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Freshman senator handles hearing alone *Several issues covered in Dixie County*



Dixie County Commission Chairman Jamie Storey (left) speaks with County Manager Duane Cannon about the project topics to be shared with the Dixie County Legislative Delegation.

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © Jan. 14, 2023 at 8:12 p.m.

CROSS CITY – State Sen. Corey Jermaine Simon (R-Tallahassee, Dist. 3) was the lone elected state leader at the 2023 Dixie County Legislative Delegation Hearing in Cross City on Friday (Jan. 13).



Cross City Police Chief Jamey King (left) and City Manager John Driggers are seen just before the hearing begins.

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State Sen. Corey Jermaine Simon (left) speaks with Dixie County Sheriff Darby Butler before the hearing.



Dixie County Building Official Leon Wright (left) and Suwannee River Water Management Deputy Executive Director of Business and Community Services Tim Alexander are seen just before the hearing. Alexander also serves on the Dixie County School Board.

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State Rep. Jason Shoaf's Legislative Aide LeAnn Bunton (left) and State Sen. Corey Jermaine Simon prepare to conduct the hearing. Shoaf was reportedly sick that day. A supporter of Sen. Simon put a campaign flag on the dais.

Sen. Simon is the state senator for District 3, which consists of 13 counties -- Dixie, Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lafayette, Leon, Liberty, Madison, Suwannee, Taylor, Wakulla counties.

Sen. Simon's chief legislative aide is Stephen Huddleston. His other legislative aides are Peter Lissarrague and Devonique Taylor, according to records.

State Rep. Jason Shoaf (R-Port St. Joe) chose against attending because he was reported to have a fever with a temperature of 102 degrees Fahrenheit. Shoaf was reported to have said he did not want to have his constituents in Dixie County catch whatever was causing him to suffer from a fever, Sen. Simon said.

Shoaf's Legislative Aide LeAnn Bunton sat at the dais instead of Rep. Shoaf. Other aides for Shoaf are Landry Driver and Amber Norris, according to records.

Shoaf won the 2022 Florida House of Representatives District 7 election when no other person – Democrat or Republican – qualified to run for election. This recently created district came to be in redistricting and it includes 11 counties -- Dixie, Franklin, Gulf, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lafayette, Leon, Liberty, Suwannee, Taylor and Wakulla counties.

State Sen. Simon, before being elected to the Florida State Senate in 2022, as the Chief Executive Officer of Volunteer Florida, where he was coordinating volunteer efforts across state agencies. Simon played football at Florida State University (FSU) under Coach Bobby Bowden before playing football in the National Football League.

State Sen. Simon, who was chairing the first-ever legislative delegation hearing in his new career as a politician, said it was a long six-month campaign to get elected. He said he is enthusiastic to represent all of the people in the 13 counties in this newly carved

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state senate district – whether they voted for him or not.

“This is the first time a Republican has held this office since Reconstruction,” Sen. Simon said.

The senator may be correct in this statement about some parts of the district, but whoever told him this “fact” was not correct in regard to Dixie County.

At least, the last the two consecutive state senators serving Dixie County voters in the Florida Senate, a husband and wife, are Republicans. A brief stroll through some of Florida’s history puts the truth in perspective.

Florida became the 27th state in the United States of America on March 3, 1845. William D. Moseley was elected as the new state's first governor. David Levy Yulee, one of Florida's leading proponents for statehood, became a United States senator.

Then, there was a war.

The Civil War was from April 12, 1861, until April 9, 1865.

As noted by the Florida Department of State’s website, “During the Civil War, Florida was not ravaged as several other southern states were. Indeed, no decisive battles were fought on Florida soil. While Union forces occupied many coastal towns and forts, the interior of the state remained in Confederate hands.”

Ultimately, the South was defeated, and federal troops occupied Tallahassee on May 10, 1865.

“Beginning in 1868, the federal government instituted a congressional program of ‘reconstruction’ in Florida and the other southern states,” according to the Office of the Florida Department of State. “During this period, Republican officeholders tried to enact sweeping changes, many of which were aimed at improving conditions for African Americans.”

