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Exclusive Coverage

**Sheriff and others share with state legislators --
Murder law needs some revision
*State prisons have critical needs***



State Sen. Jennifer Bradley opens the hearing as State Rep. Joe Harding listens. This year, Bradley was the chair. Traditionally, it would be Harding's turn next year to chair the hearing. Also, the hearing was in Williston again this year, even though last year there was some discussion about it being in Bronson. However, this year, the hearing was the same day and time as the twice-monthly regular meeting of the Levy County Board of County Commissioners.

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © Oct. 7, 2021 at 10:11 a.m.

WILLISTON -- State Sen. Jennifer Bradley (R-Fleming Island, Dist. 5) and State Rep. Joe Harding (R-Williston, Dist. 22) provided an opportunity Tuesday morning (Oct. 5) to hear from other elected leaders as well as some constituents at the 2021 Levy County Legislative Delegation Hearing.

Bradley represents her constituents in 11 counties that are in Florida Senate District 5, which includes Levy, Dixie, Gilchrist, Baker, Bradford, Clay, Columbia, Lafayette, Suwannee, Union and part of Marion counties.

She calls Clay County home. She considers Rep. Harding to not only be a colleague, but to also be a friend.

Harding represents his constituents in Florida House of Representatives District 22, which includes all of Levy and part of southwest Marion.

He calls Williston home.

During part of her opening statements, Sen. Bradley said the Florida Legislature this year has two tasks mandated by the Florida Constitution. First, as always, the Florida Legislature must balance the budget. Second, as happens every 10 years, there is the task of redistricting.

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Suwannee River Water Management District Deputy Executive Director Tim Alexander speaks with Tonya Shays, a legislative assistant for Sen. Jennifer Bradley. The senator called the hearing to order promptly at 9:30 a.m., as scheduled; however, there was time before then for socializing with one another.



CareerSource Citrus Levy Marion CEO Rusty Skinner (left) and CareerSource CLM Executive Vice President Dale French prepare to listen to matters shared at the Levy County Legislative Delegation Hearing.

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Rep. Joe Harding (left) and Yankeetown Mayor Jack Schofield speak before the start of the hearing. Schofield's single message to the Florida Legislature was the need for funding a program for small town to transition from septic to central sewer, and before that to implement a septic tank inspection program.

Bradley represents her constituents in 11 counties that are in Florida Senate District 5, which With the current configuration of Florida Senate and Florida House of Representatives, Sen. Bradley said, the legislative delegations in nine of the 11 counties where she serves includes her and one member of the House. Levy County in some years past has been among the counties that had more than one House member, which is dependent upon how districts are subdivided each 10 years.

Among Bradley's more broad-sweeping statements Tuesday was that she and Harding are vital to bringing the feelings of rural Floridians to Tallahassee.

"The things that folks in Miami may think is a good idea," she said, "are not such a good idea, with some pretty harsh impacts if policies like that were to make their way into North Florida."

The 2022 Florida Legislative Session starts on Jan. 11. Bradley said there are six weeks beforehand of committees meeting, and that the formation of ideas and requests for the coming session has started already even before the committee meetings.

As for redistricting, Bradley is serving as the chair for the Senate's map in the coming session, she said.

Her other committee assignments from the previous year, she said, will remain the same, except for a select committee on global COVID-19 pandemic response in the Senate. That committee has dissolved, she said, and the issues involving the pandemic will be relegated to their substantive committees – such as healthcare and education.

Levy County Sheriff Bobby McCallum, who is also the president of the Florida Sheriffs Association, Levy County Superintendent of Schools Chris Cowart, Fanning Springs Mayor Trip Lancaster,

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Williston Mayor Jerry Robinson, Yankeetown Mayor Jack Schofield, Partnership For Strong Families CEO Steven Pennypacker and others addressed the state leaders.

The four remaining Levy County commissioners were in a meeting and did not attend the legislative delegation hearing.



Levy County Sheriff Bobby McCallum speaks from the podium to Sen. Jennifer Bradley and Rep. Joe Harding on Tuesday morning (Oct. 5)

SHERIFF BOBBY McCALLUM

Sheriff McCallum said he was speaking to the legislators as the sheriff of Levy County as well as the president of the Florida Sheriffs Association.

His first key point was to have the legislators better define where license-plate reading devices can be installed. Plate readers are a valuable tool for law enforcement officers to find murderers, vehicle thieves and other criminals.

Sheriff McCallum told the state leaders that this tool is not used to spy on people, and that providing the information to parties other than law enforcement is not intended. Instead, the license plate readers will be used singularly to catch suspected killers and other suspected felons as they travel on roadways.

The sheriff's next ask was for the lawmakers to improve Florida Statute 782.04. That law relates to murder.

