

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 Chuck Wagon Gang gospel concert on Thursday, Jan. 19 from 3-5 pm, at DFS Community Center on Hwy. 83N. Free admission.
- 2017 Chautauqua Assembly, Jan. 26–29. For Tickets, call (850) 892-7613.
- DFS Marvel of Flight Mar. 31–Apr 1. City Airport, free admission.



HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Greetings, dear friends!

Across the nation, 2017 has been greeted with sighs of great relief, expressions of hope for our future and no small amount of hysteria and outrage. As I am squarely on the side of hope and relief, I am looking forward to the coming year.

On the national front, I am pleased to see that the business climate is reawakening. Ford, Stanley Black and Decker, Trans-Lux, Carrier and other companies are reinvesting in America, bringing more jobs and opportunities for American workers. This trend is also pushing the S&P 500 stock markets to new highs, which many economists say will likely continue through 2017.

While there are still many variables in play and a lot of work still to be done, it is very

encouraging to see such positive changes across the nation. I also believe this new wave of optimism will continue to grow and spread to smaller cities and towns.

It is important to note that merely starting a new business or opening a new branch does not guarantee success. Many new and existing businesses can fail for a variety of reasons. However, it is the responsibility of federal, state and local government to create an inviting, business-friendly climate that offers opportunities and incentives without excessive paper bureaucracy and red-tape restrictions.

Here at home, in just the few short years since I have had the honor of serving you on the council, we have seen a number of new shops and businesses locate here. This is due, in part,

to an easing of cumbersome, anti-business regulations and a new yes-we-can attitude by city officials and planning staff.

Your city council has been taking steps to ensure that we are prepared for the growth that is continuing to come our way. We have pledged our support to form a partnership with the Walton County Commission and the Freeport City Council so that, if and when, we receive our share of the Horizon oil spill reparations money, we can start designing and constructing utility lines to connect DeFuniak Springs to Freeport.

As I have often said, “It is not glamorous, but this is how real progress begins.”

— Ron Kelley
Jan. 12, 2017

LOOKING OUT FOR OUR OWN

Last year, as part of its mission to widen U.S. 331 from U.S. 98 to the Alabama state line, the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) presented the City of DeFuniak Springs and its residents with three options of how the highway might move through the city and asked the city for its opinion. After much discussion and debate, your city council chose Option One, which keeps U.S. 331 on its current path (and overlays U.S. 90 for approximately two miles). Out of the entire project, we asked for only two modifications, both on the U.S. 90 portion — eliminate the proposed bicycle path, which would cause some businesses to be demolished — and eliminate a proposed grass median, which would restrict free access to businesses on both sides of the highway and create unsafe driving conditions.

Though some business owners suggested we not object the bike lanes for fear that FDOT would, in retaliation, bypass the entire city, **most** of your council strongly advocated against that concession for several reasons. One, we already know that FDOT can and does allow changes in their highway plans even late in the design/build process. We are currently in the early stages of this process. Two, neither I nor a majority of your council believe that FDOT is comprised of malicious, vindictive people who would punish a city for making two requests that would greatly reduce the cost of the project. Three, how can you get something if you do not ask for it?

FDOT’s focus is on building a road between Point A and Point B and that’s all. It is not FDOT’s responsibility to safeguard our business community or worry about the impact the various options might have on our local economy. That is your city council’s job and I am proud to say that **we did** vote to safeguard all our businesses and protect all our citizens, as well as our local economy.

NEW CHAMBERS FOR THE CHAMBER

In 2016, the City of DeFuniak Springs applied for and was awarded a state grant for almost \$500,000 to help us repair and remodel the Chautauqua Hall of Brotherhood. While that amount will not cover everything that needs to be done, it will still help us accomplish some major deficiencies that have been documented by our architectural firm for the project, Pendleton & Bowman. Another issue that needed to be resolved before the construction work begins was the relocation of the Walton County Chamber of Commerce's north Walton office, which has been in the Chautauqua building for decades.

The city council made the decision to permanently relocate the Chamber, which will allow us to fully utilize the entire Hall of Brotherhood space. To that end, the council decided to install the Chamber office in the western section of the Walton County Heritage Museum building on Circle Drive, which the city owns. That area had been used for storage, but with some remodeling, the council felt it would make for an excellent location. For the Chamber. In fact, it may increase foot traffic for both the Chamber and the Museum.

