

# Target range secures 90% federal grant funding

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Union County Sheriff Mack Mason is excited to announce that the Georgia Department of Natural Resources has committed to providing 90% of the funding necessary to build the Union County Target Range off Georgia 180.

The state had previously committed to funding 75% with a 25% local match. A couple of years ago, site plan designers for the range initially estimated it would take about \$2.4 million to build, so Union County Government budgeted \$600,000, or 25%, toward the project.

But materials and other

costs have risen dramatically over the course of the pandemic, creating an untenable situation when the best bid submitted last fall came in at \$3.2 million, putting the local match at \$800,000 for a \$200,000 budget overrun.

Now that DNR has increased the funding, the county will be rebidding the project starting next month, with a goal of having a bid returned and accepted within a 90-day timetable for construction to take place this year.

With its new 10% match amount, the county is virtually guaranteed to stay well under its originally budgeted \$600,000 figure — maybe even only half of that — and the project may yet acquire additional funding through the state and other

sources like shooting sports foundations.

Federal grants for projects like the target range are made available via the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937, which enables the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to appropriate funds from excise taxes on firearms, ammunition and archery equipment.

In May 2019, then-President Donald Trump signed into law the Target Practice and Marksmanship Training Support Act, upping the level of federal grant funding available for such projects from 75% to 90%.

Despite the passing of this new law, progress stalled in securing the 90% funding for the local range project.

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Last week, Sheriff Mack Mason met with Jim Marchman of the Commissioner's Office, State Sen. Steve Gooch, State Rep. Stan Gunter and Chamber President Steve Rowe at the Community Center to look over plans for the Union County Target Range. Photo/Submitted

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which to that point had only been approved at the 75% level, with Georgia DNR acting as the passthrough agency for the federal grant monies.

At the request of Sheriff Mason on Friday, District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch reached out to Georgia DNR Deputy Commissioner Walter Rabon, who subsequently agreed to apply the full 90% funding for which the range is eligible.

"As State Senator for Union County, I am proud to help get the funding appropriated for this worthwhile project," Gooch said. "This gun range will be a state-of-the-art facility that both the residents of Union County and surrounding communities will gain experience and training in firearm safety.

"I am especially excited that our youth will benefit from the opportunity to respect guns. I applaud Commissioner Lamar Paris and Sheriff Mack Mason for their determination and patience in pursuing these funds to bring this recreational opportunity to the mountains of North Georgia."

Range operations will be delegated to the members of the Union County Gun Club, with access to be granted to the general public during yet-to-be-determined days and hours each week.

The Gun Club is a fee membership organization consisting of passionate local gun owners who formed the club on July 10, 2017, in an informal meeting held at the request of Sheriff Mason.

It has been a long road for the dedicated group, including countless hours planning for the range and speaking with elected and other government officials.

As the unofficial spokesperson for the club, Sheriff Mason has spent the last several years acting as a political liaison trying to make the range a reality, and he is grateful to the Gun Club Board and the group's many members for their patience and willingness to carry out the project.

"Once I found out during a computer search that Pittman-Robertson had been amended to allow for 90% funding on projects instead of 75%, I was bound and determined to get this additional money," Sheriff Mason said. "Sen. Gooch made that happen on Friday. Thank you, Sen. Gooch!"

When Sheriff Mason

first asked people to join the club in pursuit of a local target range nearly five years ago, he told those gathered that "this wouldn't happen overnight"; indeed, it was a leap of faith for everyone involved.

"The Gun Club Board Members and I are very appreciative of the fact that these people have stuck with us," Mason said.

Currently, the Gun Club has 295 members whose dues are paid up to date, plus 65 members who have not yet paid for this year but have been constant supporters to this point and are expected to renew. That's more than 350 total members who have helped to make the range happen.

And due to the generosity, patience and confidence of its membership, the club has been able to raise \$62,000 to assist in the administration of the range once it is fully operational.

Union County has never had a dedicated target range for residents to practice shooting, so 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.

Prior to this funding announcement, the most crucial step in the process occurred in November 2019 when the U.S. Forest Service agreed to issue a special use permit to the county to build the range on a 14-acre piece of public land off SR 180 between mile markers 18 and 19.

In more good news for the project, the county has received the permit from the Georgia Department of Transportation to install the entry driveway from SR 180 into the proposed target range, as more and more pieces continue to fall into place.

Assisting in making such progress possible has been a steering committee of stakeholders for the range, including representatives from Union County Government, Georgia DNR, the U.S. Forest Service and others. This committee will meet for further discussions on Jan. 28.