

Gun Club holds annual meeting, discusses target range progress

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With a shared sense of purpose in their goal of realizing a local target range, members of the Union County Gun Club gathered for their annual meeting on Thursday, Nov. 1, inside the Blairsville Civic Center.

Guest speakers in the meeting were Union County Sheriff Mack Mason and Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, along with several Gun Club officers who brought members up to speed on club news.

Much appreciation was expressed in the annual meeting for Sheriff Mason, who advises the club, and

Commissioner Paris, both of whom have worked closely with the dedicated Gun Club Board to get the project off the ground.

For his part, Sheriff Mason offered thanks to those who have maintained contact with the Gun Club and county regarding the proposed target range, including Joyce

White, who is the Georgia State Director for USDA Rural Development.

White answers directly to former Georgia governor and current U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue, and she attended the Oct. 24 Target Range Public Meeting conducted jointly by the U.S. Forest Service and Union

County Government.

Also in the Nov. 1 meeting, the Gun Club entertained a handful of new business items, including:

Moving annual meetings from November to March to coincide with the deadline on club dues; the covering of board vacancies by appointment until the next annual meeting; voting

to allow Caroline Pirie to fill the board secretary vacancy; and having the official date of the bylaws changed to Nov. 1, 2018.

The first annual meeting was held earlier this year on May 1, and the next will be held in March 2019. After that, the club will continue to

See Gun Club, Page 6A

Gun Club ...from Page 2A

meet annually every March, and it will hold meetings more frequently once the range gets off the ground.

Initially, the club came to be during an informal meeting held by Sheriff Mason on July 10, 2017, forged from the interest of more than 200 people in attendance who immediately raised \$1,600 to kick-start the venture.

Since then, the club has moved at a remarkable pace toward acquiring public land for a local target range, first forming a partnership with Commissioner Paris' office to make an application with the U.S. Forest Service, then working with the Forest Service on a site plan for the proposed range.

Gun Club membership has more than doubled since inception to over 420 members, and the club has already raised more than \$20,000 toward the eventual construction and operation of a target range.

The overall prospects of the project received a big shot in the arm in the Oct. 24 public meeting.

In that meeting, District Ranger Andy Baker reported that there were still many steps to go before a special use permit could be issued for a range on public land.

However, he also stated that two major concerns – water and noise – had cleared important early hurdles, and that everything was good to go so far.

Union County has never had a Gun Club or 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.

Even local law enforcement must rely on private property owners donating the use of their land for important shooting practice, as the state requires peace officers to requalify with duty weapons annually.

All that could change by late summer 2019, which is the estimated timeframe for the completion of an extensive environmental testing phase, subsequent administrative review period, to include more chances for public comment, and final decision-making



Sheriff Mack Mason

Normally, the series of required tests would cost interested parties tens of thousands of dollars to complete, but thanks to a financial application process, the Forest Service will be covering testing costs associated with the project.

Once all the appropriate tests, environmental and otherwise, are conducted and a final decision is reached to issue a permit, groundbreaking at the proposed range site can begin.

The range will be situated upon a 14-acre piece of land off SR 180, between mile markers 18 and 19, and is set to feature a 200-yard rifle range, a shorter

pistol range, and a clubhouse, that the Gun Club Board feels confident will be able to accommodate 4-H BB and Air Rifle teams.

Of course, the project is still in its initial Public Scoping Period, during which members of the public are encouraged to submit comments, for or against, to be included and publicly available as part of the official record of the project.

Comments may be entered at any time during the project, but the impending deadline for comments to establish standing for objection eligibility is Nov. 13.

The Forest Service and Gun Club are asking that people be as specific as possible concerning why they believe a local target range would or would not be a good use of public land.

Comments can be viewed and submitted at the project page, located at www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=54559; mailed to Andrew L. Baker, District Ranger, ATTN: Nelson Gonzalez-Sullow and/or Jerome Bennett, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, 1755 Cleveland Highway, Gainesville, GA 30501; or sent by fax to 770-297-3011.



Gun Club Officer Joan Moody having a conversation with David McDonald of U.S. Rep. Doug Collins' office following the Nov. 1 annual meeting.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard