

Rabun County Alliance

formerly West Rabun Property Owners ~ Est. 2001



Summer 2017 Newsletter

“Seeking Leadership and Accountability in Government”

THE LOSS OF A LEADER

We are greatly saddened to report the recent passing of RCA chairman Biff Wilson, a well-liked and respected leader, friend, husband, father and citizen who was involved in efforts to improve the living conditions of those around him. Biff interacted extensively with local hospital officials, seeking to help establish the highest possible standards of healthcare delivery that could be achieved. He was active in his church and the Men’s Christian Fellowship group, and exhibited his faith in his calm and welcoming demeanor. He will be greatly missed but never forgotten.

Editor’s Note: To get this issue in the hands of members well before the total solar eclipse (article follows), we had to accelerate the printing of this issue. Some regular features (Roads, Fire Protection, Recycling) were not completed in time for this issue, but will appear in our next issue.

AUGUST TOTAL SOLAR ECLIPSE

Editor’s Note: This is an update of information previously provided
On Monday the 21st of August 2017 at 2:35 PM Georgia, and specifically Rabun County, will experience one of the rarest of nature’s wonders—a total solar eclipse. As one of only 14 states so blessed, Georgia is in a unique position to showcase NE Georgia, and Rabun County specifically.

It has been almost 100 years since the US experienced a coast to coast total solar eclipse, and it will be 375 years before Rabun County experiences the next one. Forecasts are that this will be the most watched eclipse in history.

The “Line of Totality” will exactly dissect Dillard, Georgia and the Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School (RGNS) campus, site of the “OutASight” viewing party. Gates open at 11 AM, and while weather can be a factor, we expect around 10,000 people from Georgia and surrounding states to attend. To gain a sense of the size and uniqueness of this event, let me highlight some of the day’s content and events:

➤ The Georgia State University Physics and Astronomy Department has partnered with the Rabun County Tourism

Development Authority (TDA) to bring their expertise, their assistance, and their equipment to RGNS for the eclipse. Their professors will narrate the visual aspects of the eclipse while we will live stream back to the Georgia State campus for a viewing party.

- Two 9’x16’ video boards will border a performing stage to show the NASA video feed from viewing sites across the USA as the eclipse progresses from Oregon to South Carolina.
- Cedar Hill will be the featured band with cameo performances from the Wiley Singers and the Rabun County High School Band.
- Vendors will be in position to feed over 8,000 people.
- GDOT, GSP, and all local law enforcement agencies are assisting and partnering to assist with traffic control.
- RGNS has dedicated their entire campus to the event, including Rearden Auditorium, the performing arts center, where we’ll show a Georgia State University-produced video on the science of an eclipse.
- Dr. Keith Bechtol, a highly sought-after astrophysicist will present a lecture at RGNS on Sunday afternoon 8/20 at 5 PM to kick off the event by speaking on “eclipses and the major remaining mysteries of the universe.”
- Virtual buses will be giving live scientific demonstrations of astronomical science.

COMMUNITY CALENDAR: visit the Chamber of Commerce at gamountains.com for Rabun County events
visit georgiapowerlakes.com for helpful lake information from Georgia Power
visit lakerabun.org, lbca.net, and seedlake.org for the various Association events
Men’s Christian Fellowship meets every Friday, 7:45–9:00am (706-947-3740 or 706-782-7425 for more info)

ALLIANCE LEADERSHIP

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- Nick Walker, the Weather Channel's "Weather Dude" will be the Master of Ceremonies.
- Channel 11 in Atlanta, WXIA, will be our exclusive TV media outlet and provide promotional spots leading up to 8/21 and be on scene with live broadcasts.
- We expect Congressman Doug Collins to be among our invited guests.

We will provide parking on the RGNS campus and in several large parking areas south of RGNS. Signage will indicate parking and shuttle buses and vans will transport patrons to and from the campus. With interest surging in this event, we recommend an early arrival around 10 AM to ensure your spot on campus. Cost is \$5/car to park; \$5/person to attend which includes your viewing glasses. Since we are guests on the RGNS campus, please no pets, no coolers or backpacks, no tobacco or alcohol or firearms. We will have food and beverages available on campus.