Specifically, the sheriff addressed the part of Florida law for drug-related murders.

The modification last year of FS 782.04 with "proximate cause" of death from drug overdose, Sheriff McCallum said, is sought to be amended to read "substantial cause" rather than "proximate cause."

This revision is sought of law by the Florida sheriffs to improve law enforcers' ability to search back from the person who died from the overdose -- to track and find the person who sold the drug that caused that death, Sheriff McCallum said. This will aid prosecutors as well as the law enforcement community to hold responsible the people selling drugs that kill the buyers and users.

The sheriff said problems from drug abuse are a significant part of crime, not just from the violation of drug laws, but as a root cause of thefts, injuries from criminal acts of violence and even deaths.

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“We’re having weekly drug overdoses,” Sheriff McCallum said, “and probably I would guess at least three to four deaths a month from drug overdoses in Levy County alone. Deputies in my county alone (Levy County) have saved a half-dozen lives in the last six months with Narcan.”

Narcan is a drug that quickly interacts to reduce or stop the effects on humans from narcotics such as heroin and other opiates.

Beyond the opioid problem that is relatively well publicized now, Sheriff McCallum told the state leaders that people using methamphetamine die from overdoses, which cannot be stopped by Narcan. Meth is a terrible problem in Levy County, he said, and throughout the State of Florida.

Finally, Sheriff McCallum said as he spoke to those two leaders, the entire Florida Legislature needs to look at the Florida Department of Corrections (DOC).

The failure of the DOC to provide a better pay rate for correctional officers, as well as to not maintain or replace deteriorating state prisons is impacting Florida’s sheriffs in every county, McCallum said.

Detention deputies in Levy County see a starting salary of about \$3,000-a-year more than the starting salary for a DOC corrections officer, McCallum said. With mandatory minimum wage increases, accepting a job as a clerk at a retail outlet can be more inviting for a worker rather than being part of the team of people responsible for keeping convicted felons in state prisons as those people serve their sentences.

Poor salaries lead to a lot of openings, McCallum said. This employment vacuum can lead to some “negligent hiring,” the sheriff said.

Due to the state’s DOC shortcoming, county sheriffs are being forced to house sentenced inmates, who have terms exceeding one year. This is contrary to state law, which puts those prisoners in the state DOC rather than in the counties’ jails (which are also called detention facilities).

County sheriffs are being forced to hold state inmates for months and months, rather than to transfer them to where they are supposed to be housed in state prisons, as is noted in Florida law, McCallum said.

This is costing county taxpayers more money, as well as causing counties’ sheriffs to face issues for resource allocation, McCallum said.

“It is critical as to what is going on,” McCallum said. “Prisons are closing, you know. There are employees that are having to be bused and driven hundreds of miles a day, and then work double shifts, and this kind of thing.”

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As an example, FSA President Sheriff McCallum said Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri was in a meeting on Friday (Oct. 1) with McCallum and DOC leaders. In Pinellas County alone, Sheriff Gualtieri has 100 people sleeping on mattresses that are on floors at his detention centers, because there were 90 inmates as of Friday who could not be transferred to state custody due to DOC shortfalls in employees and prison cells.

This problem at the state level, Sheriff McCallum said, filters down to the county level and impacts them.



Levy County Superintendent Chris Cowart speaks to the Levy County Legislative Delegation. Cowart said he is grateful to the state for its help with funding the building of facilities in Chiefland.

LEVY COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS CHRIS COWART

Levy County Superintendent of Schools Chris Cowart expressed his thanks to the two state leaders Tuesday. He urged them to do what they can to assure Levy County has one representative and one senator when redistricting happens this year.

Cowart, who also served on the Levy County School Board in his earlier political career, shared with the leaders a trade program.

The wastewater and water treatment program of education for careers in those fields started at Bronson Middle High School this year. Six students participated thanks to partnerships with two state university system institutions.

Levy County had the first high school student who was able to obtain certification in this field of work, Cowart said.

On another matter, the global COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on local traffic around schools in Levy County, he said. Parents are dropping children off and picking them up, rather than using school buses.

One school that used to see 75 to 100 vehicles is now seeing 250 vehicles for drop off and pickup of children, Cowart said. This is causing traffic safety issues. Interestingly, Tuesday night, Williston Police Chief Dennis Strow said there is a similar problem near an education facility in Williston.

Cowart said he may be approaching Bradley and Harding to help obtain Florida Department of Transportation assistance with traffic on a particular section of a Levy County impacted by these traffic snarls, and he mentioned this county road is used by logging trucks.

