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Rep. Chuck Clemons and Sen. Rob Bradley listen to constituents



Rep. Chuck Clemons (left) and Sen. Rob Bradley listen to Cross City Mayor Tank Lee on Wednesday afternoon (Jan. 16) in Dixie County. Later that day, the two legislators were in Trenton to hear from the people of Gilchrist County.

Story, Photos and Video

By Jeff M. Hardison © Jan. 17, 2019 at 2:38 p.m.

CROSS CITY -- State Rep. Charles Wesley "Chuck" Clemons Sr. (R-Newberry, Dist. 21) and State Sen. Robert "Rob" Bradley (R-Fleming Island, Dist. 5), joined by members of their staff, conducted annual legislative delegation meetings in Dixie County and Gilchrist County on Wednesday afternoon (Jan. 16).

<https://youtu.be/Yfk3ZWQjhCU>

In this video, the state leaders share their closing remarks at the conclusion of the Legislative Delegation meeting in Dixie County. The men are glad to serve the people in their districts. The two men work well together, and they both seek input from the public to best represent the will of the people in this part of Florida.

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Cross City Mayor Tank Lee speaks with the state leaders about how he appreciates what they have done to help the city and Dixie County.



Dixie County Education Foundation President Kathryn McInnis and Florida Gateway College Executive Director Mike McKee speak to the state leaders about matters relating to education, and to the college. Some FGC buildings need to be replaced.

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Melanie Anderson of the Dixie County Tobacco Free Partnership shares information with the state leaders, especially in regard to electronic water-vapor devices that are used to ingest nicotine.



Dixie County Chamber of Commerce President Carol West tells the state leaders about progress in business and the economy in Dixie County.

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Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition Executive Director Katrina VanAernam tells the Rep. Chuck Clemons and Sen. Rob Bradley about how the coalition is helping people understand more about the dangers from using drugs.



Rep. Chuck Clemons (left) and Sen. Rob Bradley speak with Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition Executive Director Katrina VanAernam as she speaks from her chair in the audience after they asked questions.

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Third Judicial Circuit Public Defender Blair Payne tells the state leaders about revising laws in the state, as the Florida Public Defenders Association would like the legislators to do to best serve the people of Florida.



(from left) Dixie County Commissioner Wade E. "Gene" Higginbotham (District 1), Dixie County Commissioner Jamie Storey (District 4) are seen wearing sports coats as Dixie County Sheriff's Office Maj. Scott Harden sports a GCSO windbreaker. During the program Wednesday afternoon, Third Judicial Circuit Public Defender Blair Payne joked about coming to the Legislative Delegation event if for nothing else than to see Dixie County Property Appraiser Robbie Lee and Commissioner Higginbotham wearing sports coats. The three gentlemen seen here were among those who visited with each other a bit after the meeting concluded.

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Rep. Clemons's serves in the Florida House of Representatives as he represents the people of all of Dixie County, Gilchrist County and part of Alachua County.

Sen. Bradley serves in the Florida Senate as he represents the people of Levy, Dixie, Gilchrist, Baker, Bradford, Clay, Columbia, Lafayette, Suwannee, Union and part of Marion counties.

The gentlemen were well received in both Cross City and Trenton as they listened to their constituents. While the two state leaders represent their respective districts, like their colleagues in the House and Senate, both men work for the wellbeing of all residents and visitors to the State of Florida.

The session for lawmakers convenes in Tallahassee on March 5.

Among the people sharing input with the state leaders during their meeting at the Dixie County Board of County Commissioners' meeting room in the Dixie County Courthouse on Wednesday were Cross City Mayor Kenneth "Tank" Lee; Mike McKee of Florida Gateway College; President Kathryn McInnis of the Dixie County Education Foundation; President Carol West of the Dixie County Chamber of Commerce; Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition Executive Director Katrina VanAernam; Melanie Anderson of the Tobacco Free Partnership of Dixie County; Third Judicial Circuit Public Defender Blair Payne; and Charlie Fornaciari.

Tank Lee

Cross City Mayor Kenneth "Tank" Lee shared information with the state leaders, including expanded connections to wastewater services in Cross City.

Sen. Bradley mentioned that the Florida Department of Transportation on U.S. Highway 19 has spent about \$12 million of state funds on projects in Dixie County. The senator mentioned this helps people travel in the county better, especially in areas where the water is close to the highway.

Mayor Lee expressed his appreciation for the many manners in which the state government helps the municipality and Dixie County. Mayor Lee just started his 22nd year on the City Council as he heralds his 12th year as mayor of Cross City.

Mike McKee

Florida Gateway College Executive Director Mike McKee told the state leaders that the FGC STEM Building has been condemned.

Science classes and laboratories formerly conducted there are now being held in "alternative places," McKee said.

"We teach a lot of nurses," he said. "We teach a lot of EMTs. We do a lot of anatomy and physiology. We have two cadavers on campus."