Since the era of Republicans of Florida during Reconstruction, however, that party has changed its platform several times.

As for Dixie County, it did not even exist as a political subdivision of Florida during the Civil War or during Reconstruction.

Dixie County was created in 1921 from the southern regions of Lafayette County.

The senator was gently guided, too, in the accepted practice of Legislative Delegation Hearings in Florida, where the elected county and city leaders speak first, followed by any members of the general public.

Actual requests for funding for capital expenditures are due soon on a form, and these hearings provide opportunities for legislators to listen to constituents in the people’s home counties rather than in Tallahassee.

The Florida House of Representatives and the Florida Senate will draft laws. Those two bodies will form an annual budget. The governor has certain veto powers.

The 2023 Regular Florida Legislative Session starts March 7.

Meanwhile, here is a recap of what happened Jan. 13 in the meeting room of the Dixie County Commission in Cross City.

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Dixie County Sheriff Darby Butler



Dixie County Sheriff Darby Butler speaks to a legislative aide for the member of the Florida House of Representatives that represents the people of Dixie County, and State Sen. Corey Simon, the freshman senator who represents the people of Dixie County and people in 12 other counties.

Sheriff Butler said Dixie County is a fiscally constrained county.

The Dixie County Jail was built in the early 1990s, Butler said. In addition to housing prisoners, this facility includes space for evidence storage, investigation conferences, training of deputies and correctional officers, and control of 9-1-1 communications all within one building, Butler said.

The Dixie County Sheriff's Office has outgrown the building, Butler said. The sheriff said another infrastructure request he has for the state for help is in regard to communications. This radio improvement need is to help law enforcement as well as to help the first responders from Dixie County Emergency Services and elsewhere as they try to protect life and property.

The sheriff said the DCSO was out trying to serve a warrant on a suspected child killer very recently and it experienced radio problems.

"Our communications are poor," Butler said. "And we're putting our lives on the line for other people. One thing we can't stand, can't tolerate, is lack of communications."

He said adequate radio service for law enforcers, firefighters, paramedics and EMTs is critical, not just for those employees but for the people they serve.

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Dixie County Tax Collector Michelle Cannon

Dixie County Tax Collector Michelle Cannon pleads for courthouse renovations or creation of an off-site office for the Dixie County Tax Collector's Office. The increased duties for the tax collector and the increase in population for Dixie County since the



courthouse was built in the 1960s has caused a need for more space for this elected official to best help the residents and visitors of Dixie County.

Dixie County Tax Collector Cannon said that her office has seen a dramatic increase in requests for service due to phenomenal growth in Dixie County in the past few years.

Last year, she said, her seven office staff members completed 51,000 transactions at just under \$20 million in revenue. And they did this without complaint, despite being forced to work in a very small space in the Dixie County Courthouse built in 1960 or so.

The lobby area of the Dixie County Tax Collector's Office that was planned in the 1950s is serving people with the same space in 2023 – more than 60 years later – while her office provides far more services to a much larger population.

Cannon said her office deals with collection of ad valorem property taxes, license tags, driver licenses, concealed weapon carry permits, hunting and fishing licenses and more.

People are moving to Dixie County, not only from other states, she said, but from other Florida counties.

Cannon said she needs an office outside the courthouse, or there needs to be renovation inside the courthouse. She is calling upon the Florida Legislature for help in this regard.

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Dixie County Superintendent of Schools Mike Thomas



Dixie County Superintendent of Schools Mike Thomas shares information about James M. Anderson Elementary School, which shows why the county is seeking state aid to improve the school.

School Superintendent Thomas, who lived in Tallahassee from 1986 to 1990, spoke about some memorable moments in that college's football history that the senator remembered.

Thomas said he is pleased to work with the members of the Dixie County School Board -- Cheryl Pridgeon, Amanda NesSmith, Paul Gainey, Timothy Alexander and Lucas Rollison.