Interim City Manager Tilman Mears reports that the office is almost ready for occupancy and should be ready next week. This will be welcome news for the Chamber of Commerce folk and will allow us to close the Chautauqua Hall of Brotherhood while the repairs are being made. For the next six to eight months, the building will not be available for meetings, receptions, weddings and other events. Pendleton-Bowman has indicated that the complete project should be done in phases, due to the size and depth of the project and available funding.

UNITED WE STAND

I am pleased to report that your city council recently took part in a joint meeting with the Walton County Commission, the Freeport City Council and Restore Act Coordinator Bill Williams, regarding one of the most important projects in the history of Walton County. I, along with Councilwoman Janie Griffith, Councilman Mac Work, Interim City Manager Tilman Mears, Interim Public Works Director Craig Drake, Finance Director Joe Brown were there and several members of our architectural firm, Dewberry-Preble-Rish, were also on hand.

We discussed our proposed joint project, the laying of water and sewer lines along U.S. 331 South between DeFuniak and Freeport. This would effectively provide those utilities from DeFuniak to south Walton. This is important because future growth and expansion will require those utilities and being able to immediately provide these services will encourage growth and increase revenues for DeFuniak and Freeport.

Best of all, if the state legislature doesn't seize the funds and redirect them elsewhere, the \$11 million in needed funding will come as private compensation to help Florida counties recover from the oil spill of 2010, not taxpayer dollars! This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance for us to move forward. We have the land, we have the location. We can offer interstate highway, rail and air transport opportunities. The only thing holding us back now is putting the needed infrastructure in place.

I know everyone wants everything right now and so do I. However, nothing in government moves that quickly so this process will take many months. However, I am proud to be able to help ensure that our town continues to grow and prosper far into the future, long after I am gone and forgotten. Good government works best when it works together.

KUDOS AND CONGRATULATIONS

"You cannot raise a man up by calling him down."

-William J. H. Boetckere

Those citizens who do not regularly attend city council meetings are probably not aware of a segment that comes at the end of each meeting wherein the council members have a chance to make a comment on the city operations, upcoming events or most anything that comes to mind.

One thing is continually mentioned more than anything else and with good reason. That is—what an exceptional staff we have.

When terrible storms rip through the city knocking down trees and limbs, when water or sewer lines break, when traffic signals fail, in brutal cold or withering heat, we have men and women who respond at a moment's notice around the clock.

You will see them out there removing debris, cutting up fallen trees and moving them off the roads, repairing traffic signals—whatever the problem is, our crews respond. They roll up their sleeves

and get busy. They go above and beyond the requirements of their job and they do it all in a courteous and respectful manner.

I could not be more proud of them or more pleased with the work they do. They do not hear it enough so, join with me in thanking these dedicated men and women who simply go about their daily business, doing their very best, each and every day.

Thank you ALL!

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

There is an old saying, “The Devil is in the Details.” That is true. It is the little things that trip us up, the small details that are so easy to overlook. When Tilman Mears took on the role of city manager and started kicking over a few rocks, he discovered a plethora of contracts, agreements and policies that had slipped through the cracks and were hopelessly out of date.

While juggling all of the other day-to-day tasks that must be done, he began work on these old contracts and agreements. At our most recent meeting, he presented a long list of important items that have now been brought up to date.

These include an updated agreement with Florida Gas Utility, an updated Gulf Disaster Recovery plan, an updated FDOT Lighting contract, a new Airport Commercial Hangar Lease agreement, a new City Surplus Agreement, a new FDOT Traffic Signal Maintenance agreement, a new Senior Center agreement, a new Boys & Girls Club agreement, a new tree dedication and donation policy and a new Walton County Road and Bridge Ad Valorem Tax agreement. These are just a few of the long list of things he has updated and does not include the various 5- and 10-year strategic plans he has created for several city programs.

This is exactly the kind of attention to detail that we need in a city manager. I can think of no one more dedicated to this city and its people than Tilman Mears. He continues to be a major asset to our town and a blessing to our residents.

The Chuck Wagon Gang is Back!

The legendary gospel group, Chuck Wagon Gang, will be returning to DeFuniak Springs for another big show. The original Chuck Wagon Gang rose to national fame in the 1940s, bringing a unique and distinctive style of harmony singing to gospel music.

Today, Anna Carter’s granddaughter Shae leads this incarnation of the group, which stays true to the original style and arrangements that made the Chuck Wagon Gang one of the greatest gospel groups in history.

Make plans now to attend the show, on Thursday, January 19, from 3-5 p.m. at the DeFuniak Springs Community Center. Best of all, admission is free!



“Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

- Finley Dunne