

# HardisonInk.com

## **Follow That Dream: Inglis mayor's whitewater kayaking vision scores \$7,000 secret donation**



**Making the announcement Wednesday morning (Sept. 26) are (from left) Inglis Mayor Drinda Merritt, former Dunnellon Mayor Nathan Witt, Dr. Richard Streeter of the Withlacoochee Gulf Area Chamber of Commerce, and Withlacoochee Aquatic Restoration President Dan Hilliard. These are the four representatives of the Withlacoochee Area Economic Compact who were at the front of the Inglis Community Center that morning.**

### **Story and Photos**

**By Jeff M. Hardison © Sept. 29, 2018 at 2:38 p.m.**

**INGLIS** – Follow That Dream is a 1962 American musical film starring Elvis Presley and made by Mirisch Productions.



**Dr. Richard Streeter of the Withlacoochee Gulf Area Chamber of Commerce and Dr. Phil Geis of the Small Business Development Council of North Florida chat with each other before the start of the program to announce the update on the whitewater kayaking project.**

# HardisonInk.com



**Among the many people providing input and asking questions from the audience on Wednesday is James Fowler. He said he endorses the project if it has a positive environmental impact. He said he quit eating fish from Lake Rousseau after the state repeatedly killed aquatic weeds with herbicides. He said he has seen fish with indications that the chemicals affect their health adversely. He reminded the listeners that Agent Orange was used in the Vietnam War, and veterans have died from the major health problems that are attributed to exposure to that herbicide.**

Part of the film *Follow That Dream* was staged in the Inglis-Yankeetown area, and the cities succeeded in having Levy County Road 40 West named in honor of this piece of historic cinema fame – Follow That Dream Parkway.

The movie was based on the 1959 novel *Pioneer, Go Home!* by Richard P. Powell.

The concept of following a dream, though, is as American as baseball and apple pie.

Inglis Mayor Drinda Merritt's and her colleagues' dream of a whitewater kayak attraction in southern Levy County has gained momentum, as she announced both Tuesday night (Sept. 25) and Wednesday morning (Sept. 26) in Yankeetown at a Chamber of Commerce meeting and at the Inglis Community Center respectively.

One plan for a whitewater kayak venue in Inglis was first proposed around 2000, when there was an idea of it possibly serving the 2012 Summer Olympics. That venture, however, showed a different idea for construction and it never started.

This current dream may show shovels in the ground, breaking it for the start of construction as soon as five to seven years from now.

Joining Inglis Mayor Merritt on a panel named the Withlacoochee Area Economic Compact, and now at the forefront of this proposed project are former Dunnellon Mayor Nathan Witt, Dr. Richard Streeter of the Withlacoochee Gulf Area Chamber of Commerce and Withlacoochee Aquatic Restoration President Dan Hilliard.

Mayor Merritt gave listeners background information about the \$35,000 collected

# HardisonInk.com

and spent on a feasibility study, before announcing the last \$7,000 being provided by an anonymous donor to complete the \$15,000 needed to pay an engineering firm to create a plan to build this whitewater rafting attraction.

The engineering firm is named S2O Design. It is the world's premier design and engineering company behind the world's most successful whitewater park designs and river engineering projects.

Former Mayor Witt, a former mayor of Yankeetown, Mayor Merritt and a couple of other people, Merritt said, got together for lunch three or four years ago, she said.

From that luncheon, she said, grew the Withlacoochee Area Economic Compact.

Mayor Merritt said participants in this ad hoc group are people from Marion County, Citrus County, Levy County, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Office of Greenways and Trails. The all sought methods to increase economic growth in southern Levy County and other parts of the region – while not adversely impacting the relatively rural quality of life of the area.

Eco-tourism, Merritt said, is a top economic engine in this part of Florida.

Then-Mayor Witt, a few years ago at the outset of this movement, mentioned to the group that in 2000, developers from Orlando and Tampa looked at southern Levy County for the development of a whitewater kayaking venue to train members of the United States Olympic Kayak Team.

Witt and others went to the bypass canal to show how it would work. The bypass canal is a canal built to relieve flow from the failed Cross Florida Barge Canal.

“Gov. Jeb Bush in 2000,” Witt continued, “signed a conditional agreement, so that if the Olympics were brought to Tampa-Orlando, then this would be the preferred whitewater-kayak venue.”

Merritt said the team knew it needed an economic impact study. That cost \$35,000. The interests who donated to fund that are Duke Energy, the Felburn Foundation, the Florida High Tech Corridor, the Nature Coast Business Development Council and the Town of Inglis.

The now-completed study by the University of Central Florida (UCF) for \$35,000 shows potential revenue sources include attendance fees and user passes; equipment rental and guide fees; classes and sport instruction; sales of materials; concessions of food, beverages and specialty items; commercial photography; off-site adventure bookings; and accommodations.

The UCF study shows three scenarios where annual visits were 64,770; 100,480; and 154,200.

Those three scenarios showed increased employment by 135 people, 249 people and 404 people respectively, based on that many annual visits to this attraction.

Total annual spending respectively in those three scenarios at dollars of 2018 value were about \$9.3 million, \$15 million and \$24 million respectively, according to UCF researchers.

At the current millage rates and with current property values in Levy County, and using those three scenarios of annual visits, that would generate in new Levy County taxes annually about \$311,000; \$567,000; or \$920,000 in county taxes respectively for the three scenarios.

UCF, which conducted the feasibility study, also determined “No other whitewater park that we examined for this analysis can claim anything close to the total market exposure possible in Levy County. The potential for a vibrant and extremely popular

# HardisonInk.com

new attraction is outstanding.”

Funding the upcoming \$15,000 engineering study to be completed by S2O Design are contributions from the following interests: Town of Inglis -\$15,000; High Tech Corridor - \$ 2,500; W.H. Owens Consulting Inc. - \$500; and anonymous donor \$7,000.

Merritt said the S2O Design President Scott Shipley, P.E., is scheduled to be in Inglis on Nov. 19 and 20.

President and Engineer Shipley is among the best-known American kayakers in the world today.

Shipley is a veteran of three Olympic games (1992, 1996 and 2000). He earned of four world titles in the sport and has more than 25 years' experience as a whitewater competitor.

He also earned bachelor's and master's degrees in Mechanical Engineering from top-ranked Georgia Institute of Technology.

Even though there is no way to know when this project will start or its cost, the preliminary guesses at the meeting on Wednesday morning were a cost of about \$50 million with a starting date of five to seven years.

This attraction will either be run by the State of Florida, on its property next to that canal, or by a concessionaire who contracts with the state – as they do for various services at different state parks in Florida today.

There is a significant environmental element to this possible park. The potential to draw down water levels from Lake Rousseau may decrease the amounts of herbicide sprayed there by the state.

That aspect of the announcement took a big part of the meeting, especially when a Dunnellon city council candidate asked questions and spoke at length about Dunnellon's interests connected with Lake Rousseau.

In addition to the main attraction – a whitewater kayaking adventure, there are plans for disk golf (Frisbee); a dog park; mountain bike riding, and a zip line.

One benefit from this location for kayakers, especially those training for the Olympics, is the potential to use it year-round due to more moderate temperatures in the winter than in some other places around the globe.

Another of Mayor Merritt's dreams for improving the region is for the state to help the southern Levy County area have improved central wastewater collection. That vision includes a concept of being able to change sewer water into drinking water, which is possible with existing technology – but the economically-depressed Levy County is far afield from being able to fund that venture.