

Gun Club seeks lawmakers' help on shooting range



Photo by Shawn Jarrard

The Union County Gun Club Board of Directors with Sheriff Mack Mason, Commissioner Lamar Paris, Andrew Seaver of U.S. Sen. David Perdue's Office, and Joel Katz of U.S. Rep. Doug Collins' Office.

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Assistant Editor

It's been seven months since the formation of the Union County Gun Club, and already, the club is close to realizing its goal of establishing a local shooting range.

The club's board of directors has located a roughly 14-acre strip of U.S. Forest Service land off Georgia 180 that members think would be perfect for a range.

A key aspect of the range would be its ability to accommodate rifle shooting at 200-plus yards, pistols and potentially shotguns.

Club members would have regular access to the range, with limited hours for the public, and local peace officers from the Union County Sheriff's Office and Blairsville Police Department would have a home to train for firearms requalification.

Furthermore, the club would consider opening the range to students on the Union County 4-H Shotgun and BB Gun Teams, which would be particularly helpful since development of the 4-H shooting range came to a halt last year.

And while the club has yet to acquire the land for the range, it's a no-brainer for Union County Sheriff Mack Mason. After all, there are four ranges in neighboring counties on public land controlled by the U.S. Forest Service.

"Half this county is Forest Service, and the U.S. in that, to me, means 'us,'" said Sheriff Mason, who advises the gun club. "We're the government, we're taxpayers, we're citizens. We don't see any problems. We've looked at this from every angle, and we don't see a negative thing about it."

Situated about five miles east of US 129S, just across from Bob Creek Road on 180, the USFS land in question was once part of an old Union County homestead, so it's relatively flat and clear.

The area is at the base of a mountain ridge and has other natural boundaries in Bob Creek and a minor wet weather branch.

Should the range become a reality, it would be surrounded on all sides by USFS land while maintaining more than a mile and two small ridges between it and the nearest home.

Of course, all of this is dependent upon the club coming to terms with the Forest Service for use of the land, and Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris has pledged to act as a go-between to lease the land from the Forest Service to the gun club.

The club is also hoping to capitalize on other key relationships to clear a path toward securing a lease from the U.S. Forest Service.

On Thursday, Feb. 1, the gun club board, Sheriff Mason and Commissioner Paris met locally with U.S. Sen. David Perdue's Northeast Region Field Representative Andrew Seaver and U.S. Rep. Doug Collins' District Director Joel Katz.

Inside the Union County Community Center that Thursday, the two guests listened to a presentation from the board and Sheriff Mason, then asked/answered questions before heading off to examine the site itself.

Later that afternoon, a couple of board members traveled to Athens to make a similar presentation and speak with Joyce White, who is state director for U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development in Georgia.

All parties contacted so far – Seaver, Katz and White – have expressed interest in assisting club members in their interactions with the federal government, and next steps will include an upcoming meeting with Forest Service officials.

Former Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue leads the USDA as Secretary of Agriculture, and he is therefore directly over the U.S. Forest Service, which should bode well for the gun club and the continued efforts of the club's board.

"We have a board of directors that has just been absolutely divine, just really a good working crew, working together," said Paul Clark, chairman of the Union County Gun Club. "We've accomplished a lot in a very short period of time."

The steady movement toward the opening of a Union County shooting range is a testament to the level of local interest.

More than 200 members of the community raised over \$1,600 in the club's July 10, 2017, inaugural meeting, which was organized by Sheriff Mason, and support for the club has continued to grow.

The club's board has hit the ground running since that first meeting, acquiring an IRS number, achieving LLC status, lining up reference letters, incorporating bylaws and studying aerial maps of U.S. Forest Service land in anticipation of a lease agreement to build the range.

Sheriff Mason and the club are optimistic that the range will be operational within a year's time, though the club will have its work cut out for it if the Forest Service agrees to let members use the land.

That work will include site designs and several rounds of evaluations, including environmental and other testing to verify that the land would be usable as a shooting range.

Fortunately, enthusiasm among club members is high, and the board is confident that funding will not be an issue, as members plan to continue their financial support, and it's likely grant funds will be available from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the National Rifle Association and others.

"What if some young boy or girl, man or woman, develops good shooting skills out here, and then winds up on foreign soil defending the United States of America?" said Sheriff Mason. "What if that person is able to defend themselves, or their family, or stop an enraged person bent on doing harm to mass individuals?"

"The club asks anyone who will, to step out on faith and be a part of this historic effort to bring a shooting range to Union County. Please help us make this a reality for current and future generations."

For more information on the club and to obtain a membership form, visit UnionCountyGunClub.org or .com.



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Katz, left, going over the plans with Seaver, Sheriff Mason and Club Chairman Paul Clark.