The FGC leader said he is appreciative of the State of Florida, where Rep. Elizabeth Porter (R-Lake City) (elected Nov. 2, 2010 – elected Nov. 6, 2018 -- 11th District 2010–2012 and 10th district 2012–present) and Sen. Bradley succeeded in obtaining a \$4 million appropriation for a future STEM building.

The college has been moved from first on the list for this type of project to fourth on the list, McKee said. The FGC executive director asked the state leaders to support funding for the STEM building, which is about \$12 million.

Kathryn McInnis, a member of the FGC Board of Directors told Sen. Bradley that FGC President Dr. Lawrence Barrett enjoyed providing a tour of the campus to the senator, as they both rode in a golf cart to traverse the property.

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The senator said his tour two days ago gave him a chance to appreciate how Florida Gateway College moved its chemistry lab as a result of the STEM building being condemned.

Sen. Bradley said he is acutely aware of the need to improve some of the infrastructure at the college.

Melanie Anderson

Partnership Facilitator Melanie Anderson of the Tobacco Free Partnership (TFP) of Dixie County said the TFP tries to help reduce tobacco use by helping people not start using those products, and to assist those individuals who want to stop using tobacco products.

This includes assisting business interests to make it easier for their employees to quit tobacco.

Anderson said the support demonstrated by the members of the Dixie County Board of County Commissioners is excellent in regard to the TFP. One aspect of the TFP is Students Working Against Tobacco (SWAT), she said.

SWAT members can tell about where tobacco use occurs; how the products are bought; as well as the age when students start using it (currently, middle school).

“Vaping” is the latest trend for tobacco use, Anderson said, and the schools are being “bombarded daily” with electronic cigarette use.

“They are taught the lie of it being safe,” she said.

Anderson mentioned that the Florida voters approved Amendment 9 to add electronic cigarettes to the Clean Indoor Air Act, “... which means anywhere you are not allowed to smoke, you are not allowed to vape (which is the verb for the act of intaking water vapor laced with flavors and nicotine).”

The Dixie County Commission, she added, was ahead of state in one aspect of the law by addressing the age limit in 2014 – making it 18 years old.

Dixie County, she added, included a requirement to keep electronic cigarette vials behind the counter.

This prevents children from simply picking up flavored nicotine containers from the countertop at stores. Anderson said she would like to see the state lawmakers require electronic cigarette products to be placed behind the counter, rather than up by the candy.

Parents and grandparents don’t understand the danger. They think the candy-flavored water vapor is safe – when it is not, Anderson said. The use rate of this form of nicotine intake has tripled since 2012, she said.

Since adults who vape have developed an addiction for nicotine, as their electronic cigarette devices recharge, they are using cigarettes, Anderson said. Vaping has led to a dual-use product for tobacco, she said.

Anderson said the youth in Dixie County today don’t want to be labeled with another moniker. They don’t want to be known as being from Dixie County, “where everybody dips.” So, the effort to reduce the use of chewing tobacco and dip is seeing success in Dixie County, she said.

With the new school being away from stores now, Anderson said she hopes that as business interests develop in that area, they will not be targeting school children as future tobacco product consumers.

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Carol West

Dixie County Chamber of Commerce President Carol West said the business interests here face the same challenges of other enterprises in rural Florida.

The North Florida Economic Development Partnership, she added, has helped Dixie County make inroads with business.

This year, she continued, the Chamber plans to look at best methods to assist in the development of a more skilled workforce.

The Chamber plans to continue helping to support existing businesses, she continued, to expand and grow. The recent start of Cross City Lumber has been helpful to the local economy, she said.

The purchase by Conifex Timber Inc., a publicly-traded lumber and sustainable forestry company operating in British Columbia, Canada, of the former Suwannee Lumber Co. was beneficial, she said.

West and others spoke about the contribution \$200,000 this year by investors to four non-profit groups. (That story is still on the Home Page and is scheduled for placement in the archives of HardisonInk.com.)

The Chambers flags and crosses project is self-sustaining, she said, and the Chamber gives four \$1,000 scholarships from this as a result.

To see a 2016 story about that project, click [HERE](#).

Katrina VanAernam

Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition Executive Director Katrina VanAernam said the 8-year-old organization has a goal of adding value to the community.

In 2017, she said, Dixie County was the top county in the state for opioid-related deaths on a per-capita scale. The coalition is one of the four organizations that was given a grant of \$50,000 to help it.

One of the things the coalition is participating in is Prevention Advocacy Day in Tallahassee, which is Jan. 23. Last year, there were about 10 participants on the team with her, VanAernam said. This year, there is an anticipation of 60 people from 23 different groups, she said.

The Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition budget was \$186,000 last year, and this year with the \$50,000 donation and some subcontracted work with Meridian HealthCare, the budget for the group is \$251,000.

VanAernam said when the effort started years ago, there was no money. The effort to help people improve the quality of life in the community by reducing drug abuse has shown success.

