

# Rabun County Alliance

formerly West Rabun Property Owners ~ Est. 2001



## Summer 2019 Newsletter

*“Seeking Leadership and Accountability in Government”*

### SHERIFF’S REPORT

In this issue, I am writing with a humble and appreciative heart. One of my areas of focus when elected Sheriff was to ensure that our deputies were equipped with tools needed to fulfill job requirements while being adequately protected. The commissioners have been very supportive and have assisted tremendously regarding officer equipment. Last year the Board approved a fleet lease purchase agreement for vehicles so that our deputies could be in safe and dependable patrol vehicles. Commissioners have been purchasing ballistic vests for all deputies for many years as well. With the national rise in violence against police officers, the increased threat of active shooters, and the increased drug enforcement locally, the concern for officer safety has grown as well. After pricing needed equipment with different vendors, it became obvious that our goal of superior officer protection was beyond our reach. As we began to discuss our intentions and organize our efforts, I was introduced to Tom Madison. He took the lead in a fundraising initiative to help provide officers with state-of-the-art equipment, and in less than two months, our once “impossible” goal was not only met but surpassed. In total, approximately 55 individuals and businesses/groups donated over \$91,000!

Because of our community’s generosity, we were able to outfit 32 deputies with ballistic vests, plates, and helmets, as well as medical kits. Not only were we able to fund the original, basic outfitting price but were able to upgrade the ballistic plates. Officers will now be outfitted with vests that are both safe and comfortable, allowing them to wear superior protection during regular patrol. By partnering with Shield 616, a non-profit organization in Colorado,

we were able to purchase complete kits. The organization collaborates with different vendors to build protective gear sets at the best possible cost rather than independent agencies having to make multiple orders with multiple companies.

The culmination of this fundraising campaign will be on August 29. Deputies will be presented with their kits during a ceremony honoring both donors and recipients. Our Sheriff’s Office is the first agency in Georgia to receive protective equipment from Shield 616. On behalf of our agency, deputies, and families, I want to express my deepest gratitude to Mr. Madison and all donors. I will close with the mantra of the Shield 616 organization: “Take up the Shield of Faith with which you can extinguish all the Flaming Arrows of the Evil One.” – Ephesians 6:16. *Sheriff Chad Nichols*

*Rabun County Alliance would like to extend its own measure of thanks to Tom Madison for his impressive fund-raising efforts to support our Rabun County Sheriffs. Tom has lived on Charlie Mountain since 2006, and served for many years with Rabun County’s Wilderness Search and Rescue Team and Tallulah-Persimmon Volunteer Fire Department.*



**COMMUNITY CALENDAR:** Visit the Chamber of Commerce at [gamountains.com](http://gamountains.com) for Rabun County events.

Visit [georgiapowerlakes.com](http://georgiapowerlakes.com) for helpful lake information from Georgia Power.

Visit [lakerabun.org](http://lakerabun.org), [lbca.net](http://lbca.net), and [seedlake.org](http://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).

Visit [rabuncountyalliance.com](http://rabuncountyalliance.com) for items of importance you may hear or wonder about between newsletters.

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## SDS AGREEMENT STILL STALLED

According to an article in the Clayton Tribune, the failure of Rabun County and City of Clayton officials to agree on an SDS (Service Delivery Strategy), which has been ongoing since 2015, continues as of the development of this newsletter. An SDS “is an intergovernmental agreement between a county and its cities that outlines the provider of certain services, including water, roads and animal control.” As noted in prior newsletters, failure to achieve an SDS can result in the county and its cities being ineligible to receive state-funded grants, loans and other forms of financial assistance. Over time, this failure can clearly lead to pressure to increase taxes on residents to make up for lost governmental financial assistance.

We should note that our previous newsletter indicated that the sanctions preventing Clayton and Rabun County from receiving financial assistance as a result of their disagreement were lifted by the overseeing judge earlier this year due to the then impending mediation between the parties. That mediation did not happen, and to our knowledge, the sanctions have not *yet* been re-imposed (but it’s not hard to imagine that they might be, since the reason for lifting them has disappeared).

According to the article, a year ago all parties to the SDS agreed on a mediator to work toward resolution, but when the selected mediator withdrew from consideration, the County and Clayton ended up in disagreement over the choice of a replacement, and that disagreement has continued to the present. According to the article, the continued disagreement has cost taxpayers over \$1 million.

To illustrate the depth of this inability to achieve agreement, on July 16, 2018, all parties apparently agreed that a Macon judge would be the mediator to work toward an SDS agreement, but soon thereafter his name was eliminated from consideration (apparently due to scheduling conflicts). Later, legal counsel for the County suggested three names for consideration that were presented to Clayton, all of which were rejected without explanation, and a completely new list of candidates was proposed by Clayton officials. The County responded that only one name on the city’s list was acceptable, but the County strongly preferred one person from its list and could not understand the city’s objection to him. Nothing positive followed this sequence.

