

Dispatches from DeFuniak



From Councilman Ron Kelley

D E F U N I A K

F L O R I D A

S P R I N G S

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- The 3rd Annual Autism Walk, on Saturday, April 8, at Wee Care Park on Walton Road.
- DFS Marvel of Flight Mar. 31–Apr 1. City Airport, free admission.
- Concert In the Park Dwayne Langston Saturday, March 11 3-5 pm at Lakeyard Amphitheater. Free Admission



A TIME FOR EVERY SEASON

Greetings, dear friends!

Much has taken place since my last dispatch. As most of you know by now, Interim City Manager Tilman Mears unexpectedly tendered his resignation due to unrelenting harassment and antagonism by two elected city officials.

Having voiced my unwavering support for Mr. Mears in media reports and a recent letter to the editor, I will not continue to belabor the point. However, in our last meeting, the Council received quite a bit of unsolicited advice in an effort, I suppose, to “educate” us on how to select a city manager. The main points were that we should advertise nationwide and require an advanced degree in business administration.

On its face, there is nothing wrong with either suggestion, but they fail to consider other

important facts.

For instance, in the last six years, the city hired two finance directors who had degrees and who came from far away. Their credentials were excellent and they both interviewed well.

Upon being hired, the Council discovered that neither were up to the task. They both flamed out rather spectacularly, leaving us in worse shape than we had been in before.

My point, of course, is that hiring the expert-from-out-of-town with a business degree is hardly a guarantee of getting the best candidate for the job.

Second, our town still has basic objectives that must be met before we can install an executive to sit in an ivory tower and issues edicts, saying, “So let it be written, so let it be done!”

I believe Mr. Mears was and

is the person our city needs now. Mears met all of the requirements in our ordinance to qualify as city manager. As a direct result of his actions and decisions, the city has saved hundreds of thousands of dollars. Important issues that had previously been ignored or forgotten were discovered and corrected or set on a path to be corrected. He went into the field and worked alongside our crews. He proved his value many times over, but he did not have a university degree. Had we required one, we would never have had the lasting benefit of his leadership.

Our current ordinance allows us the flexibility to hire the most capable person for the job. Nothing else is needed.

— Ron Kelley
Feb. 28, 2017

POLISHING THE JEWEL

At the City Council meeting Monday (2/27), architect Victor Bowman of Pendleton & Bowman, Inc., talked about the planned repairs and remodeling of the Chautauqua Hall of Brotherhood, our most famous landmark. The city was awarded a \$500,000 grant by the state to make needed repairs and improvements to the 100+ year-old building. Bowman said that that amount will likely be used up in the first phase of the project, as there are many issues that need to be addressed.

However, he said he believes the all exterior repairs and the installation of the elevator can be completed in phase one. He urged the city to start working on another grant in order to be able to continue with the project without interruption. “Interruptions are tough on contractors, which drives up the construction costs,” he said. Phase one should be completed by June 2018.



CITY SKATEBOARD PARK READY FOR IMPROVEMENTS



It is always easier to complain about what's wrong than to actually put forth the effort to fix the problem. For years, a very familiar lament among local residents was that there is nothing for kids to do. The City Council has been taking steps to improve that situation. In addition to supporting the Boys & Girls Club, maintaining recreational areas like Lake Stanley Park, Pat Covell Park and the Clay Street Tennis Courts, the Council is upgrading the city Skateboard Park, next to the DeFuniak Springs Community Center.

City Safety Director Mike Sharver presented the Council with a list of skateboard ramps that he had researched and located via the Internet. The ramps, though not new, are in remarkably good shape and the city can get them for a fraction of the cost of new equipment. Sharver said the manufacturer will guarantee their good condition, disassemble them and transport them to us. The good news is that the city will have about \$100,000 worth of skateboard ramps for a cost of less than \$18,000. The best news is that kids will have something to do that they really enjoy. Thanks, Mike! Great job!

