

Former Gov. Perdue tours Shooting Range

By Shawn Jarrard
 North Georgia News
 sjarrard@nganews.com

Union County Government recently inked out the proverbial red carpet for former Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue, who came to town for a tour of the under-construction Union County Shooting Range on Tuesday, Dec. 19.

Years in the making, the public range is tentatively scheduled to open in March of Georgia 180, between state routes 18 and 79 and people are eagerly awaiting their chance to use the facility, including Perdue.

Now serving as the chancellor for the University System of Georgia, Perdue was



Local leaders met with University System of Georgia Chancellor Dr. Sonny Perdue for a tour of the under-construction Union County Shooting Range last month, pictured here at one of the shooting sheds on the property. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Perdue Tour ...from Page 1A



DNR Assistant Chief Walter Lane explained elements of the backstop on the pistol range to former Gov. Perdue and others Dec. 19. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

last month.

A pilot, Perdue flew his personal plane up from Bonaire to the Blairsville Municipal Airport that Tuesday for a visit to the area on a variety of business, to include the Shooting Range tour as well as a few stops in the region as part of his official chancellor duties.

"There's much more interest in firearms and the Second Amendment these days than there has been," Perdue said. "This is a place where people can learn to use those weapons safely and securely and get training."

"That's really what we want people to do; if they're going to have a firearm, we want people to have experience with them, know how to handle them, and they're going to have trainings out here that help people do that safely."

Meeting with Perdue at the range were Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, Sheriff Mack Mason, County Construction Manager Mike Tomason, County Manager Larry Garrett, Fire Chief David Dyer, Curtis Colwell of Colwell Construction, and other local attendees.

"This wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for Gov. Perdue," Sheriff Mason said before echoing Perdue's sentiments that he hopes people "come out here and shoot safely, enjoy themselves, and get instruction on how and when to use a firearm," including women and young folks.

Also attending the tour were District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch; Assistant Chief Walter Lane of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources; Ray Lambert Jr. of the DNR Board of Natural Resources; Project Manager Travis Smith of Milestone Construction; and Joyce White, who served as Georgia State Director for USDA Rural Development during Perdue's federal tenure.

"This project is a great cooperation between local, state and federal

government," Perdue said. "It's a good example of that. It's embarrassing when they've taken so long, though."

"That's the one problem, the government doesn't move that quickly with the checks and balances that you have to have, which are needed, but I felt like we could have done it a lot faster."

Regardless of how long it has taken to see the range through to completion, everyone agreed that day that the final product — a first-class, multimillion dollar pistol and rifle range with amenities, supervision and instruction — was well worth the wait.

And while local officials give Perdue credit for making the range a reality, he in turn credits the persistence of the people here, from the county government and the Sheriff's Office to the folks in the Union County Gun Club who have stuck by their gun range vision for six and a half years.

"They had to be persistent because there were a lot of barriers," Perdue said. "Bureaucracy puts a lot of barnacles in the way, and sometimes you just have to be tough enough and persistent enough to keep scraping off the barnacles, and that's really the situation here."

"But also, there were considerations of the neighborhood and people who may live close by to make sure their voices were heard. This needed to be done in a very democratic, respectful way to make sure it was in the right place and being done in the right way, and I think it is."

Construction on the state-of-the-art facility started around February 2023 and is set to wrap around the beginning of February 2024, weather pending, according to Project Manager Travis Smith.

To date, shooting sheds have been erected for both the 25-yard pistol range and the 150-yard rifle range, with interior work remaining to be completed. The pistol range features 10 shooting stations

and a 20-foot berm, while the rifle range will be able to accommodate 14 shooters.

Both ranges will have safety officers "running the show," operating a red light/green light system to announce when the ranges are hot and cold.

The 2,000-square-foot conference building has been erected also, likewise with interior work remaining. This building will be used to facilitate on-site firearm training and other activities.

Overall, the project has required a massive amount of grading, taking the backside of the property down 30 feet, with still more dirt to move in the month before construction concludes.

The facility will feature a chief range master in Craig Davenport, who oversaw training at the Sheriff's Office before retiring there at the end of December. Davenport looks forward to managing the facility, advising range safety officers and showing people a good time Tuesday through Sunday.

Shooters will be able to acquire an annual pass via membership with the Union County Gun Club, and the general public will also be able to practice shooting by purchasing single-use day passes.

Importantly, local law enforcement will finally have a nice facility for state-mandated annual firearms training.

Many partners have contributed to the development of the range, including the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, which has established the rules to be enforced when the range is operational.

It has been a long time coming, as the effort to build a range began in July 2017 when residents banded together to form the Union County Gun Club, with Sheriff Mason serving as the long-time liaison to government officials to find the right piece of land and secure plans and funding.

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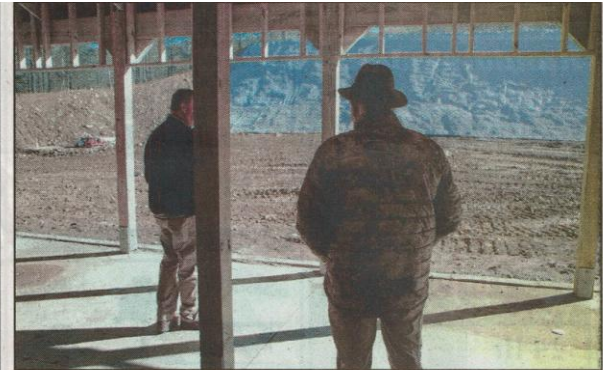
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Sonny Perdue looking out onto the new 25-yard pistol range at the Union County Shooting Range, expected to be open for business in March. Photo by Shawn Jarrard