senator for all of Levy County, as well as Dixie, Gilchrist, Baker, Bradford, Clay, Columbia, Lafayette, Suwannee, Union and part of Marion. He will be attending another 11 legislative delegation hearings.

Rep. Stoney is the state representative for all of Levy County and the western part of Marion County. He will be with Sen. Bradley at that get-together in Marion County.

Since Sen. Bradley lives in Clay County and Rep. Stone lives in Marion County, Sen. Bradley said he leans on Stone for a closer perspective on issues that affect the district.

Both state leaders said they work closely together to assure Levy County is well-served in the Florida Senate and the Florida House of Representatives, and they both agreed that they work as a team with both sets of legislative aides communicating well with each other.

Assisting Rep. Stone are Legislative Assistant Dennis Ragosta, who is primarily in Tallahassee, and District Secretary Connie Mullis, who is primarily in the district office on the campus of the College of Central Florida in Ocala.

Assisting Sen. Bradley are Chief of Staff Steven Richardson, and legislative assistants Mary "M.D." Lee and Tonya Shays.

Both gentlemen reminded listeners to approach them for matters of concern in the district, but also to approach specific legislators on certain committees. When a matter not only is of importance to this House and Senate district in particular, but may relate to a committee where the men serve, that can be an even better contact.

Rep Stone is the vice chairman of the Agriculture & Natural Resources Appropriations Subcommittee; and he is on the Joint Select Committee on Collective Bargaining; the Education Committee; Government Accountability Committee; the Government Operations & Technology Appropriations Subcommittee; the Insurance & Banking Subcommittee; and the Oversight, Transparency & Administration Subcommittee.

Sen. Bradley is chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee; the chairman of the Environmental Preservation and Conservation Committee; and is on the Transportation, Tourism, and Economic Development Committee; the Appropriations Subcommittee on Higher Education; the Banking and Insurance Committee; the Criminal Justice Committee; the Judiciary Committee; and the Rules Committee.

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When Rep. Stone addressed the audience, he said it is “an honor and a pleasure to represent all of Levy County.”

Stone is in his fifth year of service in the Florida House of Representatives.

He sees Levy County as being full of good, hard-working, God-fearing people.

The most recently past session in the Florida House, Stone said, was somewhat unusual. He said this because the House, the Senate and the governor just could not agree on some matters.

Despite some obstacles to agreement on some matters, there was good legislation.

The education bills passed by the Florida Legislature and signed into law by Gov. Rick Scott was good, Stone said.

“The environmental bill that Sen. Bradley worked so hard on was a great piece of legislation and good policy,” Stone said. “I think overall, we came out with a good session; although we did have our disagreements on how some of that policy should be instituted.”

Rep. Stone sees the coming session as being a continuation of some of the unresolved issues from the previous year.

“It’s always an honor to represent you,” Stone said. I enjoy going to Tallahassee and telling people I represent Levy County.”

Stone said Sen. Bradley has been most accommodating, and he has never said “No” but instead says “Let’s find a way to get it done.”

When Sen. Bradley spoke next, he said it is as students learn in civics classes. To get things done, both house of the Florida Legislature are required.

The first people to speak to Levy County Legislative Delegation were other elected officials.

## LEVY COUNTY SUPERVISOR OF ELECTIONS



**Levy County Supervisor of Elections Tammy Jones explains how a program can help reduce voter fraud by people who vote in two or more states.**

Levy County Supervisor of Elections Tammy Jones requested the Florida House of Representatives and the Florida Senate to hear what the Florida Association of Supervisors of Elections seek.

The association has five top issues, she said. The first and foremost is to create

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legislation to allow Florida to participate in the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC).

This was proposed last year and passed the Florida House. It did not pass the in the Senate, Jones said.

The ERIC program allows supervisors of elections to communicate across state lines. It reduces the ability of people to vote in Florida and vote in some other state as well. While federal law prohibits one person casting more than one vote for a federal candidate, people violate that law. This would help capture those criminals.

The ERIC program would help remove dead voters from the rolls, especially in Florida, and this would reduce dead people somehow casting ballots. Many people in Florida live in other states as well, and they can die in that other state without Florida being notified.

“ERIC has been instrumental in identifying more than a million voters who are registered in more than one state,” Jones noted in a handout she gave the state leaders. “ERIC began in 2012 and is currently employed by 20 states and the District of Columbia.

“Cleaner voter rolls equate to more efficient elections with shorter lines at the polls,” she noted, “and ultimately cost saving with less returned mail and fewer provisional ballots.”

