

Gun Club highlights Target Range plans in annual meeting



L-R: Mack Mason, Joyce White, Lamar Paris and Paul Clark in the March 10 annual meeting of the Union County Gun Club.

Photo by Mark Smith

**By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer**

The Union County Gun Club held its annual meeting at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center on Tuesday, March 10, with well over 300 people in attendance.

"I'm truly grateful that you've got this many people that's come out and been with us," Sheriff Mack Mason said. "Two years and eight months ago tonight, in this very building, we started the Union County Gun Club."

Mason has been an adviser to the Gun Club since before it formally began, and he was instrumental in establishing vital relationships, such as with Joyce White of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in getting the ball rolling on a public target range via U.S. Forest Service land.

And nearly three years later, on Tuesday, March 3, the Forest Service issued a Special Use Permit to Union County authorizing the use of public land located in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests for operation and maintenance of the Union County Target Range.

"You came together," Mason said to the audience. "I asked you to step out on faith with your presence and your money, and you've done that. And that's why we're where we are tonight. We have the lease secured to the county from the Forest Service."

Mason made sure to express gratitude for Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris for his role in stepping up and submitting the application for the lease.

"When I started this, I didn't have any idea of the county submitting the application to the Forest

Service for this," Mason said. "And I want to thank Commissioner Paris. Let's give him a hand. It's made it a whole lot easier to transfer the government land into the hands of another government entity, being Union County."

"We've got over 500 members, and that is the reason that we've been able to do this. That's one of the first questions they asked us: 'What are you going to do? Are you going to come in and take this land, make a range, and then abandon it?' Well, it looks like that's not the case."

Additionally, Mason thanked Joyce White, who enlisted the help of Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, and Congressman Doug Collins, who has been a supporter of the club since its inception.

For his part, Paris took the floor to offer an update on the latest with the target range.

"What has happened since we last met, and since I last talked to you, is nothing short of a miracle," Paris said, referring to the two-year timeframe of getting approval for the range.

Reading from a letter sent to him by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Paris relayed that DNR was in the process of finalizing an intergovernmental agreement with the county to provide cost sharing for the design work and construction drawings of the range.

"The county will be selecting, hiring and supervising the design work and getting reimbursed from DNR for 75 percent of the cost of that work," Paris said. "Once the final design work is complete, as per the agreement, DNR has the final approval for the design."

"And once approved, it will

be the county's responsibility to submit the design to the U.S. Forest Service for their consideration and final approval. So, now we're at the point where we have to select a design firm and try to get them out there and get a design as quick as possible.

"Once we get the design approved, that will give us a cost estimate," he said, estimating that the cost of building the SPLOST-funded range project would be between \$2 million and \$2.5 million.

Paris said that the percentage of time the general public will be allowed to use the range, meaning people other than Gun Club members, will be directly related to the level of funding the county is able to acquire to offset the estimated cost of range construction.

"If we didn't have the sales tax money, we couldn't even think about doing this," he said.

Given the current state of the economy, time of year, and the fact that engineers and contractors are very busy, Paris said that, realistically, the target range could be up and running "by about spring of 2021," though that's "purely speculation at this point."

White spoke briefly, introducing herself as a President Trump appointee who works at the pleasure of Secretary Perdue. She is currently the Georgia State Director for the Department of Agriculture, Rural Development.

"I can promise you that this secretary and this president are moving things along as best they can," White said. "I look forward to the groundbreaking for the Gun Club, and then the ribbon cutting for the Gun Club. I am your public servant, and I am so glad to be here. Thank you."