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Chamber banquet shows success and hope



Debra Weiss and her husband Peter C. Weiss show their happiness at being at the Chamber banquet. Peter did not let the need for a short-term bandage on his nose get in the way of providing a photo opportunity. Debra Weiss is a former mayor of Yankeetown.

Story, Photos and Video By Jeff M. Hardison © Nov. 11, 2017 at 8:07 p.m.

YANKEETOWN – Keynote speakers Wednesday evening (Nov. 8) let the members and guests at the Withlacoochee Gulf Area Chamber of Commerce Annual Banquet see the success of the past year and hope for the future.

Perhaps the most immediate success present was the banquet.

Volunteers worked with Cery Logeman leading the way in the creation of an amazing low country boil. This dish is primarily unshelled shrimp, crab, sausage, corn-on-the-cob, potatoes and other ingredients.

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Cery Logeman dishes out more shrimp to a diner who sought seconds. Within a few seconds, that plate was covered with shrimp.



Dr. Richard Streeter holds up a lid to show the low country boil. He was among the helpers in the kitchen. Cery Logeman is the leader of the crew that created the signature dish of the night.

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Helen Ciallella holds up a couple of the different pamphlets for promoting the area to visitors. Paddling, biking, birding, fishing, sailing, powerboating, scallop hunting, wildlife hunting and camping are among the activities in the Tri-County Area of Levy, Dixie and Gilchrist counties.

Among the many volunteers in the kitchen was Dr. Richard Streeter, a past president of the Withlacoochee Gulf Area Chamber of Commerce. A pleasant addition to that key menu item this year was donated by Food Ranch. This top grocery store in Inglis donated pulled pork and fixings to provide barbecue for the non-seafood crowd.

Actually, there was so much food, all of the diners could have enjoyed seconds and brought some home as well. The selection of dessert offerings alone covered two tables that must have been at least six feet long and three feet wide.

The banquet was a success.

Chamber President Marilyn Ladner, a retired provost of the College of Central Florida Levy Campus, was joined by Nature Coast Business Development Executive Director David Pieklik, Inglis Mayor Drinda Merritt, County Commission Chairman John Meeks, and Levy County Visitors Bureau Executive Director Carol McQueen to share highlights of the past and projections for the future.

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Doug Johnston (left) holds a plaque for his 30 years of Community Service and Larry Henderson holds his plaque for 42 years of Community Service in Inglis, presented by Lauren Winn. These gentlemen are among the workers who served the residents and visitors at the Food Ranch grocery in the Town of Inglis.

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Lauren Winn presented two plaques near the end of the annual banquet for Community Service to Doug Johnston and Larry Henderson. Lisa Hall accepted a plaque on behalf of Scott Levesque for his creation of the best scarecrow.

Scott's Automotive Repair won the 2017 Withlacoochee Gulf Area (Inglis-Yankeetown) Chamber Scarecrow Contest. Drummond Community Bank placed second and DAB Constructors Inc. earned third place.



Lisa Hall (left) accepts a plaque on behalf of Scott Levesque of Scott's Automotive Repair for the Best Scarecrow in the Chamber contest.

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THE SPEAKERS

Chamber President Marilyn Ladner

The chamber president served as emcee throughout the meeting.

She joined the Chamber in 2013. She recognized past and present Chamber leaders.

Among the highlights for 2017, Ladner mentioned that the South Levy Marketplace has been successful. The Chamber has a new logo, which may be viewed at the website <http://inglisyankeetownchamber.com/index.html>.

There is a plan under way to add a kiosk in front of the Chamber Building, on the north side of Levy County Road 40 to the west of Inglis Town Hall. That kiosk will be working 24-hours-a-day and will be accessible by anyone seeking information about the Inglis-Yankeetown area.

The plan to fund the electronic kiosk is through money the state is accepting through the RESTORE Act – to pay for damage caused by the big oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

An \$18.7 billion settlement was announced in 2015 for all federal, state and local claims against BP that resulted from the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill from the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, which left 11 dead and spewed millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

Ladner said this will be a very attractive addition for the front of the office. It will have devices to reduce the odds of vandalism, she indicated.

The addition of a permanent display near the Chamber office in regard to the “Follow That Dream” Parkway was mentioned.

To read about that Elvis event, and to see the video that was displayed during the meeting, click [HERE](#). This is among the archives of *HardisonInk.com*.

Ladner intimated from the input she received from many Elvis fans that this could become an annual event to attract visitors to the area.



INGLIS MAYOR DRINDA MERRITT

Inglis Area Mayor Drinda Merritt spoke about projects that can help the region’s economic base.

The first was her update on the South Levy Rec Area. There was a need for \$30,000 to conduct a feasibility study, she said, and the project is within \$5,000 of attaining that

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goal.

By the end of the first quarter of 2018, she hopes to see the study completed and then a vendor will be sought. This project includes leasing 27 acres from Levy County, she said.

Flying disk golf, a zip line, a dog park with a facility for agility competition are among the first offerings planned. Sculling (rowing competition) events on the Cross Florida Barge Canal is another potential in the future as well, she said.

She sees this addition of a recreation facility to the area as having a \$400 million annual economic impact on southern Levy County as a major draw for visitors. This will translate to a positive economic impact for north Citrus County and west Marion County as well, she added.