The four other issues of concern by the Florida Association of Supervisors of Elections, Jones said, are:

- Exempt voter registration information from public records;
- Provide that sample ballots be mailed rather than published in a newspaper. Jones said she mails a sample ballot to registered voters, and she buys space in HardisonInk.com.
- Provide that candidates pay qualifying fees using a cashier’s check or money order drawn from funds in the candidate’s campaign account.
- Conform the times for mailing and canvassing ballots in Florida Statute 101.6103(1) and (6) to other substantive statutory time frames.

## LEVY COUNTY COMMISSION CHAIRMAN JOHN MEEKS



**Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks presents a plaque of appreciation for the state funding to improve the Bird Creek Boat Ramp**

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west of Yankeetown.



**(from left) Sen. Rob Bradley, County Commission Chairman John Meeks and Rep. Charlie Stone provide a photo opportunity after the plaques were presented.**

Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks said he is thankful to the representative and the senator for standing up for what they saw as right, despite that potentially costing a little political currency during the session last year, by not going with what the Florida House of Representatives Speaker Richard Corcoran (R-Lutz, District 37) might have wanted.

Chairman Meeks said that the Levy County Road 40 Boat Ramp has been a problem of regional significance because boaters from all over Florida use it to launch into the Gulf of Mexico west of Yankeetown.

Sen. Bradley and Rep. Stone were instrumental in the county obtaining \$650,000 in an appropriations bill, Meeks said, for renovations and improvements at the Bird Creek Boat Ramp.

For their work in that regard, Meeks presented them both with a plaque of appreciation.

Chairman Meeks was the first of a number of people requesting the Florida Legislature to revise the boundary lines for the Suwannee River Water Management District and the South West Florida Water Management District.

As it stands, the county is split between the two districts and the people of Levy County prefer to have this entire county in the Suwannee River Water Management District. The division results from bodies of water, basins, springs rivers and the like not falling within geo-political subdivisions. However, for efficiency of government and consistency of representation in the water management districts, this revision seems logical.

Another point Meeks mentioned for the state leaders is for them to do what they can to provide more Internet Server Provider options for the people of Levy County.

While all five public libraries are WiFi hot spots and there are some number of public computers, this is not enough for the students of Levy County to use for homework. Verizon offers a MiFi service and some people can connect to the Internet via cable, but

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overall the level of service for Internet in Levy County is relatively abysmal in contrast with more urban counties like Alachua, Citrus and Marion.

Meeks mentioned that good Internet service makes a difference for economic development and commerce as well as education.

Stone said the federal government regulates communication. He sees private interests as saying there are not enough users in Levy County to justify the expense of creating a network here.

The state looked at what it would take to subsidize an Internet Service Provider in rural Florida to entice them into providing that service. The cost was seen to be prohibitive, he said.

Meeks said he plans to be active in the Florida Association of Counties' roundtable discussion to find a method to bridge the gap of the digital divide which has created the "haves" and the "have-nots."

Meeks said a previous roadblock was law that precluded rural electric cooperatives from operating an Internet service. He is speaking with Central Florida Electric Cooperative to consider that sort of service being part of the CFEC.

The County Commission chairman wrapped up his time at the podium by mentioning his appreciation of the two leaders' work during and after Hurricane Irma.

"It was good to try to help you," Rep. Stone said. "But I will probably never get another Christmas card from Duke Energy."

## LEVY COUNTY SCHOOLS



**Levy County Superintendent of Schools Jeffery R. Edison (at the podium) and Levy County School Board Chairman Chris Cowart**

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Levy County Superintendent of Schools Jeffery R. Edison and Levy County School Board Chairman Chris Cowart shared their insight with the state leaders.

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Edison said there were 1,500 people who used hurricane evacuation shelters in Levy County during Hurricane Irma. Shelters were staffed by the public servants who are employees of the Levy County School Board and others.

Edison said he agrees with County Commission Chairman Meeks who said Levy County is blessed to have not suffered more destruction from the hurricane than it did.

As South Florida evacuated, Edison said, Levy County experienced an influx of evacuees with special needs. Normally, Levy County anticipated needing facilities for 40 people but with the northbound traffic, there were 120 people who fit into that classification.

The state sent nurses and National Guard members to assist, Edison said, and he is thankful for that state aid.

The top administrator of schools in Levy County reminded the state leaders that all 67 counties are charged with caring for their medically challenged students.

This past week, Edison said, a student would have died if not for the rapid response of school nurses and Levy County EMS after an incident at a school.

“If our folks did not do as they were trained,” Edison said, “that child would have died.”

As for the hurricane, Edison spoke well of the EOC staff, the Levy County Sheriff’s Office, Chairman Meeks County Coordinator Wilbur Dean and others. He said all of the agencies worked together in Levy County for the good of the people.

Edison said Chiefland High School is a campus with includes buildings that are older than 50 years old. Levy County needs a new high school in Chiefland, he said.

Chairman Cowart said helping 1,500 people was daunting.