Thomas is a former parole officer, teacher, assistant principal, and was the principal at James M. Anderson Elementary School before being elected as superintendent in 2016 and has been reelected since.

The superintendent said Dixie County will be requesting special facilities funding for an elementary school in Cross City. James M. Anderson Elementary School is 55 years old, he said. Built in 1968, the open campus plan is not designed for student safety, Thomas said.

Right now, the school for children in kindergarten through fourth grade lacks efficient electrical and mechanical systems to serve the needs of administrators, faculty, staff, students and families, he added.

Media and food services at the school are understaffed as well, he said, according to Florida Department of Education standards, Thomas said.

Thomas expressed his gratitude to the Florida Legislature for the Dixie County High School campus that was built in 2018 to serve students in grades eight through 12.

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Dixie County Manager Duane Cannon



Dixie

County Manager Duane Cannon talks about some of the county's needs. Cannon graciously helped guide the state senator, who did not have an agenda for the hearing, and who appears to have just learned that day that in the hearing, the elected officials traditionally speak before the delegation hears from members of the general public.

County Manager Cannon spoke on behalf of the four-member Dixie County Commission.

The top four project topics he mentioned were

- Dixie County is submitting for Phase 2 of the Dixie County Flood Mitigation Projects. The county suffered from flooding to the point that the Florida Department of Corrections' Cross City Correctional Institution (state prison) had to be evacuated. People lost property from the devastating flood. Since then, the county cleaned out or improved in excess of 60 locations of structures such as culverts, as well as restoring approximately 10 miles of canals that were critically in need of service to allow proper drainage. This year's request is to have the state fund the continuation of the previously planned phased improvements.

- As noted by the sheriff, Dixie County will be submitting for infrastructure improvements on the jail.

- Dixie County will be asking for two tankers that each cost an estimated \$500,000. The \$1 million worth of tankers are needed so that the Dixie County Emergency Services has the water supply it needs.

- Dixie County will submit for funding to build in the community of Suwannee. The only evacuation route is eroding, and a seawall is needing repair.

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DCES Chief Darian Brown



Dixie County Emergency Services Chief Darian Brown speaks to the state senator and an aide from the state representative, in whose district Dixie County was placed during redistricting.

Chief Brown said County Manager Cannon is correct about the county needing the two tankers for fire service in Dixie County.

The chief said Dixie County Emergency Services covers all county needs for fire, EMS and emergency management. This includes all 700 square miles, 24-hours-a-day every day.

Between the global COVID-19 pandemic and the floods, DCES Emergency Management Division was continually active for more than a year and a half, he said. Emergency management is preparing for disasters at all times, too.

Last year, the Florida Legislature approved funding for two fire stations and the governor did not line veto the appropriations. Progress is continuing on those projects, the chief said. The Emergency Operations Center will see additions to include a facility as the 10-person station. The other new fire station will be in the center of the county with construction starting in a few months.

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City Manager John Driggers of Cross City



City Manager John Driggers of Cross City helps the state leaders know some of the help Cross City could use from the Florida Legislature.

City Manager Driggers mentioned he was joined at the hearing by Cross City Vice Mayor Jerry “Ryan” Fulford, Cross City Police Chief Jamey King.

State Sen. Bradley (R-Fleming Island, Dist. 6) had been the senator for Dixie County. Her husband former Sen. Rob Bradley, also a Republican with a home address in Fleming Island, was the senator representing Dixie County before the redistricting. Sen. Rob Bradley was Sen. Jennifer Bradley’s immediate predecessor.

City Manager Driggers said Cross City had been working with Sen. Bradley on an appropriation. The city is seeking help with its effort to convert from septic tanks to central sewer service expansion. Cross City is the county seat for Dixie County.

The city is working with the Suwannee River Water Management District and the Florida Rural Water Association on this goal, Driggers said.

Police Chief King said the CCPD needs to hire a fourth man so that the department can offer 24-hour-a-day coverage, rather than having to rely on the Dixie County Sheriff’s Office to take over for periods or time regularly.

