

Farmer recounts history of Lake Chatuge, fishing camps and local tourism

By Chad Stack
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Last week, the Towns County Historical Society hosted Winston Farmer, who spoke about the old fishing camps that were created after the Tennessee Valley Authority built Lake Chatuge and Chatuge Dam in the 1940s.

All throughout the early '40s, the Towns County Herald was reporting that the sleepy little town of Hiawassee was about to become a tourist destination for fishermen. Farmer said in the April 8 meeting. And this proved to be accurate, as the lake heralded the opening of many local cabins and fishing camps.

The county was a farming community at the time that TVA decided to construct the dam for flood control.

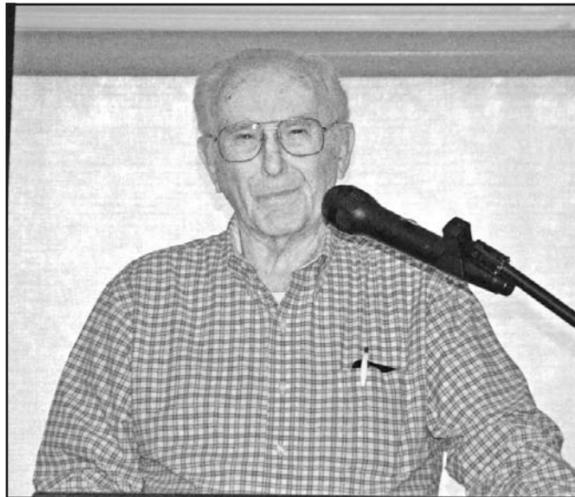
"The best that I can remember is around 141 homes and places had to be moved to make way for the lake," said Farmer. "It wound up that it was about 60 of the 141 that moved out of the area and had to find new places to live."

Before Lake Chatuge was created, the land was used by local families for farming, schools, churches and gravesites, though all that changed when TVA came to build the dam.

"The relocation of families proved to be difficult for some, but others saw this as a new opportunity at a fresh start," Farmer said.

Standing 144 feet tall and stretching 2,850 feet long, Chatuge Dam was built on the Hiwassee River in the early 1940s for flood storage purposes. The 7,200-acre lake that TVA created became a fisherman's paradise, with over 70 miles of shoreline in Towns County.

The lake was split at the



Winston Farmer speaking with the Towns County Historical Society about his presentation on the old fishing camps of the area on April 8. Photo by Chad Stack

state line, putting 3,500 acres of the lake in Towns County and 3,700 acres resting in Clay County, North Carolina.

With the newly finished lake, many of the locals started to build cabins and fishing camps for the tourists that were coming from all over to fish Lake Chatuge.

Farmer offered before and after pictures as part of his presentation, showing many of the very first fishing camps and cabins that were built right here in Hiawassee.

Today, the Chatuge shoreline is made up of privately-owned summer homes and full-time residences, along with RV parks, campgrounds, cabins, sandy beaches, recreation areas, boat ramps, hiking trails and two marinas.

Lake Chatuge brought great economic growth to Towns County, which was still suffering from the Great Depression, and in the 1950s, the city of Hiawassee became a tourism-based economy, which today generates millions

of dollars every year and local jobs.

Also during the meeting, Historical Society President Sandra Green discussed the April 12 season opening of the "Old Rock Jail." The hours are 12 p.m. to 4 p.m. each Friday and Saturday through October, with admission being free.

"We hope that we have a lot of visitors this year," said Green. "We are really proud of it and hoping for a good season."

Historical Society Officers Mary Ann Miller and Tyler Osborn are creating a video of the Old Rock Jail to accompany the jail tours.

A drafted copy of the updated bylaws has been completed and will be mailed to all members to be voted on sometime in May.

The next Towns County Historical Society meeting will be held at the Towns County Civic Center on Monday, May 13, at 5:30 p.m.

School Taxes...from Page 1A

anticipation of tax revenues coming in at a later date.

TAN money can be used for many purposes, and in this case, the system wants to ensure that it can move forward with its summer projects, namely the installation of a new artificial turf soccer/football field and Phase II of the high/middle school modernization project.

In the event that reimbursement money from the state is late this fall, the tax anticipation note would be used to ensure that the schools can meet their payroll needs.

Should the schools need to use TAN money, it will have to be repaid in the same calendar year, and modernization grant money would be used to do that once it arrives from the state.

For similar reasons last year, the schools secured a

Tax Anticipation Note in the amount of \$1 million, though they ended up not needing to use it.

The board approved the FieldTurf contract for a max price of \$1,035,000, which features a \$25,000 grant. Also approved was the contract to replace the track and the damaged concrete surrounding the track for \$114,000.

School board members approved a bid from Charles Black Construction worth \$3,625,000 for the upcoming all-summer modernization project.

"The current construction bid is \$200,000 less than last year's projects," said Berrong.

As previously reported, School Board Member Robert Williams had to resign from the board after moving out of the

Macedonia Precinct.