FAMILIAR FACES—NEW POSITIONS

Anyone visiting City Hall in the near future is likely to see people they may already know, but in new positions. With the resignation of Tilman Mears, the logical step is for his assistant, Interim Public Works Director **Craig Drake**, to assume the top slot until another city manager is selected. The Council has done it this way twice since I have been there. This is a good move since probably 90 percent of what we do is related to Public Works, either directly or indirectly. For the relatively short time the new selection process will take, Mr. Drake is more than capable of handling the task. Like the man he follows, Craig has proven to be a knowledgeable, dedicated staff member. City Hall staff has already pledged their support and assistance, so that makes this transition easy.



Another familiar face is that of Chris Mitchell.

Many people will remember Chris from his days as director of the Florida Chautauqua Assembly and as a reporter for WMBB TV. Chris joins our staff as our Grant Writer. He is tasked to seek, research and successfully submit grant applications to help the Council fund needed projects. It is a big job, but Chris is used to taking on big jobs and we have confidence that he will thrive in his new position.

WALK SOFTLY BUT CARRY A BIG STICK

“What comes from the heart, goes to the heart.”

— Samuel T. Coleridge

Like most cities, we have structures and properties that have fallen into blight. Such structures are unsafe and pose health hazards. They attract vagrants, foster criminal activity and lower adjacent property values. The owners are either unable or unwilling to repair or demolish the structures. Also, properties

that have been repossessed by out-of-state banks get very little attention from banks who prefer not to invest any more money in them.

Placing liens on these properties has little effect and can take years to come to fruition. At a workshop this week, the Council discussed possible options for taking action that will lead to quick results. This

could include citations with fines, creating a city code enforcement board or hiring a special magistrate.

Although no action was taken, it will be on the agenda for our next meeting. We must take decisive action now before the blight spreads and turns our town into something that our residents scorn and visitors avoid.

SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

As many of you know, there is a good chance that the eight counties that were most affected by the massive Deepwater-Horizon oil spill of 2010 might soon receive \$300 million in damages. Thanks to State Senator George Gainer and two other senators, who sponsored a bill to ensure that northwest Florida would receive its fair share, Walton County, Freeport and DeFuniak Springs stand to receive up to \$30 million dollars. This money comes directly from BP and does not include any taxpayer dollars.

What makes Sen. Gainer's bill so unique is that the money could only go toward infrastructure and education projects that bolster the local economy. Sen. Gainer said, "It cannot be used for corporate welfare."

To increase our chances for funding, the Walton County Commission has partnered with the city councils of Freeport and DeFuniak Springs on a far-reaching project that will benefit all three. The plan is to install water and sewer lines along U.S. 331 South, connecting the two towns. This would encourage immediate development in both municipalities and in the unincorporated areas of the county.

This would allow housing developers to create new residential subdivisions. New companies could locate new manufacturing plants, distribution centers and commercial retail stores along the busy corridor. This project would be a companion project for the highway widening project. Together, they would have a major impact on life in Walton County for generations to come. Not since the establishment of the Florida Winter Assembly of Chautauqua in the late 1800s has any project had such a potential for changing people's lives here in Walton County. This project can help us create sustainable long-term growth and prosperity for this area for generations to come.



Look What's Happening Here

Autism Walk — Autism is a disorder that strikes thousands of children each year, often producing medical and mental health issues such as gastrointestinal (GI) disorders, seizures, sleep disturbances, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, anxiety and phobias. Sadly, there are many autistic children in DeFuniak Springs and Walton County. To raise awareness and scholarship funds for those children, a local group called Friends of Autism is sponsoring the 3rd Annual Autism Walk on Saturday, April 18 at Wee Care Park. To find out how to participate or help sponsor the event, call Jackie Herring at (850) 834-2419.

Concert in the Park — As part of the city's ongoing Concert in the Park series, organized by the Special Event Committee, country music fans are invited to attend a concert by **Dwayne Langston**. Langston has performed at Gilley's Family Opry and other venues throughout the South. The concert will be held Saturday March 11, from 3-5 p.m. at the DeFuniak Springs Lakeyard Amphitheater. Admission is free.