Advance tickets may be purchase online at <http://explorerabun.com/total-eclipse/> or at the Welcome Center on US 441 in Clayton. Eclipse T-shirts, caps, and visors are also available at both of these locations.

PROPOSED RIDGELINE/STEEP SLOPE ORDINANCE ABANDONED

Officials of the Tallulah River Watershed Council (TRWC) last year identified a worthwhile project regarding standards for ridgeline and steep slope development that have been adopted in several adjoining counties, but which do not exist in Rabun County's Code of Ordinances. Rabun County residents are truly blessed to be situated in one of the most beautiful landscapes in the country. Further, much of the County's territory is owned and managed by the U. S. Forest Service, precluding development in over half of the County's landscape. Yet many people have noticed increasing development on ridgelines and on steep slopes that often otherwise distract from the spectacular beauty of our County.

Examples of unrestricted mountain development can be found in neighboring counties, but have thus far not become problematic in Rabun. Many other counties have adopted ordinances that permit but also restrict how development may proceed in defined "mountainous" areas, including such nearby counties as Fannin, Union, White and even Towns, where significant unrestricted development occurred before the County passed its ordinance.

While unrestricted mountain development has not been rampant in Rabun County, it is certainly underway, and this newsletter presents some photo examples taken in the County depicting some of what already exists. Accordingly, TRWC officials initiated a project in 2016 to study what other counties had done, create a proposed ridgeline/steep slope ordinance based on its research and work with County officials to put it (or a modified version) in front of the Board of Commissioners for consideration. A task force was created to carry out this process and work with senior County officials to craft an acceptable ordinance which could be presented to the Board. Task force leaders met early with senior County officials to outline the scope of the project, share photos of what already exists, and seek confirmation that the County would be receptive to studying the issue. The County officials were very positive in suggesting that the project be carried on.

The task force visited representatives of other counties to learn how they went about the process and learn from their experiences what led to successful implementation. It consolidated language from other counties' ordinances and created several iterative drafts designed to

reflect learnings gained from the experiences of others and eliminate provisions found to be problematic with people skeptical of the impact of such restrictions. A final version of the proposed ordinance was created which was less than six pages long, much shorter than those adopted in other counties.

After the senior County officials had a chance to study the proposed ordinance, task force leaders met with the officials to gauge their reaction and determine prospects for moving forward. Unfortunately, the reaction from the officials was far less positive than in the initial meeting. Without going into details, the end result of the meeting was that the senior officials decided not to endorse either the draft ordinance or the concept of pursuing it further.

Task force officials recognized that, without the support of County leaders, going through the rigorous process of meeting with the plethora of affected individuals and businesses, and holding numerous public hearings on the ordinance would likely be futile. Accordingly, the project was "shelved." Those of us who devoted time and effort to the project were disappointed in this outcome, and it is difficult to see any near-term prospects of the project coming off the shelves and back into consideration.

UPDATE: SEDIMENTATION ISSUE ON KENNESAW ROAD

Last issue, we reported of a serious issue regarding sedimentation wash into Lake Burton caused by "recreational" traversing of areas along Dicks Creek by four-wheel drive vehicles. An increasing number of vehicles has been crossing and driving through the Creek and veering off into adjacent privately-owned meadows, dislodging significant amounts of silt which pass through the Creek and into the Lake. The Tallulah River Watershed Council decided to assist the Kennesaw Road property owners, who had begun to publicize the problem, in seeking a solution. (Kennesaw Road parallels much of Dicks Creek and is the thoroughfare used by the joyriders).

Although a final solution has not yet been reached, progress has been made. The northern (roughly) two-thirds of Kennesaw Road is owned and maintained by the U. S. Forest Service, and TRWC members had a positive discussion with the USFS representative regarding installing gates to prevent unrestricted access to that portion of the Road. TRWC members also discussed ownership of the remainder (southern third) of the Road with County officials, who indicated the County has not been maintaining Kennesaw Road, and without having done extensive research, were of the opinion that it is privately owned.

The next step is to ascertain from historical records the actual ownership of the non-USFS portion of Kennesaw Road, and if in fact it is privately owned, to be sure that paperwork is completed to register that ownership within County records. If those records reflect County ownership, then discussions regarding transfer of ownership would commence.