His fellow members approved his resignation letter in the April 8 meeting, though they were sad to see him go.

Board members were expected to discuss and approve a recommendation for a new board member from the Macedonia Post in the April 15 regular school board meeting, which occurred after press time.

The board also approved a policy update preventing middle school students from being held back for interscholastic activities.

"If they are going to be held back, it has to be for academic purposes, so that is just the update to the current policy," said Berrong.

Water Rates...from Page 1A

\$29.13/1,200 gallons.

Overages for all customers will be prorated at \$5 per 1,000 gallons.

The city is raising its residential customer rates in response to a recent water rate study by the Environmental Finance Center of the University of North Carolina.

This study was conducted in partnership with the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority, which covered the costs of the study.

Key findings of the rate study showed that the city needed to raise its rates for three main reasons.

First, the city's water and sewer departments are operating at a deficit. Rates are so out of line, in fact, that last year, the water/sewer system cost \$159,000 more to run than customers paid in, meaning that it finished the year in the red.

Operating at a deficit is never a good thing, as it means cuts must be made elsewhere, like on budgeted essential maintenance equipment, in order to maintain operations.

And not many businesses, for example, would be able to operate at a deficit for long, as they would run out of money

and have to close up shop.

Second, the city hasn't implemented a rate increase in six years. About six months ago, while searching through paperwork to be used in the above-mentioned water rate study, Mayor Liz Ordiales stumbled upon an old ordinance calling for annual 3% water rate increases.

But those increases never went into effect, and Ordiales isn't sure why. She does know, however, that the lack of incremental increases over the years has compounded the current operational deficit.

Third, the city is slowly working to pay down close to \$4 million in debt, at least \$2 million of which belongs to the water/sewer system.

That level of debt concerns Ordiales, who strongly believes it is imperative that the city take better care of its finances, to include getting out of debt and correcting the water/sewer deficit situation.

Ultimately, the city's goal is to get the residential water rate up to around \$40/1,200 gallons to ensure that the utility pays for itself, and moving forward, Ordiales plans to implement incremental changes

to accomplish that goal.

"We need to ease into getting to where we need to be," said Ordiales. "If we were to do it all at one time, it'd have to be \$38 a month, and that's almost double, so I didn't want to do that."

"Raising rates over time is the only thing we can do. How can we continue to operate in negative numbers? And a slow increase will get us there. Over the years, we'll eventually balance out and it'll be OK."

Remaining the same will be current commercial rates that start at \$32.77/1,200 gallons inside city limits and go up from there, into the hundreds of dollars; North Carolina customer rates at \$33.96/1,200 gallons; and sewer rates.

"The only thing that's going to change is residential water," said Ordiales. "The reason those other ones aren't changing is because I think that the business rates are pretty high, and the Carolina rates are also pretty high. So, we're just going to leave those the way it is."

Hiawassee Water services 2,200 accounts, including both commercial and residential customers.

Old Rock Jail...from Page 1A

may have been here in the '30s and '40s, and it was used as a jail until the early '70s, until the new jail was built.

"So, this was used as offices with the City Hall being here for a while, and the voter registrars being here at one point. The Sheriff's Office was also here at one point, and when we acquired this building, we renovated and gutted all the improvements that had been made.

"As you can see, when they converted it to office space, they put in a drop ceiling and sheetrock, and at one point, they glued plywood down on this beautiful floor."

Historical Society members made it their goal to restore the Old Rock Jail as closely as possible back to its original condition, before any of the additions were put inside the building.

Furniture and other historical collectables and household items have been donated by members of the community to display in the museum and help it achieve the original look.

There are also old pictures of Towns County residents from the Civil War era, as various people from the area fought for the South, though a few fought for the North.

One of the main attractions of the museum is the jail itself, which is on the top floor of the building and surrounded by rock walls,



The Old Rock Jail – a historical gem for Towns County – has been restored as closely as possible to its original condition.

Photo by Jarrett Whitener

"Local people like to look at the story board, because they remember when these buildings were here or when their ancestors were here before the lake was built," said Green. "It really just depends on the person and what they want to get out of the museum. We have a lot of people come for different reasons, and I think that's the appeal of it."

The Old Rock Jail brings much value to the community, with some people being interested in the lives of the families that lived in the house, and others being interested in the jail itself and whether or not they recognized some of the names scratched on the cell door.

The Old Rock Jail Museum will be open from 12 p.m. to 4 p.m. every Friday and Saturday between now and the end of October, and guests can look forward to someone from the Historical Society being on site to answer any questions they may have.

TCSO...from Page 1A

of 159 county sheriff's offices within the State of Georgia that holds State Certification status.

State Certified Law Enforcement Agencies are required to undergo a re-assessment every three years to maintain the certification.

Certification was a goal that Sheriff Clinton set for his Sheriff's Office and staff years ago, and they accomplished that goal for the first time in October 2012. Since then, the Sheriff's Office has recertified twice, once in January 2016 and again recently on April 4.

