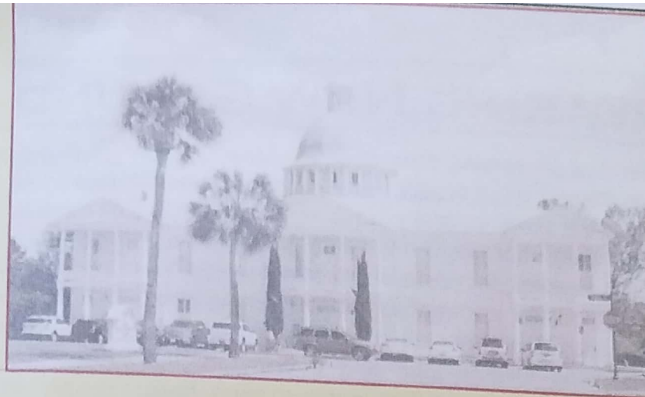


Dispatches from DeFuniak



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:

- Walton County Heritage Museum on Circle Drive.
- The DeFuniak Springs Library on Circle Drive.
- The DeFuniak Springs Country Club, on U.S. 90W



REMEMBERING TO BE THANKFUL

Greetings!

After a year of riotous news and disturbing events that seem designed to divide us, it would be easy to take a dim view of our nation's circumstances and any hope for the future. However, if we just turn away from all the noise and distractions, we will see that there really are so many things for which we can be thankful.

In America, I am thankful that our economy is soaring far beyond the "new normal" we were told was here to stay. I am thankful that unemployment dropped to the lowest point in nearly half a century.

I am thankful that the median household income rose to the highest level ever recorded, and that poverty and crime are down.

I am thankful that the number of food stamp recipients

have gone down and weekly wages have gone up.

In Florida, I am thankful that our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) topped a **trillion** dollars. Said another way, if Florida was an independent country, our \$1 trillion economy would rank us as the 17th largest economy in the world – ahead of Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

I am thankful that the election debacle is behind us and we know who we elected as our governor and senator.

I am thankful that one of every 14 jobs in America are created in Florida. In fact, our state's annual job growth rate has outpaced the nation for 74 of the past 75 months.

Here at home, I am thankful that I lived to see U.S. 331 get four-laned. This will open many doors for growth and develop-

ment far into the future.

I am thankful for Veterans Lodge and the good it will do for veterans and for our city.

I am thankful that we have a new city manager and new finance director. I am thankful for all of our city staff members who stepped up and kept the city functioning so well while we went through this process.

I am thankful for all the new businesses that have located here.

Most of all, I am thankful for the people of this town. They are generous, compassionate, and hard-working. They place a high value on honor and decency and I thank God for them every day.

May your Thanksgiving Day be filled with goodness and rich with blessings.

- Councilman Ron Kelley
Nov. 22, 2018

ANOTHER NEW FACE AT CITY HALL

Thanks to the diligence and dedication of our Council-appointed Application Review Committee, we have a highly-qualified new finance director. She is Debra Gibson of Troy, Alabama.

Ms. Gibson has been the Chief Financial Officer for the Pike County Commission since 1999. Her 19 years of service there represents the kind of excellence and stability that this Council has been seeking.

Ms. Gibson has earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Accounting and a Masters Degree in Business Administration from Troy State University, as well as numerous continuing education certificates relating to accounting and business administration.

Pike County Administrator Harry Sanders gave Ms. Gibson a glowing recommendation, noting that she always performed at such a high level of proficiency that the Alabama State Examiners of Public Accountants asked her to serve as an instructor for numerous classes for county administrators. "Ms. Debra Gibson has earned both my trust and respect and it is my honor to offer my recommendation, without reservation," he said.

Debra Gibson will assume the office of DeFuniak Springs Director of Finance on Monday December 17. We are all delighted to have her on board!