The chief said the city would appreciate help from the state to reach this goal.

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Cross City Vice Mayor Jerry 'Ryan' Fulford and Cross City Police Chief Jamey King are among the city's staff at the hearing on Friday (Jan. 13), and they are seen here in the audience.

Dixie Education Foundation President Carol West

West asked the Legislative Delegation to speak on behalf of the Foundation to continue a match of funding that goes to the Dixie Education Foundation from the Florida Education Foundation, which is a consortium.

CFEC General Manager Denny George



Central Florida Electric Cooperative General Manager Denny George helps people know about the significance of the Fiber By Central Florida's efforts to improve Internet service in this part of rural Florida.

George told Sen. Simon and Rep. Shoaf's aides about the fiberoptic service coming to the Tri-County Area of Dixie County, Gilchrist County and Levy County thanks to Fiber By Central Florida,

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which was launched by CFEC.

This for-profit entity -- Fiber By Central Florida, is wholly owned by CFEC. This means, George said, that all of the benefits flow back to CFEC members.

Grant dollars attained by Fiber By Central Florida will help reduce initial capital costs as the project takes off. Fiberoptic lines are anticipated to be placed on CFEC poles as soon as March.

This fiberoptic service will not only give faster, better, affordable and reliable Internet service to the Tri-County Area, but it will also serve CFEC to monitor and repair its 4,000 miles of electric service lines, George said.

In the future, this fiberoptic network will be able to be used to read meters, he said.

George explained to the state senator how the Florida Legislature can help Fiber By Central Florida by urging the Florida Department of Economic Opportunities Office of Broadband leaders to see a grant from the state to Fiber By Central Florida, which has been applied for, will help Floridians much like rural electric cooperatives helped Floridians in the past and today.

This will give the countryfolks the same Internet access that the city folks enjoy, George said.

Not only is CFEC moving toward giving members this Internet service, George said. There are five cooperatives -- CFEC, Tri-County Electric Cooperative, Suwannee Valley Electric Cooperative, Glades Electric Cooperative and Escambia County Electric Cooperative -- involved in this venture to add fiberoptic Internet service.

"On mission, five co-ops, 16 counties, with a land mass, when you include the other providers inside the counties, that addresses 23 percent of the entire state of Florida," George said.

George said Fiber By Central Florida is waiting to hear about its application for a grant from the DEO Office of Broadband, but it plans to seek other grants too.

The grant application form for state aid from the DEO Office of Broadband included a question, George said, that asked if the applicant expected to be in business in the next five years. George said CFEC has been in business for almost 85 years.

"This is the investment for the next 85 years," he said he wrote when answering that question.

CFEC General Manager Denny George spoke to the senator and legislative aide about another matter in which he is involved.

President of the Friends of Children of North Central Florida George then spoke about a matter other than electric service and Internet service in rural North Florida.

The Friends of Children of North Central Florida organization raises funds to support foster parents, children in foster care, single moms and local families. Its board of directors volunteer their time and talents to offer this Christ-centered support.

The group built a small fostering camp north of Gainesville and south of LaCrosse (Alachua County), Friends President George said. It has already ministered to more than 130 children with 34 of them being adopted, he said.

He spoke about the Brave Moms program. The Brave Moms in program helps assist families remain together, while providing a safe environment, all through the love of Jesus, the website for the group notes.

"Friends of Children works with the Brave Moms program to help struggling mothers care for their children so that foster care placement can be avoided. Brave Moms helps mothers of young children by assisting with housing, financial counseling, job search

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skills and other services,” the website notes.

Some of these women come from abusive relationships, the Friends of Children website notes. Some have experienced financial challenges or have never known God’s unconditional love, it adds. This residential ministry offers support, stability and encouragement as they work toward bettering their lives and providing for their families.

George said the Alachua County efforts have shown success and now the group seeks to help the same type of distressed mothers and children in Dixie County, Gilchrist County and Levy County.

