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## State lawmakers visit Cross City and Trenton



**Rep. Chuck Clemons and Sen. Rob Bradley's Legislative Assistant Tonya Shays prepare to hear from the people of Dixie County on Wednesday.**

### Story and Photos

**By Jeff M. Hardison © Oct. 6, 2017 at 3:57 p.m.**

**DIXIE AND GILCHRIST COUNTIES** – Tonya Shays, a legislative assistant for State Sen. Robert “Rob” Bradley (R-Fleming Island, Dist. 5) and State Rep. Charles Wesley “Chuck” Clemons Sr. (R-Newberry, Dist. 21) listened to people at the annual Dixie County Legislative Delegation Meeting on Wednesday (Oct. 5).



**Dixie County Sheriff Dewey Hatcher Sr. (left) speaks with the Legislative Delegation before the meeting starts.**

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**(from left) Rep. Chuck Clemons, Students Working Against Tobacco (SWAT) Advisor Melanie Anderson, SWAT Member Jiy-Meece Davis, SWAT Member Cathy Burkett and Senate Legislative Assistant Tonya Shays provide a photo opportunity. Anderson shared with legislators that SWAT is active in Dixie County, and she gave an update on progress with the effort to help people quit using tobacco products like cigarettes, cigars and chewing tobacco.**



Sen. Bradley, who is an attorney, was needed in a courtroom in Lake City (Columbia County) as he represented a client at the very same time as this annual meeting and that is why he sent an assistant. Shays, however, has a long track record of working in the Florida Senate than Bradley, though, and she is very adept at helping constituents and the senator communicate with each other.

Sen. Bradley was able to attend the 1 p.m. event that day, where he and other senators accepted tokens of appreciation for their successful efforts to have the Dixie County Middle High School construction project continued to its scheduled completion in the spring of 2018 – to serve students after August of 2018.

Sen. Bradley also joined Rep. Clemons in Trenton later in the day to be part of the Gilchrist County Legislative Delegation

Shays was an assistant for four state senators, Rep. Clemons said.

She served former Sen. George Kirkpatrick Jr. (Dec. 24, 1938 – Feb. 5, 2003). The late Sen. Kirkpatrick served as the Democratic Party senator from the Fifth District in the Florida Senate from 1980 until 2000.

Shays was an assistant for Sen. Rod Smith (D- Gainesville) from 2001 until 2006.

Shays was an assistant for Sen. Steve Oelrich (R-Gainesville) from 2006 to 2012.

Oelrich's district was part of the revised sets of representation. Oelrich represented the 14th District, which included Alachua, Bradford, Columbia, Gilchrist, Levy, Marion, Putnam, and Union counties.

Sen. Bradley, who took office in 2016 for this district, now represents the 5th district, which is Dixie, Gilchrist, Baker, Bradford, Clay, Columbia, Lafayette, Levy, Suwannee, Union and part of Marion counties. He previously represented the 7th district from 2012 to 2016. His home county for both sets of terms is Clay County.

The Dixie County Legislative Delegation met in the Dixie County Commission Chamber located in the County in Cross City.

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## JASON HOLIFIELD

### Dixie County Commission Chairman Jason Holifield

Dixie County Commission Chairman Jason Holifield welcomed the delegation to Dixie County, and he thanked them for coming.

Protecting home rule; promoting job growth in Dixie County; and increased WiFi connections in Dixie County, especially at residences, were the points he wanted state leaders to consider when they begin their session on Jan. 9.

Rep. Clemons asked about Dixie County's success in dealing with Hurricane Irma. Holifield said the county's emergency services personnel did an extraordinary job.



## TIMOTHY ALEXANDER

### Dixie County Manager and Dixie County School Board Chairman Tim Alexander

"It's one team, one mission, in Dixie County when we hit crunch time like that," Dixie County Manager Tim Alexander said. Alexander is also the chairman of the Dixie County School Board.

He said county staff and members of the public all worked together well. Alexander said he is thankful to God that the possible impact that could have hit Dixie

County did not happen.

Alexander said he would like the state leaders to continue to attend to the needs of fiscally-constrained counties like Dixie County. Rural infrastructure and job growth are needs that the state may be able to help its people with, he said.

With cooperation of the Dixie County Chamber of Commerce and state staff, the county is seeing progress from an economic development project it has been involved with for the past year, Alexander said.

