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Dixie County accepts state aid *Governor visits on Good Friday*



Alex Cronin, a 24-year-old Florida State University graduate, sets up the podium before Gov. Ron DeSantis arrives. Cronin is one of five governor's regional representatives. His region includes the Panhandle. Other members of the DeSantis team coming to Cross City on Good Friday (April 15) were Governor's Digital Director Robbie Myers, Deputy Press Secretary Bryan D. Griffin as well as agents from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and others.

Story and Photos

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CROSS CITY – As noted in a previous *HardisonInk.com* story, which can be viewed by clicking [HERE](#), State Rep. Charles Wesley "Chuck" Clemons Sr. (R-Newberry, Dist. 21) and State Sen. Jennifer Bradley (R-Fleming Island, Dist. 5) successfully passed local bills in the Florida Legislature to bring Dixie County help with infrastructure improvements for Dixie County Emergency Services and for improving drainage to reduce flooding.

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An airplane heads in for a landing at Cross City Airport. Within 30 minutes of the governor speaking to the people, two jets took off from the airport in Dixie County within an hour of the governor's visit.



Dixie County Sheriff Darby Butler (left) and Dixie County Emergency Services Chief Darian Brown provide a photo opportunity, when requested, as they are speaking outside the Dixie County Emergency Operations Center on April 15.

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Dressed to greet Gov. Ron DeSantis, Dixie County Emergency Services leaders (from left) Chief Roy Bass, Chief Matt Ferguson, Chief Darian Brown and Chief Scott Garner are seen before DeSantis arrives. Chief Brown is the top leader of the DCES, which includes fire-rescue, as well as emergency management for Dixie County.



Some of the whole DCES team present Friday afternoon is seen here in the Dixie County Emergency Operations Center. They are (from left) Firefighter-EMT Jason Venegas, Firefighter-Paramedic John Mash Jr., Lt. Andrew English, Chief Roy Bass, Chief Matt Ferguson, Chief Darian Brown, Chief Scott Garner, Support Staff member Mike Sermons, Lt. Mandy Lemmermen, Lt. Jason Lemmermen and Firefighter-EMT William Garner.

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Minutes before the governor spoke in Cross City late in the afternoon of Good Friday 2022, the people take their seats.



Reserved front row seats that day were for (from left) Suwannee River Water Management Executive Director Hugh Thomas, and SRWMD Governing Board members Charles Keith, Larry Thompson, Larry Sessions, William Lloyd and SRWMD Chair Virginia Johns.

Rep. Clemons reminded the Dixie County Board of County Commissioners at that April 7 meeting that Gov. Ron DeSantis has the power to line-item veto any budget item. On the late afternoon of Good Friday (April 15), Gov. DeSantis showed up at the Dixie

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County Emergency Operations Center with a check for just over \$10 million, taking away any doubt about some level of funding by the state government for local projects.

Dixie County Commission Chairman Jamie Storey accepted the \$10 million check on behalf of himself and the other Dixie County Commission members -- Vice Chairman W.C. Mills, Commissioner Mark Hatch, Commissioner Jody Stephenson and Commissioner James Valentine.

While every resident and visitor of Dixie County benefits from the appropriations, among the happiest people that day were Dixie County Emergency Services Chief Darian Brown, and the next top three chiefs of DCES – Chief Roy Bass, Chief Scott Garner and Chief Matt Ferguson.

Among the other DCES staff at the EOC that afternoon were Lt. Andrew English, Lt. Mandy Lemmermen, Lt. Jason Lemmermen, Firefighter-Paramedic John Mash Jr., Firefighter-EMT Jason Venegas, Firefighter-EMT William Garner and Support Staff member Mike Sermons.

Before the governor arrived, Dixie County Manager Duane Cannon spoke about the visit of the governor. He said Gov. DeSantis is bringing a check for the appropriations the Florida Legislature made to help Dixie County, which the County Commission had asked Rep. Clemons and Sen. Bradley to secure.

Cannon said Dixie County for several years has sought help to add to the Dixie County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and for a new fire station at Old Town. Cannon said all of the county leadership are happy to see this money is for the state fiscal year, which begins on July 1,

Cannon said it is not as if the money is instantly available to Dixie County on July 1, but through the various processes the county will be able to fund the two firehouses and to conduct operations to help drainage.

Perhaps the most exciting news, he said, is the state helping with flooding problems in Dixie County.

“During the flood last year,” Cannon said, “we were under a state of emergency for over five months due to the 62-plus inches of rain we had from July through September in 2021. We are getting some allocation monies for cleaning out all of our drainage areas across Dixie County.”

Cannon went on to say this will provide maintenance that has not happened for 40 to 50 years, since some previous timber companies created the canals.

As the flood water rose, Cannon said, Dixie County Road Department and other workers removed debris from the ditches that became clogged. But the new funding will cover costs for replacement of dilapidated structures, as well as reestablish destabilized banks, which suffered damage during the flood.

Cannon said this is phase one of what may be a five-phase procedure. The funds this year will be a big help in starting what needs to be done, he said. The county will seek more state help next year to continue improvements, he said.

The first focus of work, he said, will be around the Cross City Airport Canal and around the Cross City Correctional Institution (CCCI).

During the flood, Cannon said, CCCI became flooded. Three hundred families of the employees had to alter their lives for five months due to the flood. The prison is one of the most significant employers in Dixie County, Cannon said.