George then introduced Gina Dickey, Coordinator, Title IX Part A, of the McKinney-Vento Program/Families in Transition.

McKinney-Vento Program/Families in Transition



Gina Dickey, Coordinator, Title IX Part A, of the McKinney-Vento Program/Families in Transition, tells people tragic news about homeless children and families in Dixie County. She shared, too, how the McKinney-Vento Program/Families in Transition is working to help those children and families.

Dickey works with students and youth who are experiencing homelessness (as defined by the McKinney-Vento Act) in the Tri-County Area, and the significant need for

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transitional housing in this area.

“I am excited to be working with Mr. Denny George and Friends of Children to help address this need,” Dickey noted for *HardisonInk.com* after the hearing.

Children and youth experiencing homelessness are not visible in shelters or on the streets, but rather moving from place to place: couches, basements, motels, cars, and wherever they can find temporary refuge.

Dickey said families in the Tri-County Area are living in campers, tents, motels, cars, domestic violence shelters, and are doubled-up with families and friends.

Natural disasters, manmade disasters and economic crisis in families are among the causes for this homeless lifestyle, she said.

The group where George serves as president and the McKinney-Vento Program/Families in Transition are not making specific requests of the Florida Legislature, Dickey said. Instead, the two individuals simply want to bring state leaders into awareness about this aspect of homelessness in the Tri-County Area.

“Our goal is to establish transitional housing for these families,” Dickey said, “where they can stay for short terms while they receive relief, support, training education.”

After leaving this transitional situation, Dickey said, the goal is for these families to never return to this situation again.

There are more than 300 homeless children enrolled in schools who have been identified in Dixie County, Levy County and Gilchrist County she said.

Dixie County currently has 94 of these children, Dickey said, which is more than a 100 percent increase from the previous school year in this county.

Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition



Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition Director Katrina VanAernam (at the podium) speaks about the organization’s goals. Standing next to her are Debby Sweem and Sheila Frierson, two of the staff members of the coalition.

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Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition (DCADC) Director Katrina VanAernam spoke about the 12-year-old coalition.

The coalition attempts to be relevant, capable and community-focused, she said. The Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition has programs in the schools and in the community to help in the effort to stop drug abuse, and to help drug abusers change their lives by making different choices.

Sheila Frierson is a DCADC employee who is a registered nurse that has worked in this area for 48 years as a nurse.

In 2017, Dixie County had the highest number of deaths from opioids per-capita in Florida, she said.

Frierson spoke to the delegation about the coalition's efforts to make the community safer and healthier. Partners of the coalition include Meridian Behavioral Healthcare, the Cross City Police Department, the Dixie County Sheriff's Office, the Dixie County School Board, and Dixie County Emergency Services.

Accomplishments by the DCADC during one grant period included institution of a program using Deterra Drug Deactivation program to neutralize over-the-counter drugs for disposal at solid waste transfer stations, making them safer for the environment – not leeching opioids into the aquifer.

The DCADC also works with the United States Drug Enforcement Agency in its Drug Takeback program. The DCADC also has distributed 1,400 doses of Narcan so far to help make it more available for saving the lives of people suffering from opioid overdoses, Frierson said.

The DCADC is partnering with the DCSO at the jail by providing a Narcotics Anonymous 12-step program for inmates who want that help to stop experiencing problems that are part of the drug culture.

When asked by the senator, Sheriff Butler said that he believes between 80 to 90 percent of all inmates in the Dixie County Jail are there from direct drug law violations, or from some other crime that came to be from a drug influence.

Among the DCADC staff members also speaking to the senator and the legislative aide was Debby Sweem, a certified peer-support specialist. As noted in the ad in HardisonInk.com by the DCADC, people can seek a hope dealer if they are tired of their dope dealer by contacting the DCADC.

The hearing lasted about an hour. The closest district office to Cross City for the state representative or the state senator is in Live Oak (Suwannee County). Aides can be contacted at the Tallahassee offices, too.