County Manager Alexander mentioned that the County Commission has reached its

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maximum 10 mills for ad valorem property taxes. One mill of this tax in Dixie County only generates about \$500,000, Alexander said, because of the value of taxable property in the county.

The Dixie County Jail needs a new roof, he said, and the leaders are putting together proposals for the Florida Legislature to consider helping the county.

Shays then asked Alexander about money from FEMA for damage suffered from Hurricane Hermine last year. Just as they have heard in other counties, the federal money has reached the state level and for some reason it is not being given to the counties.



## MICHELLE F. CANNON

Dixie County Tax Collector Michelle F. Cannon told the delegation that her office, like tax collectors all over the state, are seeing the need to provide more services, which everyone is happy to do.

There does seem to be, however, no reciprocity to the counties from fee increases.

Another tidbit of news from this conversation on Wednesday is that people who pay for licenses through the Internet online send their

money to Tallahassee, and their home counties do not see any part of that particular revenue.

## MIKE THOMAS

### Dixie County Superintendent of Schools Mike Thomas

Dixie County Superintendent of Schools Mike Thomas said he is thankful for the hard work of the local legislators to get funding to complete the construction project at the new Dixie Middle High School.

Thomas addressed four issues.

The North East Florida Education Consortium helps Dixie County, he said. With its principal leadership academy and technology support, NEFEC is a great aid to the county, he said.



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Sparsity funds for Dixie County is another area that has a huge positive impact, Thomas said.

Safe schools funding is another important area for state leaders to consider as they look at the next budget year as well, Thomas said.

Rep. Clemons was specifically thanked for his strong stand for the digital classroom. Thomas said Dixie County is one of the only counties in Florida where there is a one-to-one match of students in kindergarten through the twelfth grade, so that every student has a computer notebook for use during the school year.



## CAROL WEST

### **Carol West, a strong advocate for economic growth in Dixie County**

Dixie County Chamber of Commerce President Carol West spoke about economic matters in the county.

She mentioned her belief that the state can help the people of Florida by bringing back a stronger technical education program, so that some student can choose to learn more about carpentry and other skills beyond the academic realms for

college-bound young people.

Vocational-technical education has fallen by the wayside in Florida over the past few decades. One result is seen now in the wake of a disaster that shows a need for people who can build or rebuild structures, wire houses and businesses, provide for plumbing needs and related types of work.

In Dixie County, West said, the population includes fewer than 7 percent who have completed college to the point of having a degree.

She reminded the delegates that Dixie County does not have a paid staff member to help with economic development. Much of the progress comes from volunteers with the local Chamber.

The Florida Department of Economic Opportunity and other state agencies are welcome to help rural, fiscally-restrained counties to improve the quality of life by offering more job opportunities.

Clemons asked if Florida Gateway College had mentioned using space at the high school for skills training.

West said there is some progress in regard to a school for Commercial Driver Licenses for truck drivers.

“However,” she continued, “they (Gateway) have chosen to have it at their Olustee Center, which is 81 miles from Cross City and doesn’t help a lot. It’s going to be in the range of 8,000, which is more than it costs to go to Crystal River (to earn a CDL), which

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is 79 miles.”

She continued that this CDL class is good for people in Lake City, and perhaps other parts of the five-county Florida Gateway College service area.

Classes in the fields of medicine and aeronautical interests also have not progressed with Florida Gateway, she said.

“There are some initiatives underway for partnering with other schools,” she added.

In regard to a question about the airport in Cross City, County Manager Alexander said the county has obtained an adjacent 75-acre parcel. As for runway extension and increasing the weight load capacity of the runways, Alexander said, it is too early to talk about starting and completion dates for those projects.



## **CHRIS DOOLIN**

**Chris Doolin, a voice for all of the people in rural Florida**

Speaking on behalf of the Small School District Council Consortium, Chris Doolin addressed the delegation.

This group includes 39 small counties' commissions and 34 small counties' school districts.

There are 15 Florida Senate and 24 Florida House of Representatives districts within the footprint of the counties involved in this group. The issues faced by small counties, he said, are

shared in every small Florida county.

In regard to evacuation routes, Doolin said the state transportation system crosses through rural counties.

He mentioned that he saw an idea about regional gasoline storage to avoid the issues of transporting it into the state during a hurricane event.

While he may not see this as a good idea, Doolin said that if the state moves forward with this concept, he would recommend looking at rural counties for that purpose, because just like with prisons and mental health institutions, this can mean economic growth.