The enmity between the County and Clayton has gone on for years, all to the detriment of residents of both. At this point, nothing RCA can cite from its analysis of past interactions would seem to indicate that a solution to this ongoing disagreement is imminent. Should the County/City stalemate continue into the future, our best suggestion is for readers to consider in the next election process whether new players might have a more balanced and compromising focus on how to get Clayton and Rabun County into alignment than those that now seem embedded in a continuing state of disagreement.

## TIME FOR A NEW COURTHOUSE IN RABUN COUNTY?

An article in the Clayton Tribune indicates that Russell Smith, the Chief Judge of the Ninth District, advised the County’s Commissioners that a new Courthouse is needed, saying the current courthouse no longer accommodates the needs of the County. He indicated the number of court cases has increased, and sometimes all of the circuit judges need to be on the bench at the same time, not possible in Rabun’s current courthouse, and that not having all judges on the bench at the same time makes it harder to schedule cases. He also indicated that security is a problem, given that there are multiple entrances to the courthouse and no holding cell on the same floor as the courtroom. His assessment is that, because building a new courthouse would be a large project, it would likely need to be a future SPLOST item. Greg James, Chairman of the Board of Commissioners indicated that more security measures at the courthouse will be implemented immediately. We are left to wonder why this need was not considered at the time the most recent SPLOST was being developed.

### SPLOST 6

The Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, initiated in 2013, ended this summer with funds remaining. The County has developed a budget for the remaining funds for fiscal year 2020 (July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020) as follows:

Total Tax Revenues and Interest	\$ 8,015,000
Expenditures:	
Water & Sewer	2,160,550
Golf Course	396,868
Fire Department	1,025,536
Solid Waste	300,000
Pavilion Park	501,572
Roads	1,952,574
Debt Service*	<u>1,677,900</u>
Total Expenditures	\$ 8,015,000

\*Repay General Fund advances (which are occasionally used to fund critical SPLOST projects before sufficient SPLOST funds are collected)

RCA *is* encouraged that the County has budgeted nearly \$2 million to spend on roadwork by the end of June, 2020. We have developed a separate article on road paving which follows this article, and which mentions slow progress in improving road conditions in years past, and we sincerely hope the Roads allocation showing in the 2020 budget signals a stronger focus on road condition improvement going forward. In previous newsletters we have noted transfers of funds from certain unfinished SPLOST projects to fund monies for overspending

in other SPLOST projects, a process which significantly depleted the large budget allocated to “Roads, Streets and Bridges” in SPLOST 5. SPLOST regulations permit transfers of money from projects only when the projects approved by voters are completed. ***If one looks at the County’s “project list” above (which is in reality a project category list), there is no way to know what the end of each project might look like, because a specific project has not been named. Thus, County officials are free to “deem” project completion at will.***

### **SEDIMENTATION WASH INTO WATERWAYS**

Over the years there have been many reports of sedimentation wash entering the lakes, whether from maintenance and travel on the County’s many gravel and dirt roads, or improperly attended construction and maintenance on hillsides adjacent to the lakes. In the past, there have been many reports of muddy wash flowing down creeks and warnings to avoid sandbars observed in some coves. Sedimentation build-up to our knowledge has not been measured regularly in the past.

A few years ago, Georgia Power Company conducted a mapping exercise on Lake Burton to assess elevations of lake floors in specific areas. The next mapping is still a few years away, but it will reveal whether siltation build-up is a significant problem or not. We understand GPC might be willing to share the results of the mapping with the RCA, and if so, we will then have definitive information regarding the extent to which siltation build-up is a problem.

However, there are two actions the County could take to contribute to reduction of silt intrusion. RCA has long advocated paving many or all of the dirt roads that parallel the river and lake waters, which would eliminate a good amount of the sedimentation build-up. Also, a County ordinance requiring silt fencing be used during construction on properties lying above our waterways, combined with a regulation requiring clean-up, spreading and tamping of the collected sediment in a way that avoids further wash, would further improve the situation. Investigating what other locales have done to prevent sedimentation wash might add more solutions to consider.

We should also mention that sedimentation wash is a naturally occurring event; as high rainfall events will always dislodge and wash sediment to lower levels. But let’s be clear: ***over an extended period of time, sedimentation will continue to build in our waterways and will cause lakes to continuously fill with sediment, ultimately making boat travel dangerous and difficult, with a corresponding deleterious effect on property values. Paving roads and vigorously enforcing construction controls won’t prevent, but will dramatically extend, the time when sedimentation build-up becomes highly problematic.***

### **UPDATE ON SALE OF RABUN BUSINESS PARK**

The sale of the Rabun Business Park (RBP) to the ELK Group International (EGI) is proceeding as planned although there have been minor changes regarding the sale closing date. Previously targeted for the end of August, the \$8.1 million sale is now scheduled for closing on or before September 30, 2019.