Blair Payne

Third Judicial Circuit Public Defender Blair Payne gave a brief sketch of what the Florida Public Defenders legislative priorities are this year.

The Third Judicial Circuit includes Columbia, Dixie, Hamilton, Lafayette, Madison, Suwannee and Taylor counties

Payne is a native of Hamilton County where his family has resided for six generations. He graduated from Hamilton County High School. He earned an Associate of Arts degree from North Florida Junior College and a degree in Criminal Justice from Valdosta State College.

Public Defender Payne said judges' hands are tied when it comes to sentencing from a

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set of points that the convicted person will have as the result of certain factors. There are mitigators, though, that allow a judge to sentence a convict to less time.

To those possible things to consider, Payne and the majority of public defenders in Florida would like the state lawmakers to add drug treatment as a method for judges to be able to impose fewer years in prison.

This would be “a very, very small change” in the state’s Criminal Punishment Code.

“Drugs are a problem,” Payne said, “and people are going to prison, where they could benefit more by getting treatment.”

Another revision in state law that public defenders would like the Florida Legislature to change is \$300 as the threshold for grand theft – a felony. This has been the dollar amount since 1986, Payne said.

The Florida Public Defenders Association asks the state lawmakers to revise that amount to be \$1,500 before the value of what the thief stole is considered to be at a felonious level. Payne said going from \$300 to \$1,500 is a big increase, but from 1986 to 2019 is “a long time” (33 years), according to the mathematics he learned in high school at Jasper.

Texas is at \$2,500 as the point for grand theft, Payne said. South Carolina is at \$2,000, he added.

Another law revision the public defenders would like to see, Payne said, is driver license suspension reform.

“We’re not talking about suspensions for driving-related offenses,” he explained. “What we would like to see is suspensions from non-driver-related offenses to go away.”

When a person enters court for any criminal action, they will owe at least \$600 to \$800, he said, in fines, fees and court costs.

If those court-ordered debts are not met by the offender, then the person’s driver license is suspended. In areas with mass transit, the person can find a way to work, the grocery store, etc.

In Columbia, Dixie, Hamilton, Lafayette, Madison, Suwannee and Taylor counties, and other parts of rural Florida, a driver license is needed for most people to get around.

When a person loses his or her driving privilege, Payne said, the issue causes problems to grow like a snowball rolling down a snowy hill. It gets bigger and bigger.

The person falls behind on child support payments, the have utilities shut off from non-payment, the bank forecloses or the landlord evicts them for not paying those bills, he said.

Another request of public defenders, Payne said, is to reduce the number of children being tried as adults and sentenced into adult prisons. This can happen by legislators revising Florida laws.

By placing children on probation rather than in prison, Payne said, not only is it the humane thing to do, but a study shows it increases the chances for a reduction in recidivism.

The final request from the public defenders of Florida, Third Judicial Circuit Public Defender Payne said, is to require tape recordings being made when law enforcement officers interview suspects. This will reduce uncertainty about who said exactly what to whom, including the tone of voice.

The public defender also thanked the state leaders for the increase in pay for assistant state attorneys, and assistant public defenders in Florida.

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Charlie Fornaciari

Among the members of the general public heard by the two legislators was Charlie Fornaciari

He shared with the leaders that he was given a diploma from high school, rather than earning one – because he was lazy.

Thanks to an apprenticeship, he became a tool and die worker in the aerospace industry. And thanks to the natural talent he had, he was able to become among the workers who build parts for the Apollo space program.

The parts he built had to be within a tolerance level of 150-millionths of one-inch. Those parts were on a manned spaceship that went around the moon, he said.

Today, he lives in a condominium off of the Indian River in Brevard County, where he can look across the river and see the Vehicle Assembly Building at the National Aeronautic and Space Administration complex at Cape Kennedy.

Therefore, he said, he hopes the state leaders recognize the value of learning trades as well as the more academic nature of schooling in Florida.

Fornaciari was among the people who were very involved with the Dixie County Artificial Reef Development Agency.

From 2010 through 2015, with the support of the Dixie County Commission and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Fornaciari obtained funding for 18 new artificial reefs containing in excess of 1,175 tons of limestone and concrete.

Those 18 artificial reefs were built at the Horseshoe Beach site, which is about 6.23 nautical miles from Horseshoe Beach with a heading of 239 degrees (rather south, southwest more or less).

One reef off of Dixie County is at North Latitude 2917.400 degrees and West Longitude 8315.520 degrees. Another is at Latitude 2919.434 and Longitude 8326.472.

The names listed on the plaques along the bottom of a monument dedicated in 2016 to the reef-builders are Mike McCaskill Family, Steve Langford, DCSO Capt. Chad Allen Reed Sr., David J. Osteen Family and Charlie Fornaciari.

These are the people who were among the first key participants to the reef program.

Also speaking to the legislators in Dixie County on Wednesday was Tim Alexander, county manager and member of the Dixie County School Board.