There is a bike path connection between Inglis and Dunnellon being sought as well, through a grant from the state to help connect with the state's Greenways and Parks. She said 50,000 bicycle riders visit the Dunnellon area annually now.

Her final topic was a wastewater treatment plant that will be to the level that it produces water that can be drunk after it is treated. She said potable water is vital to Florida's future, and this is a type of wastewater treatment plant that will help reduce water loss.



NCBDC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR DAVID PIEKLIK

David Pieklik shared facts about the current population and projected growth in Levy County.

He spoke about the function of the Nature Coast Business Development Council and its history in the county.

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COUNTY COMMISSION CHAIRMAN JOHN MEEKS

After being introduced by Past Chamber President Jack Schofield, County Commission Chairman John Meeks spoke about the \$650,000 grant from the Florida Legislature to improve the Bird Creek (West Levy County Road 40) Boat Ramp.

Meeks said State Rep. Charlie Stone (R-Ocala, Dist. 22) and State Sen. Robert “Rob” Bradley (R-Fleming Island, Dist. 5) are to be thanked for their success in attaining this for Levy County.

Interestingly, this banquet fell on Chairman Meeks’ birthday and yet he went to help the southernmost Chamber group learn about this project. Accompanying Chairman Meeks was his wife Stephanie Nettles Meeks.

Chairman Meeks said the people of south Levy County had a change of three County Commission members within six years. As a result, he saw there may not have been a continuation of seeking completion of projects.

He made it his mission to become even more familiar with the area, because all county commissioners are elected countywide.

<https://youtu.be/FEa5cPnYAMM>

In this video, Commission Chairman John Meeks says how he wants people to enjoy nature by using the boat ramp and park that are slated for improvement. The county commission chairman came to the banquet on his birthday.

The boat ramp and park, he said, is an important destination for people who want to enjoy natural Florida – bikers, hikers, fishermen, boaters, kayakers and others.

Among the possible improvements are a separate fishing pier, better traffic and parking for boat trailers, and a longer boat ramp with less of an incline.

Deborah Furrow of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will be

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the project manager, Meeks said.

This project requires the county to invest first, and then to be reimbursed by FWC, Meeks explained.

While \$650,000 seems like a lot of money, he said, adding that it is a lot of money, these funds will go quickly when it comes to boat ramp park improvements.

First county staff and others will create a concept for improvements. An engineer will draft a preliminary design.

Then there will be public hearings for more input from people who use the facility, Meeks said, because sometimes engineers don't see concepts that are visible to the actual users of a facility.

Meeks said he hopes to be cutting a ribbon on the improved boat ramp and park in 18 months, although sometimes there can be things to delay progress – such as hurricanes.



TDC DIRECTOR CAROL McQUEEN

Levy County Visitors Bureau Executive Director Carol McQueen, who gave an information-packed speech last year about local eco-tourism, spoke primarily about the completed Big Bend Shellfish Trail Map.

This was a two-year project by the Levy County Tourist Development Council and the Levy County Board of County Commissioners.

McQueen's grant application to the Conservation Fund brought back \$20,000 to produce in excess of 50,000 maps.

The Conservation Fund has worked in all 50 states to protect more than 7.8 million acres of environmentally valuable land since 1985, including 117,000 acres of working forestry, recreational lands, wildlife habitat and cultural resources across Florida.

This map covers a four-county stretch of coastline. It includes Levy, Dixie, Taylor and Jefferson counties, McQueen said. The entire Big Bend section of Florida, she added, is 14 counties – from Wakulla County in the north to Pasco County in the south.

The Conservation Fund was interested by the aquaculture and fisheries of working

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waterfronts in those four counties, McQueen said.

She partnered with all four counties as well as the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences statewide shellfish specialist Leslie Sturmer. She works at the UF/IFAS station in Cedar Key and provided scientific facts related to water quality and the effect shellfish have on water purification.

The map shows a “trail” of places to find shellfish vendors, McQueen said. The map shows locations of restaurants, seafood markets, marinas, tackle box shops and boat ramps.

The map identifies where recreation shellfish harvesting is available during season, she said. The map shows locations of places to learn about the commercial production of clams and oysters, McQueen continued.

“And really,” she said, “the map shows where you can go to take an active role in keeping the waters clean and sustainable so that these fisheries can continue to produce.”

The paper map, she said, has become an online map.

It is accessible by clicking [HERE](#).

The map that is online provides Google map options.

The map tells a story about the shellfish trail, she said. This is the largest shellfish trail in the United States now, McQueen added, because it has six species – Bay Scallops, Blue Crabs, Hard Clams, Oysters, Shrimp and Stone Crabs.

McQueen said this map can be used as an education tool, too. Children who do not know that milk comes from a cow, for instance, can learn that.

Likewise, they can learn the origin of deep-fried shrimp, and the many other types of seafood dishes from these six species harvested in the four-county area.

People are farming some of these shellfish out in the Gulf of Mexico, she said.

Little cameras on the maps are places where visitors can take selfies or hashtag it, she said.

McQueen said she is fielding calls at least twice a week from people who want this map. This is one of the resources to help people enjoy visiting the area.