Under any circumstance, the end result would be empowerment of the private owners of the lands adjacent to the southern end of the Road to consider methods of controlling access to the Road, whether by gating the entrance or by posting the entrance with signs restricting access and posting "No Trespassing" signs along the way.

THE TRWC

Two articles in the issue mention the Tallulah River Watershed Council and the work it has been taking on. The Council was created in the mid 2000's to investigate concerns that were then building

about possible contamination of Lake Burton and other parts of the watershed. Those participating in the Council recognized that threats could emanate from numerous sources, and TRWC has been fulfilling its mission of “promoting stewardship of our natural treasure” ever since. We will provide a broader look at the TRWC in our next issue.

RCA FINANCIAL REPORT

Following is the RCA financial report for the year from August 1, 2016 through July 31, 2017.

Newsletter printing (4 issues):	\$ 2,053
Newsletter mailing:	988
Postage:	820
Billing:	300
Website hosting fee:	80
Sample ballot printing:	405
Sample ballot mailing:	1,817
<u>New member solicitation:</u>	<u>374</u>
Total expenses:	\$ 6,758
Year-ending cash balance:	\$ 7,884

A RETROSPECTIVE LOOK AT THE RCA

As the Rabun County Alliance is now mid-way through its 17th year of existence, we decided to take a look backward at its evolution to see how consistent its focus has been over the years. The communities surrounding the lake have certainly evolved, the County’s government and officials have turned over multiple times, so we wondered: has RCA continued to focus on the mission it set out to accomplish nearly 17 years ago?

Two characteristics of the organization have changed significantly. We began in 2001 as the Burton Community Homeowners; in 2005, we became the West Rabun Property Owners; and in late 2015, we became the Rabun County Alliance. Changes in name are meant to align with focus, but don’t tell us much about accomplishments.

Also, of the 9 individuals named in the introductory issue of the newsletter, only one (Charlie Brundage) is still in the County and active with RCA. And only one other (Bob Fink) remains active in the County. All other founding contributors have either passed away or moved from the area. The tagline of the initial newsletter was not particularly instructive: “Addressing the Needs of West Rabun County” covers a pretty unspecific range of topics.

Interestingly, the initial two issues showed focus on recycling, roads (and increasing the percentage that were paved), concern about silt inappropriately coming from construction sites, high home insurance rates stemming from substandard capability ratings of fires departments, and other items that wouldn’t be out of place in today’s newsletters. In 2002, concerns about litter on the county’s roads and a focus on the imbalance of funds collected via taxation from “West Rabun Property Owners” and County services returned to that area joined the conversation.

Over the next few years, the issues of fire station capability-driven home insurance rates came into clearer focus, and the imbalance of taxes paid versus services rendered became better defined. West Rabunites understood that, with good fortune in life, one should also expect to assist others who are less fortunate. The primary issue in the debate focused on having little presence in west Rabun from the Sheriff’s Department, and the uncertainty of security implied therein.

When the name change to West Rabun Property Owner occurred, the tagline was changed to “Seeking Leadership and Accountability in Government,” a significant narrowing of focus from the earlier one.

In 2004, the newsletter began work on communicating information regarding status of the Lake Burton ecosystem, and intensified discussion about the status of healthcare services and delivery. In 2005, the then WRPO group introduced County officials to a consultant who communicated strategies for improving ratings of the County’s fire departments, which would significantly reduce home insurance rates. In 2008, work was conducted based on the recommendations, and by early 2009, the ratings of the County’s fire departments’ capabilities were improved dramatically, and home insurance premiums around the lakes were generally significantly reduced.

In 2009 and 2010, WRPO worked with the Sheriff’s Department to initiate the Neighborhood Watch program, wherein residents look for and report suspicious activities in their neighborhoods. WRPO funded many of the signs installed to warn potential burglars of the existence of the program. And WRPO identified inconsistencies regarding how properties were assessed for tax purposes between the County’s Assessors and the Georgia Department of Revenue, which assesses leased properties, arguing that the County should assess all properties to ensure consistency of approach.