The residential area of Old Town to the east became flooded, too, Cannon said, causing strife for many more Dixie County residents.

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GOVERNOR RON DeSANTIS

Gov. Ron DeSantis holds the hand of his oldest child Madison DeSantis, 5, as he heads toward the podium. The governor said he and his wife also have a 4-year-old son and a 2-year-old daughter.



Gov. Ron DeSantis tells about his choice to help Dixie County with infrastructure improvements.

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Gov. Ron DeSantis, his oldest daughter, the state senator and state representative for this part of Florida, the five members of the Dixie County Board of County Commissioners, the Dixie County sheriff and others are seen at the front of the presentation area.



Gov. Ron DeSantis and Dixie County Commission Chairman Jamie Storey hold the check for just over \$10 million. To the right and among those seen applauding is County Commission Vice Chairman W.C. Mills.

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The governor made some political statements.

In regard to his visit to Dixie County, DeSantis said that this fiscally constrained county needed help from the state.

Therefore, the state has stood up to support Dixie County in a number of ways, he said.

The governor approved the \$3.5 million allocated by the Florida Legislature to replace a fire station in Old Town that was damaged during Hurricane Hermine (Aug. 28, 2016-Sept. 8, 2016).

The governor approved the \$3.7 million allocated by the Florida Legislature for the construction of a fire station adjacent to the EOC in Cross City. This will house staff of the Dixie County Emergency Services, he said.

The governor approved the \$2.7 million allocated by the Florida Legislature for flood and stormwater mitigation in Dixie County.

Gov. DeSantis mentioned the Job Growth Grant Fund. This is an economic development program designed to promote public infrastructure and workforce training across the state.

There is another \$50 million in that fund for the next year's budget, DeSantis said, and "That allows local communities to apply for support."

He said if Dixie County has workforce needs, or infrastructure needs for more job growth, then he wants communities to apply for those grant funds. He also spoke about the most recent unemployment report, and the state's increased move toward trade education.

SEN. JENNIFER BRADLEY



State Sen. Jennifer Bradley tells the people about Dixie County being a gem.

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Senator Bradley said the vibrant economy in Florida allows the state government to help fiscally constrained counties like Dixie County with infrastructure that is vital for the people.

“Dixie is a gem,” Sen. Bradley said. “It is a rural old Florida county, and it has the Gulf of Mexico. It has the Suwannee River, but we know that water can be a challenge sometimes. And managing that water can be often expensive.”

During the Legislative Delegation Hearing, Sen. Bradley said she heard from Moms who had to take their children from their houses in boats. And this was not just for days or weeks, she added, but for months.

“People had to go and fill up their water jugs (for drinking water) every day,” Bradley said. “The prison flooded. Water is a big problem.”

A task force was formed in Dixie County, she said. They gave her a plan, which she took to Tallahassee with Rep. Clemons.

Sen. Bradley said he heard the call for help and saw the plan to reduce flooding, and he chose to stand with Dixie County.

REP. CHUCK CLEMONS



Rep. Chuck Clemons speaks about Good Friday being a Great Friday in Dixie County this year, thanks to the money to help pay for certain infrastructure.

Rep. Clemons thanked Sen. Bradley and Gov. DeSantis.

With 10 mills being the most ad valorem property taxes allowed, and with a low tax base, it causes Dixie County to be fiscally constrained.

Clemons said the people of Dixie County prayed for help.

“Today, with Good Friday, and all of us are praying folks,” Clemons said, “this (allocation) makes Good Friday, Great Friday in Dixie County.”

In addition to speaking about the successful work in the Florida Legislature to bring relief for some infrastructure needs in Dixie County, Rep. Clemons spoke about why the flag was flying at half-staff.

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Dixie County Sheriff's Office K9 Sgt. Nathaniel Singleton died in the early morning hours of April 11 in a vehicular crash while he was off duty.

Clemons said in Dixie County, the people back the blue and the back the green, meaning the people support the whole law enforcement community and the DCSO.

ATTENDEES

There were many people in attendance at the event.

In addition to the state senator and the state representative, the Dixie five County Commission members, and the Chiefs and member of Dixie County Emergency Services, Dixie County Sheriff Darby Butler and a number of his staff attended. Among the other elected officials present were Dixie County Clerk Barbie Higginbotham and Dixie County Property Appraiser Robbie Lee.

Dixie County Superintendent of Schools Mike Thomas was at the presentation as well.

Cross City Mayor Kenneth "Tank" Lee, and City Council members Ryan Fulford and Kirk Marhefka came to the EOC. Staff members of the host city present included City Manager John Driggers and Cross City Police Chief Duane Sullivan.

Horseshoe Beach Mayor Jeff Williams came to the event as well.

Florida Department of Corrections Regional Director John Palmer was at the event. Among the other FDOC members were CCCI Warden Shawn Swain, CCCI Assistant Warden Jeff Kennedy and CCCI Maj. C.P. Dedge.

Representing the Third Judicial Circuit State Attorney's Office at the event was Assistant State Attorney Jarret Thomas.

From the Suwannee River Water Management District, there was Executive Director Hugh Thomas in attendance, as were SRWMD Governing Board members Charles Keith, Larry Thompson, Larry Sessions, William Lloyd and SRWMD Chair Virginia Johns.

Many other people were there as well, including former Dixie County Commissioner David Osteen, Dixie County Road Superintendent Stevie Hutchison and Robert L. Robinson, a member of the Masonic Lodge in Chiefland.