

Thomas responds to road woes

State Rep. Elwyn Thomas responded to the need for state participation in solving county road woes as follows:

"I agree that some of our rural counties including Blount are hurting especially and are in need of state assistance. We need a statewide road and bridge bond issue dedicated to farm-to-market roads – similar to the one we had back several years ago for bridges. I think the counties got about three to three-and-a-half million dollars then.

We could do this in such a way where the state would provide 70 to 75 percent of the money and the counties that wanted to could buy in with a 25- or 30-percent match. I had talked to Lieutenant Governor Folsom about this some time ago and he was interested, but that was back when everyone thought he'd be running for governor. Whoever is elected I'll approach with that idea.

"I think we'd have to have the county match to make it do-able politically. Also, you've got to have the House, the Senate, and the governor on board to make it possible. I'd say you might end up with a statewide bond in the \$200- to \$250-million range, and the counties that wanted to participate could do so. I'd say we've got a 50-50 chance of pulling something like that off in the next two years.

"I'd also be in favor of giving people the option of deciding locally if they wanted to change their system of county organi-

zation – talking about voting on the unit system – at that time."



DEVELOPMENT

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duties, freeing the director's time for "big picture" aspects of the job, Wingo said. She is to provide the board with specific recommendations on the qualifications such an employee would need and the amount of time the position would require.

Database of current inventory needed

Another pressing need is an inventory of available sites and buildings that would provide a prospect with options to meet his specified needs within the county. The problem is that the existing inventory isn't extensive, isn't current, and isn't yet resident in a handy database. So there are three problems all in one: office help is needed, an inventory of sites and available properties must be developed, and it must be organized for timely access, organization, and transmission.

'Coming out' event should be expedited

On top of that, the organization desperately needs to introduce itself to the economic development establishment within the state, to its partnering agencies in surrounding counties, and to the municipalities and other entities it will work with locally in the process of carrying out its mission. All those agencies and entities need to know there's a new organization in town and in the county, that it's open for business, and that it's going to start relating with them, ready or not.

The meeting agreed a reception was the best way of creating a favorable initial impression, and that it needs to be held by July at the latest. In an industry where appearances often become the working reality, making a good impression is the essence of success.

Community education and team-building

Another major focus will be community leadership training. Counties that are highly successful in attracting and developing industries as well as encouraging retail and commercial growth don't get that way by accident. They get that way by learning the attitudes, ways of thinking, team ethos, and rules of the game

involved in economic development.

It's a formal program designed specifically for the elected officials and key community leaders who will become the foot soldiers of economic development in the county. The program is made up of modules covering such subjects as the economic development process, site selection, industrial park development and speculative buildings, state and local incentives, working with existing industries, workforce training and analysis, working with prospects, preparing for retail/commercial development, team building, and yes, adapting to an international outlook. That's on the scope for the latter part of the summer for 75 or more key county and municipal leaders.

Other priorities include getting Industrial Development Board members themselves up to speed on a number of matters. Alabama Power, the premier economic development experts in Alabama, will host a meeting for IDB members featuring attorneys specializing in legal issues confronting such boards. A seminar next month on new state legislation affecting economic development incentives will also require attendance and attention.

Two entities, one mission

The Blount County Economic Alliance was created in April by the Blount County Industrial Development board when it hired Wingo as executive director. The Industrial Development Board itself was reactivated last fall by the county commission after several years of inactivity. The Alliance is the day-to-day operating/marketing arm while the board provides oversight and strategic direction. The Alliance will ultimately entail a public/private partnership of businesses, municipalities and other agencies that will fund and manage the long-term economic strategic planning and development of the county.

Both the Industrial Development Board and the Alliance are charged to seek new businesses to further economic improvement and job creation in the county, with particular attention to retail and commercial development aimed at expanding both shopping opportunities and the sales tax base.

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n't matter if I'm running it, or if somebody else is running it, they're going to be dealt the same hand of cards I'm looking at.

"The fact of the matter is it's gonna take millions – millions – to fix the roads in Blount County the way people want them to be. It doesn't matter who's in office or what system of government they're operating under. A dollar's still a dollar, and when you don't have near enough of them, the roads fall apart. Nothing's going to change about that until the money changes."

Cochran said his major fear is that his district will run out of road money before the fiscal year's end in September. "If that happens, I may have to lay off somebody. I hate the sound of that word, but I will lay someone off before I'll run out of money to patch potholes. I drive these crappy roads just like everybody else does; I know how bad they are," he said.