Despite these minor delays, the sale comes at an opportune time for both Rabun County and its Development Authority (DA). It coincides with current plans to relocate the DA to the new Welcome Center complex just south of Clayton. And, the sale equally serves to benefit EGI, as they will acquire the park as it is currently leased to full capacity. All current tenant lease agreements will transfer with the sale. The sale also is good news for Rabun taxpayers as the business park property will return to the tax base (the DA is tax-exempt) and will also offer EGI an opportunity for local expansion and job creation.

Once complete, the sale of the RBP will offer Rabun County an estimated additional property tax of \$88,000 per year, as well as an estimated sales tax increase of \$47,000 per year. The purchase also brings with it a possibility of creating up to 200 new jobs over the next several years. EGI is currently the park’s largest tenant and is a premier designer and importer of indoor and outdoor residential, designer and commercial lighting fixtures, decorative accessories and furniture. Founded in 1983, EGI is headquartered in Nesquehoning, Pennsylvania.

The company distributes over 20,000 products under the brand names of ELK Lighting, Dimond Lighting, Stein World, Dimond Home, GuildMaster, Sterling, Thomas Lighting, Lamp Works, Pomeroy, Mirror Masters, Ryvyr, and ELK Hospitality. Products are available through a network of fine lighting and furniture showrooms, electrical wholesale distributors, department stores and specialty home improvement centers throughout the world. *Rick Story*

### **RABUN COUNTY 2019 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN**

As noted in the Clayton Tribune, the County will begin work soon on a new Comprehensive Plan for Rabun County and surrounding cities. The last plan was done in 2014 and can be viewed on the Rabun County Alliance website. Developing the plan (done every 5 years) will take about 8 months and will be done with assistance from the Georgia Mountain Regional Commission (an organization that assists with monitoring and implementing local comprehensive plans). These plans set an important tone for Rabun’s future planning for growth, and RCA intends to continue monitoring the progression of this plan. And please consider going online to [rabuncounty.ga.gov](http://rabuncounty.ga.gov) to fill out a survey the County is offering regarding the 2019 Rabun County Joint Comprehensive Plan—it’s your chance to have a voice in the County’s future direction!



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P.O. Box 377

Tiger, GA 30576



*(Above) Charlie Brundage of RCA met with Sheriff Chad Nichols to discuss the new ballistic vests and additional safety equipment being purchased after Tom Madison led a whirlwind two-month fundraising effort and secured enough funds to outfit Rabun County officers with better-than-originally-planned kits of protective and emergency gear.*



### **FIRE DEPARTMENTS**

Local resident Tom Madison has written an excellent article for the Lake Burton Civic Association regarding the history of Fire Departments in Rabun County. We welcome the opportunity to share this article with our readers who might not have had the opportunity to view it on the LBCA website. You can view the article by visiting [lbca.net](http://lbca.net).

### **COUNTY ROAD ACTIVITY**

In our previous newsletter, we reported on County plans to seek bidders to compete for a contract to pave 9.2 miles of roads on Warwoman, Laurel Lodge, Boggs Mountain and Persimmon Creek Roads. We are delighted to report that the County has contracted with Colwell Construction Company, Blairsville, GA, to perform this work. We don't have but are seeking the contracted cost of this contract. We are also pleased to report that the County has begun widening Boykin Road (only a ½ to ¾ mile section which is public, not private), and Road Director Darrin Giles indicated it will be paved possibly this year, or no later than next spring. Also, consideration is being given to paving a section of Meetinghouse Road in the near future.

Another article in this newsletter details the budget for spending of SPLOST 6 allocated funds, and that budget includes nearly \$2 million for roadwork. The planned work

described above will likely not deplete that budget, but it is very encouraging to see the County actively using its SPLOST balances to improve roadways in the County, something the RCA has long been seeking. And let's keep in mind that paving of roads contributes to reducing sedimentation wash into our waterways, something else we have been seeking.

With this encouragement comes one question we pose. A recent development in roadwork has involved asking residents of roads targeted for improvement to help fund those improvements. For some residents, that is an acceptable enticement to get roadwork done sooner than might otherwise be scheduled; for others, it could well be a troubling financial imposition on an already stretched personal budget. We believe that it would be worthwhile to have a public meeting in which the validity of seeking resident cost-sharing in roadwork is debated and evaluated, as roadwork has long been the complete responsibility of government as one of the reasons for tax collection.

### **COUNTY BUDGET AND PROPERTY TAXES**

The County budget for fiscal year 2019-2020 was passed with no increase in property taxes. The RCA will report more on this in our next Newsletter along with a report on the year end financial statements of Rabun County ending June 30, 2019.