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City of Fanning Springs Mayor Howell E. 'Trip' Lancaster III tells the two state leaders about the Nature Coast Rural Water Authority, which includes Fanning Springs, Dixie County, Gilchrist County and the Town of Bell. The NCRWA is seeking \$250,000 for its work on a well. This is the

part of funding the authority needs for its set of projects which include, a water tower and to finish piping water to the City of Old Town and to the school in Old Town. The arsenic levels of well water in Old Town is among the highest in the state. In regard to flooding in the City of Fanning Springs, Mayor Lancaster said 'If you're going to be on the water (live next to a river), then you're going to get wet.' Except for property next to the Suwannee River, people in Fanning Springs are not seeing flood issues.

SRWMD Deputy Executive Director Tim Alexander speaks to the Levy County Legislative Delegation about water management matters. Levy County is divided between the Suwannee River Water Management District and the South Florida Water Management District (Swiftmud). Marion County is only in Swiftmud. For years, Levy Countians have asked for the county to just be in one water management district. All of the previous Levy County Legislative Delegations failed to be able to accomplish that. As for flooding in Dixie County, the SRWMD submitted an emergency order to help there. Alexander asked the state for funding, too, on projects at University Oaks in Levy County for its utilities with those amounts being \$100,000 for Phase III and \$300,000 for Phase IV of projects there.



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Partnership For Strong Families (PFSF) CEO Steven Pennypacker speaks to the state leaders about this entity's success at helping people in the Third Judicial Circuit (Columbia, Dixie, Hamilton, Lafayette, Madison, Suwannee and Taylor counties) and the Eighth Judicial Circuit (Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Gilchrist, Levy, and Union counties) with resource

centers – including the Tri-County Community Resource Center, located in Chiefland. There are 1,500 children helped by the PFSF, some in their own homes and some in foster care. Among the other people who spoke to the state leaders are the Senior Program Attorney for the Eighth Judicial Circuit Guardian Ad Litem Amanda Knuckles Harrell. Attorney Harrell told the state leaders about the program, which speaks for children in courts. In this judicial circuit there are 300 volunteers speaking on behalf of 600-plus children. Another individual person addressing the state leaders was a woman who was extremely critical of the Florida Legislature for allegedly allowing the Florida Department of Children and Families to go with no oversight for cases where children are born into families with sexually abusive family members. According to that individual woman's recounting of her own experiences, the woman said she plans to continue in her campaign to change this problem at DCF.

Sara Nussel of Williston tells the state leaders that the Oklawaha River, a 74-mile-long river that flows north from Central Florida until it joins the St. Johns River near Palatka, is a creation of God. She asked the leaders what they will do to 'Free the Oklawaha.' A dam was built in Putnam County in the late 1960s as part of the failed Cross Florida Barge Canal. The Rodman Dam (now known as the Kirkpatrick



Dam) resulted in the clearing and flooding of approximately 7,500 acres of floodplain forests, while submerging over 20 springs and 16 miles of the Ocklawaha River beneath a massive pool of water. Nussel asked the Levy County Legislative Delegation to work toward removing the dam to restore the natural balance there that God wants.

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Cedar Key Water and Sewer District General Manager Chad Wisdom speaks about the devastation to the aquaculture industry based in Cedar Key that would occur if lift stations failed in the city's wastewater collection system. Cedar Key is seeking \$1.7 million to replace six of the 17 lift stations. The 400-plus immediate jobs in aquaculture account for more than 60 percent of the income for island area residents, he

said. The clams and oysters harvested around Cedar Key are a significant part of that food source for Floridians and other Americans. If these sewer lift stations fail, the environmental impact would be terrible, and the time to recover from it is unknown, he noted.

While Cedar Key Mayor Heath Davis was unable to attend the Levy County Delegation Hearing Tuesday (Oct. 5), Cedar Key City Commissioner (Seat 3) Jim Wortham was there to present the city's interests to the state leaders. Wortham thanked the state leaders for the \$250,000 toward an engineering study on Dock Street. He invited Bradley and Harding to tour Cedar Key and leave with a full tummy and a little bit of



suntan. He spoke about the wonderful asset to the island of the UF/IFAS Nature Coast Biological Station. Wortham sought help from the two leaders for funding for a vulnerability assessment study via the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. This barrier island is vulnerable to impacts from sea level rise, hurricanes and from saltwater intrusion. Wortham reminded the leaders that the successes and failures from research at Cedar Key is applicable to many coastal communities statewide. Finally, he said, 'We're always on the hunt for rural broadband.' Briefly, this reminds the state leaders that rural Florida needs better affordable Internet service. As school children have been homebound, those in rural Florida suffer from not having equal access to the Internet for educational resources. Sometimes, he said, the smallest child is the neediest, and so little Cedar Key is putting forth its requests of the help from Tallahassee. Like almost all of the speakers Tuesday, Wortham thanked these two state leaders for their service to the residents and visitors of Florida.