Cochran said he has just under \$170,000 left in his fiscal year budget to cover all road expenses except salaries and benefits. Such costs include – besides asphalt and gravel – fuel, maintenance, tires, pipe, chert, herbicides, utilities, and payments on equipment, among other items. Last month, those expenditures amounted to over \$58,000. At that rate of expenditure, he would exhaust his road budget in three more months – May, June, and July – leaving August and September without funds to spend on roads.

What can be done?

"I've been going to Montgomery and Washington, D.C., talking to these politi-

cians, trying to tell them we've got to have help on our roads. They're either not listening or they don't believe me. I had to tell one of'em to stop interrupting me and listen when we went to Washington this time. I need some help delivering that message. Until the people of Blount County are willing to take matters in their own hands and tell their elected officials to get down here and ride these roads and help us or else, I don't know what will happen.

"If that bunch in Montgomery would get together, they could come in here with a road program to restore our county road infrastructure – a statewide farm-to-market road renovation program – if they would take time out from giving themselves raises. We're not getting our fair share of tax proceeds as it is," he said.

Cochran said the same applies to the federal government in Washington, D.C. "It looks like our roads have been bombed. They're falling to pieces. They don't believe us when we tell them what we've got here – or don't care. They're too busy sending money to Iraq and the Sudan to fix roads over there, which have been bombed. We can't get our own government to help us.

"You take care of your own first – but Washington politicians are too busy sending all our tax money overseas to take care of what we need right here in our own country.

"I love Blount County," Cochran said with emotion. "I'll do anything for Blount County, anything. I'll go anywhere I'm asked to go. I'll do anything I'm asked to do – even if it's just to sling a shovel full of plant mix in a pothole. I'll do everything I can, even if it kills me. But I gotta have some help with these politicians."

BOARD

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from Superintendent Jack Housch concerning ongoing discussions with Blount County Probate Judge David Standridge. The discussions center around taxes owed to the system from the county dating back as long as 10 years.

Housch said that talks with Standridge are progressing and he hopes to have a resolution or word of a compromise before long.

In a final piece of business, the board reconfirmed the officers of the board. The board's officers serve two-year terms but policy has dictated mid-term supplemental elections in May. Board president Bill Burdette and vice president Geoff Smith

retained office unanimously.

Before adjourning, the board recognized the late Danny Hicks, former long-time mayor of Oneonta, who had recently died. Board member Cindy Tidwell spoke of Hicks's tireless work for the city and the school system and opined that without him, she would never have been a candidate for the school board.

Present at the May 18 meeting were board members Burdette, Smith, Tidwell, Winston Scott, and Robbie McAlpine, Housch, board secretary Charlotte Vick, system financial officer Kathy Loggins, elementary principal Ed Parrish, high school principal Keith Bender, several members of the faculty, and visitors.

The next board meeting is scheduled for Monday, June 29, at 6:30 p.m.

From the Archives

The Southern Democrat,
May 29, 1985

Bridge built by countians

Blount Countians have several reasons to be proud of Blalock Bridge, which is expected to be completed this year, according to Probate Judge Frank Green, County Commission chairman.

Residents of Little Shendoah and others who live on Center Springs Road, which connects Ala 79 and Ala 160, will have the convenience of a safe, reliable bridge that is never flooded. But all Blount Countians can be proud of the \$1.5 million structure, first because it will be completed using only about 23 percent county money and second because most people actually working on the bridge are from Blount, including most of the subcontractors.

...According to county engineer Richard Spraggins, the bridge, originally known as Vaughn Bridge, has been in the planning stages since 1978 to span the portion of the Locust Fork of the Warrior River that often floods low-lying areas.

The project's name was changed to Blalock Bridge in memory of Commissioner Gene Blalock after his death and is being completed as a joint project of commissioners Lester Gilliland and Walton Ray Thomas.

Williams takes position at Southside

After 18 years at Oneonta High School and one year at J.B. Pennington High, former head basketball coach Jim Williams has accepted the head coaching position at Southside High School, Gadsden.

Williams, who has 17 years' experience in basketball coaching, began his career at Hinson Junior High, Attalla, where he coached for one year before taking the head coaching position at J.B. Pennington. There he coached a year before moving to Oneonta.

Williams was head basketball coach at Oneonta for 15 seasons before resigning his coaching position three years ago.

Small fire at courthouse

Oneonta firefighters put out a paper fire at the Blount County Courthouse Saturday afternoon. According to Assistant Fire Chief Billy McCullough, the blaze probably started from a cigarette put in a basement trash can. He said the courthouse suffered no damage, the fire mainly burning paper. Oneonta's two fire engines were at the scene 23 minutes.

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