Rep. Stone congratulated the School Board, County Commission and other leaders in Levy County for successfully getting through the hurricane. Stone said he heard some comments about having shelters for pets in Levy County.

Commission Chairman Meeks took the podium to defend Levy County Animal Services successful efforts during the hurricane.

Meeks said the Florida Legislature asks each county to have a plan about how to handle animals during a hurricane. The plan in Levy County, he said, is a very good plan.

Pets that are brought to the Levy County Animal Services facility are put in places separate from the strays. Meeks said he is thankful to the Alachua County Humane Society for taking all of the strays from the Levy County shelter before the storm hit.

“I have pets,” Meeks said. “I love my animals, but I love myself and my children first. If I have to make a choice between leaving behind a pet or a family member, or staying in that situation, common sense says I am going to leave behind my pet.”

Once the storm arrives, Meeks said, pets cannot be taken outside. So they go to the bathroom in a shelter.

Meeks told Stone that the pet “issue” in Levy County was more of an expression of opinions by “the vocal minority” using the Internet, rather than being an actual issue.

Chairman Cowart put things into perspective. He said there were “Doughnuts With Dads” today at Bronson Elementary School. A girl approached him and asked him if he was going to be on the campus long.

Cowart told the little girl that he would be leaving the campus soon.

“And she said, ‘Oh. Okay,’ and you could see the wind kind of coming out of her sails,” Cowart said. “She said, ‘Because I was going to ask if you would be my Dad for the day.’”

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Cowart said this helps remind people about the influence of teachers, administrators and other school personnel upon the lives of the children they serve. School staff members are essentially the parents during that time when the children are away from their homes.

Sen. Bradley said he appreciates the work by Edison, Cowart and Meeks for their involvement in state matters.

The state senator spoke about the pets in hurricanes issues.

Bradley said he respects the right of local leaders to handle the matter as they see fit.

With the restraints of space for evacuees, Bradley said, he believes Levy County did an excellent job in regard to handling animals that needed to be evacuated with their owners.

Bradley said he concurs with Meeks. “We love our pets,” Bradley said.

Parents first responsibility, however, is to assure the safety of the human members of the family. He acknowledged that some people may make unwise choices as they worry about the lives of their pets in these impending disaster scenarios.

He wants to be creative going forward, from the state government standpoint. Sen. Bradley wants to reduce the odds of people not responding to storms based on their perceived inability to have a place for their pets to stay during an evacuation.

Sen. Bradley said that in the Black Creek area of Clay County, near his home, there were people who awoke in the middle of the night to find they were in an emergency situation. If not for first responders there, Bradley said, some of his constituents there would have died from drowning.

“They were told this (flood) may happen,” Bradley said, “and they did not heed that warning. Oftentimes in that mix of reasons to not leave, was the idea – this is a rural area of our county – they had a lot of animals.”

Among the public presentations were Kristen Griffis speaking about Elder Options; Dinna Bushnell speaking about the need to protect public school funding; Dr. Jay Bushnell speaking about environmental conservation by full funding of the Florida Forever program and the need to create anti-fracking legislation; and Denise Schentrup of the Archer Family Health Clinic, who said Levy County residents are among the patients at this clinic.

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**Levy County Sheriff Bobby McCallum shared the top concerns from the Florida Sheriff's Association. A key issue the state's 67 sheriffs see as of critical concern is to make texting while driving an offense for which officers can stop a motorist. Sheriff McCallum is the vice chairman of the FSA Board of Directors this year. Gilchrist County**



**Sheriff Bobby Schultz is the FSA treasurer this year. Dixie County Sheriff Dewey Hatcher Sr. is a member of the FSA Board of Directors this year. Other sheriffs who are officers of the FSA this year are Walton County Sheriff Mike Adkinson - President; Columbia County Sheriff Mark Hunter - Vice President; Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri - Secretary; Orange County Sheriff Jerry Demings - Immediate Past President; and ex-officio officers Sumter County Sheriff Bill O. Farmer Jr. - Chaplain; and Lafayette County Sheriff Brian Lamb - Sergeant-At-Arms.**



**Cedar Key Mayor Heath Davis shares with the state leaders that federal funds from FEMA to help the city after Hurricane Irma in 2016 are not arriving, although they allegedly have been allocated.**

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**Inglis Mayor Drinda Merritt speaks to the Legislative Delegation about funding she seeks from the state to create a wastewater treatment facility in southern Levy County. This treatment plant will take wastewater and make it potable – able to be consumed. Mayor Merritt shared with the state leaders that she intends to be in Tallahassee again this year, like she was last year, to watch the Florida Legislature and to represent the people of Inglis there.**



**Suwannee River Water Management District Executive Director Hugh Thomas speaks to the legislators about water management.**