Also on April 4, Towns County Sheriff's Office Certification Manager Sandy Morgan received an award from GSA President Nicholson for a "job well done."

The achievement of the



GSA President Stacey Nicholson presenting an award to Towns County Sheriff's Office Certification Manager Sandy Morgan for a "job well done."

State Certification Award was accomplished by the effort put forth by all the staff members

of the Towns County Sheriff's Office throughout the year.

April Litter Tips for Towns County

Most Monday mornings you will find Jesse Cook and Tim Grader of the City of Hiawassee's Public Works Department picking up trash from city streets and parking areas. A big problem the men encounter are discarded cigarettes. They are the most numerically frequent litter in the world. Since cars do not come with ashtrays anymore, Cook's litter tip for April encourages smokers to buy an inexpensive "butt cup" to hold the ends of cigarette. Cook said, "Our city is not your personal ashtray."

Grader's litter tip is now that it is mowing season, pick up the litter before you mow or bush hog the grass. It takes less time to pick up a few pieces of trash rather than picking up thousands of small pieces of litter after the mowing is done.

Lloyds Landing and Mayors Park are some of the most trash covered areas in town, especially with people leaving their household garbage for the city to pick up.

Cook and Grader would rather be doing other projects for the city rather than picking up other people's trash, but a town strewn with litter does not at-



Household trash left at Lloyds Landing.

tract visitors and businesses. Help these hardworking guys

out and take care of your own trash. T/Apr17,F3/SH

Tax Notices...from Page 1A

though switching to a third-party vendor will save the county at least \$1,200 – and likely more than that – moving forward.

"As commissioner, I work closely with our department heads to be as efficient as we possibly can be in everything we do," said Bradshaw. "They know that if there's somewhere we can save money, they come to me, and they present it."

"Then, we talk about the pluses and minuses, will it jeopardize any of the services and things like that."

It usually takes four employees about 40 hours to fold, stuff and mail the roughly 14,500 assessment notices each year, so on top of saving the county money, hiring a third-party vendor will also free up those employees to do other work.

Sonya Young is the Chief Appraiser at the Tax Assessor's Office, and she said it was a bittersweet occasion.

"I've been here for 23 years, and I've done it every year for 23 years," said Young. "So, it's a little sad, but we also want to be as efficient as we can be for the county, and that leaves us open to do other things instead of folding and stuffing."

"My back will appreciate it if nothing else, after folding and stuffing all those ... notices."

The idea to hire a third-party vendor to do the mailings came out of a recent meeting of the County Board of Tax Assessors, of which Young is a member, where it was determined that the county would save money by outsourcing the task.

"I am proud of Sonya for bringing this to me, and with all the numbers," said Bradshaw. "She didn't just come over and recommend it – she brought all the facts over here to show me that we would be saving money. Not just, 'Here, take my word on it,' (but) 'Here's the numbers to back it up.' And I appreciate her doing that."

2019 will be the first time that the county has outsourced the job, which Bradshaw said was standard practice in other counties.

Harris will be doing the mailings for 52 cents per notice, and with about 14,500 notices needing to be mailed out, the final invoice is expected to be somewhere around \$7,500.

The costs are considerably higher in-house, as the Tax Assessor's Office has to take into account the cost of supplies like envelopes, paper, glue and ink, plus postage at 50 cents per notice and staff time.

Early savings estimates are close to \$1,200, but the county is likely to save even more than that when all is said and done.

The reason Bradshaw called the meeting last week was so that Young could go ahead and coordinate with the vendor, as assessment notices are expected to be mailed this week.

Should a property owner decide to contest the assessment on their property after receiving their notice, they have 45 days from the date of the notice to approach the Tax Assessor's Office to discuss and potentially appeal their valuation.

"We review everything every year," said Young. "That's not to say that we make changes

on everything every year, but everything is reviewed based on sales ratio studies that we perform in-house throughout the year, so we do look at everything."

Sales ratio studies are a tool used by the Tax Assessor's Office to compare the assessed value of properties to their market value when sold.

"If they get a building permit and all of that, we would pick up any new construction that's there Jan. 1, but for land prices, what will determine that is the sales ratio study," said Young. "If there are sales in that area that indicate that the values that we have need to be adjusted either positively or negatively, then we would do that at the time we run the ratios for that area."

Once assessment values are calculated and the 45-day appeal period has ended, the Tax Assessor's Office sends its finalized portion of the tax digest over to the Tax Commissioner, who works with local governments and school systems to get millage rates established to determine property taxes.

Then, tax bills are mailed out, usually toward the end of each year.

After adjourning the called county meeting on April 12, Bradshaw announced that, due to a scheduling conflict, he would be rescheduling the regular Towns County Commission Meeting date and time from Tuesday, April 16, at 5:30 p.m. to Thursday, April 18, at 2 p.m.

As usual, the meeting will occur in the main courtroom of the Towns County Courthouse.