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Target Range receives go-ahead from U.S. Forest Service

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The U.S. Forest Service has approved the issuance of a special use permit for a Union County Target Range, paving the way for a standalone shooting facility southeast of Blairsville, though it's still too early to declare a timeline for the project.

Officials with the Forest Service signaled their approval of the target range in mid-November, when Blue Ridge District Ranger Andy Baker issued a Final Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact.

Baker's finding served as one of the very last steps in the permitting process that took more than a year to complete.

"This decision consists of authorizing Union County

Government to construct a target range on National Forest lands," Baker said in his report.

Continuing, the report states that the county will be "the special use permit holder and will assume the responsibility of funding, maintenance and operation of the target range."

As previously reported, the range will be situated on a 14-acre piece of land off SR 180, between mile markers 18 and 19. It will feature a 200-yard rifle range, a shorter pistol range, and a clubhouse.

Union County has never had a range for residents to practice shooting, meaning gun owners have had to either shoot on their own property or travel to another community to shoot at a non-local range.

And with the target

range, local law enforcement will no longer have to rely on private property owners donating the use of their land for important shooting practice, as the state requires peace officers to requalify with their duty weapons annually.

Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris said operation of the target range will be delegated to the Union County Gun Club, a fee membership organization consisting of passionate local gun owners who formed the club on July 10, 2017, in an informal meeting held by Sheriff Mack Mason.

"Sheriff Mason came to us with the idea and the property location (about two and a half years ago)," Paris said. "Prior to that, for the last four or five years, we'd been looking for a site anywhere and everywhere

See Target Range, Page 2A



Local stakeholders meeting with federal and state officials on March 9, 2018, to walk the future site of the Union County Target Range off SR 180. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Target Range...from Page 1A

all over the county.

"The thing that the public didn't understand is that the Forest Service is not just for hiking the Appalachian Trail. It is property owned by the United States, and their goal is to try to provide recreation and event space and facilities for a lot of different folks.

"So, it's not all just the campers and the hikers. That's a big part of it - you don't want to destroy your national forest - but this particular property is already in grass, so there's very few trees that will have to be cut."

Now that the Forest Service has approved the project, Larry Garrett and Jim Marchman of the Commissioner's Office will join Paris for a meeting with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources on funding for the range, which will likely consist of local, state and federal dollars.

Paris said they will be speaking with DNR officials to get direction on who to contact about developing a site plan. There are companies that specialize in gun ranges that DNR has used in the past.

It is estimated that site plan development will take at least two or three months to complete, though as mentioned above, it's still too early to offer a construction timeline for the range.

Sheriff Mason said he was thankful for everyone in the community who stepped out on faith and took a chance when forming the Gun Club, investing their patience and hard-earned money in a grassroots effort of this magnitude.

"I said this is the only chance that I know of for Union County to have a gun range,"

Mason said. "That it's kind of a now or never, so everybody jump in, stick together, and let's see this thing through. It isn't going to happen overnight."

Added Mason, "In unity, there is strength, and that's one of the things that has propelled us. We're sitting on 500 members plus, which shows the need and necessity to get this done.

"There is a lot target practice that takes place on Forest Service land near houses, and homeowners in close proximity disturb one another when shooting on their property.

"I'm hoping to centralize these people, that maybe they'll want to join this club, confine it to a particular area by shooting in a nice, safe facility.

"Safety is one thing. The

aggravation of homeowners is another, infringing on their peace and tranquility."

The sheriff went on to say that the Chatuge Gun Club Target Range in Towns County has been in operation for about 40 years with no accidents or issues, with countless thousands of people having belonged to that group over the years.

Sheriff Mason said he was also thankful the Union County Gun Club Board Members for their many hours of work looking up regulations and compiling information to get the Target Range effort to the place it is today.

"We are so pleased with the patience that has been shown to our board members by our Union County Gun Club membership personnel for their support and standing so firmly

behind us," Gun Club President Paul Clark said.

Added Clark, "We would like to take this opportunity to thank folks from Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue's office, Rep. Doug Collins' office, folks from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, our local Ranger Andy Baker and Forest Service personnel, our Union County Commissioner's office, and our Sheriff's Office for their collective unwavering support for the progress that has been accomplished so far.

"Everyone involved has voiced, at one time or another, 'what a wonderful team-supported effort has been garnered for this momentous project.'"