DEBRA GIBSON

BREAKING NEW GROUND

Over the years, there have been many rumors of grand developments locating here — a Disney World theme park, an international airport, a new town center much like Seaside, a race track. None of those rumors ever did materialize into any brick-and-mortar projects. The familiar adage says that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

At first, Veterans Lodge probably sounded that way to some residents. After all, it is a pretty grand idea — a rehabilitation facility for military veterans who sustained serious injuries

while serving their country. Also, Veterans Lodge would include various medical services and permanent and temporary housing. Parcels of land not needed for Veterans Lodge would be sold for commercial and light industrial development—all of which would provide fulltime jobs and a boost to the local economy like nothing seen here for generations. Wow.

However, instead of being another pie-in-the-sky pipedream, it is becoming a reality. Last week, a groundbreaking ceremony was held by Veterans Lodge founder Julie Smith and the numerous

partners that have come together to make her dream into a reality.

As with any major development project, especially one with as many moving parts as this one, there will be challenges ahead. However, the good news is that this project has already received the endorsement and support of state, county and city government, as well as significant community support from local residents.

It has been said that a thousand-mile journey begins with a single step. Last Thursday, we took the first step of what promises to be an incredible journey.



Bits and Pieces

The city's auditing firm, Saltmarsh, Cleveland and Gund, completed the 2017 audit last week. The Council reviewed the report and submitted the management responses. It now goes to the state. Though SG&C did not finish the audit on time, there will be no fines or penalties from the state. With the audit completed, the Finance Department has now completed the update on the newest version of finance software.

New homes are under construction on West Orange Avenue, South 23rd Street, Hidden Lakes Trail, Sidney Avenue, Nowling Drive and Park Ave-

nue. The building under construction on US 331 South, next to Aaron's Rental will be branch offices for the Northwest Florida Water Management District. A new car wash facility, A Proper Wash, is going in on the south side of the Aaron's building on US 331.

Several Occupational Licenses are under review, including the re-opening of the Busy Bee Café on South 7th Street, as well as RJs Antiques on South 7th and a Sushi restaurant on South 9th Street.

Walton Music and Nature's Own Health Food Store have relocated to

North 9th Street (Hwy. 83) along with Great Gaines Behavioral service.

A new traffic light was approved for US 90 and 20th Street. It is currently being designed and is due for construction in 2019.

Former Walton Sheriff's Deputy Brad Stafford was hired as the city's new Code Enforcement Officer in late September. Currently 81 cases have been closed and 41 remain open. Stafford and City Planner Kelly Schultz are also working on an action plan to deal with the large number of blighted structures within the city limits.

FROM HAPPY HALLOWEEN TO HOMETOWN CHRISTMAS

This is always a busy time for the many local civic groups that work behind the scene to bring events to the public. Among others, the DeFuniak Business and Professional Association (DBPA) held its annual Halloween Happening on Baldwin Avenue. The DeFuniak Springs Women's Club held their event around Circle Drive. I think it is safe to say that ghoulish fun was had by all.

Thanksgiving, Nov. 22, will be a day of celebrating our many blessings. The next day, Christmas Reflections will launch their magnificent Christmas celebration as millions of lights go on throughout the Lakeyard, drawing thousand of area residents during the five-week season. The display is held nightly, from 5 - 9 p.m. Season passes are available.

On the next day, Saturday, the DBPA will hold another of their signature events, Hometown Christmas, at the Walton County Fairgrounds, from 8 am until 3 pm. The annual craft show draws thousands of people who come to shop for unique one-of-a-kind gifts for everyone on their list. With children's activities, hot food and free prizes, it has become a hometown Christmas tradition.

The Main Street organization will also be holding a first-time event on that same day, called Small Business Saturday. They plan on having all the downtown businesses, which are usually closed on Saturday, to open for Christmas shoppers, giving a boost to the stores and drawing people back downtown. Wouldn't it be great if this encouraged more downtown shops to start opening on Saturdays year round?

On December 8, at 1 pm, the Women's Club will hold their annual Christmas Parade around Circle Drive, which has become another popular Christmas tradition. Then, on December 25, the most special day of the year, Christmas—the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Here's hoping your whole holiday season will be blessed and that you will have a Happy New Year!



"As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them." - JFK

MEETING AND GREETING

After new City Manager Mell Smeigelski joined the city team, a "Meet and Greet" reception was held to introduce him to the community. As you can see, the turnout was great and the company couldn't be beat! *(Photos by Cathy Mosley)*