He recommends the protection of digital classrooms, sparsity and the small county road programs with the state.

“Protect what you have,” Doolin said. “This session is going to be bleak. We’ve lost any new revenue that was going to be available above critical and priority programs.”

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In 2021-22, the cost of the critical and priority programs is exceeding the increase in revenue collection, Doolin said.

“We’ve got \$54 million on the table for available revenue beyond critical and priority for this year,” he said. “It’s gone. It’s gone. Okay. Then in 2021, it’s a \$1.1 billion deficit. In 2021-22, it’s a \$1.6 billion deficit.”

Therefore, he said, protect the programs that exist.

Another key factor he shared was his belief that the state need to work toward elimination of “the digital divide.” That is to say, people all over Florida need connections to the Internet at their homes and at their businesses.

Doolin said 98 percent of the rural areas of Dixie County have no Internet access at home. Yes, people can go to the library, he said, but students need access to complete homework.

Beyond that, students cannot practice for college entrance tests, and they cannot complete forms. Small business interests that are not based in the cities are likewise hamstrung by a lack of Internet access.

## STEVE MINNIS

**Steve Minnis shares information about progress by the SRWMD in reducing nutrients that are found in the waters of this district.**

Steve Minis of the Suwannee River Water Management District spoke.

He thanked delegation for their attention to the SRWMD, and he mentioned his appreciation for the staff of the representative and senator.

Payment In Lieu of Taxes has continued thanks to support from the counties, he said. The PILT program is targeted by other legislators on occasion.

The Springs Protection legislation over the past five years has brought \$60 million to the SRWMD and the projects in that time have reduced the introduction of nutrients into the water supply by nine million pounds of nutrients that were stopped thanks to septic-to-sewer programs and other means, he said.

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## GILCHRIST COUNTY

Sen. Bradley’s Legislative Assistant Tonya Shays provided the following synopsis of what happened in Gilchrest County later on Wednesday (Oct. 4) at the Gilchrist County Delegation Hearing.

Agenda/Comments:

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## **D. Ray Harrison (County Commission Chairman)**

- protect rural county funding programs
- state assistance needed to fund jail & courthouse renovations
- broadband needs
- protect home rule and stop unfunded state mandates
- concerns about county's Medicaid share of cost burden
- supports state road 26 widening

(Questions from delegation ... Rep. Clemons asked if the county participated in the federally funded broadband program a few years back... Commissioner indicated county did, but withdrew out of concerns about organization's finances and lack of transparency. Sen. Bradley spoke to jail and courthouse renovation issues, stating that it is unlikely state funds will be available to assist. Similar projects in recent years have all been vetoed. Gilchrist County needs to move forward with planning not anticipating state funds for jail. Discussion about USDA grant funds, monies they are holding in reserves for jail construction, etc....)

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## **Todd Newman (County Clerk)**

- concerns about Clerks' budgets statewide
- budgetary reductions in recent years resulted in positions being cut

(Questions from delegation ... Sen. Bradley inquired about the percentage of the budget for court costs and the percentage for costs associated with local government clerk function.)

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## **Sheriff Bobby Schultz**

- jail needs, said he has spoken to governor who indicated support
- Opioids issue will be a Florida Sheriff's Association priority

(Questions from delegation: Bradley reiterated issue that his past appropriations for public safety facilities have all been vetoed while also commenting that the governor has been good about most of his projects, but that those and courthouse funding projects have all been vetoed. Therefore, the school special facilities dollars for Gilchrist are his priority project in this county right now.)

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## **Rob Rankin (Superintendent of Schools)**

- School Special Facilities project ranks 1st
- safe schools' funds (increase)

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## **Trip Lancaster (Fanning Springs Mayor)**

- Thanks for continued funding of springs projects which have benefitted community greatly in terms of water/sewage treatment projects

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Public/Agenda:

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Diane Clifton – (spoke on the issues outlined on the agenda)

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Joshua Akin – tobacco

- smoking in Florida is down
- vaping use going up

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## Appearance Cards:

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Gabriella Redfern (Quilt Museum In Trenton)

- thanks for support of historic preservation grant application
- facility needs of Museum in Trenton
- Concerns about small/rural communities being at a disadvantage obtaining cultural/historic grants

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Hugh Thomas (Executive Director of SRWMD)

- New executive director
- importance of funding payment in lieu of taxes program to rural communities
- thanks for support of Springs restoration projects which have benefitted the region and Gilchrist County