In 2015, WRPO identified a \$750 thousand waste of taxpayer money (the County issued bonds to prefund the SPLOST projects approved by the voters, incurring underwriting and interest expenses over the 6-year period of the SPLOST, while at the time holding over \$10 million in unrestricted funds in the bank, funds which could have been used to fund the projects without the underwriting and interest costs. The SPLOST revenues would have replenished the funds used in prefunding).

The cited projects are only a sampling of BCH/WRPO/RCA activities. Developments of interest to subscribers are reported in each newsletter, reports on roads, security, recycling, fire protection, and other topics are regularly presented in the newsletters, and information on taxes and assessments are often summarized. Also, the heavy focus we place on voting, the recommendations we offer for candidates we believe will best serve their constituencies and the reminders we offer voters for the upcoming schedules are all useful to our members.

In taking this backward look at our activities, we believe we have added value via the topics presented in the newsletters, and that we have contributed to worthwhile activities that otherwise might not have been addressed.

NEW FEATURES COMING—VOLUNTEERS AND/OR SERVICE PROVIDERS NEEDED!

We are intending to expand the utility of our website: to make it more timely, to make it more interactive, and to enable us to learn more about our members’ needs, desires for information and opinions about issues. We believe that arguments for change are more compelling when the number of people supporting them can be demonstrated.

Also, we are a 100% volunteer organization and are seeking people who believe they can add value to our processes and product. We particularly need people with knowledge of website and internet interaction, but could use help with membership activities, writing and editing articles, and exploring topics worthy of publication. Volunteer involvement is usually limited to only (at most) two or three weeks of part-time activity each quarter.

Finally, depending on the scope of website development we



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formerly West Rabun Property Owners

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Ridgeline construction in Rabun is not as rampant as in nearby counties, but areas like these near Timpson Cove (above) and Wolffork Road (below) led TRWC to research and craft an ordinance proposal which ultimately failed to gain official support (see inside).



decide to tackle, we might consider engaging a for-pay provider if the level of attention is beyond the reach of willingness to volunteer.

If you are willing to consider volunteering to help us, or if you have an interest or a business in the website management arena, please send an email to waltersfam@mindspring.com indicating what interests you might have in terms of volunteer effort and, related to website management, into which camp you fall (volunteer or for-pay).

Thanks for your consideration.

SHERIFF'S REPORT

Your Rabun County Sheriff's Office is having an active summer, with deputies answering monthly averages of 289 calls for service and patrolling an average of 18,542 miles to prevent crime. During the summer months, a Sheriff's deputy is assigned to assist a DNR Ranger to patrol our area lakes by boat. This program would not be possible without the funding provided by the lake associations, and we are thankful for this support. In the summer months, the Sheriff's Office is provided financial assistance through the United States Forrest Service CO-OP to provide extra patrol on USFS property in our County. We enjoy partnering with other government agencies and community groups to make our County safer for residents, as well as tourists visiting the County.

As the school year ended, Sheriff Nichols was honored to recognize 150 5th-grade students for completing the Choosing

Healthy Activities and Methods Promoting Safety program (CHAMPS). CHAMPS was founded in 2003 by the Georgia Sheriff's Association to address the challenges faced by our children during their lives. CHAMPS provides guidance and the skills, ability, and knowledge to be safe, healthy, and happy in preparation for a successful life.

Sheriff Nichols was honored to present Sgt. Anthony Welch of our Court Services Division with the Rotary Law Enforcement Officer of the Year award. Sheriff Nichols thanks Sgt. Welch for his hard work, dedication, and service to our citizens.

Finally, as most of you are aware, the solar eclipse is fast approaching. The Sheriff's Office has been planning and coordinating with all the stakeholders involved with this event to provide the attendees with safety and security as well as the continued service and protection for our own citizens. If you choose to be out on the day of this event, please exercise patience as we expect a multitude of visitors. Enjoy the eclipse, and wear protective glasses!

UPCOMING CENTENNIALS

The bi-centennial of Rabun County is 2019 and the centennial of Lake Burton is 2020. A history of the settlement of Burton and the lake itself is being compiled. If anyone has any interesting information about the history of the lake, including facts, heresay, and tall tales, please contact, Mike Maffett M.D., at mem735@gmail.com or 404-664-6809 (cell). Interesting photos, preferably digitalized, are also needed.