

Gun Club...from Page 1A

go-between to lease the land gun club. The club is also hoping from the Forest Service to the

to capitalize on other key relationships to clear a path toward securing a lease from the U.S. Forest Service.

On Thursday, Feb. 1, the gun club board, Sheriff Mason and Commissioner Paris met locally with U.S. Sen. David Perdue's Northeast Region Field Representative Andrew Seaver and U.S. Rep. Doug Collins' District Director Joel Katz.

Inside the Union County Community Center that Thursday, the two guests listened to a presentation from the board and Sheriff Mason, then asked/answered questions before heading off to examine the site itself.

Later that afternoon, a couple of board members traveled to Athens to make a similar presentation and speak with Joyce White, who is state director for U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development in Georgia.

All parties contacted so far – Seaver, Katz and White – have expressed interest in assisting club members in their interactions with the federal government, and next steps will include an upcoming meeting with Forest Service officials.

Former Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue leads the USDA as Secretary of Agriculture, and he is therefore directly over the U.S. Forest Service, which should bode well for

the gun club and the continued efforts of the club's board.

"We have a board of directors that has just been absolutely divine, just really a good working crew, working together," said Paul Clark, chairman of the Union County Gun Club. "We've accomplished a lot in a very short period of time."

The steady movement toward the opening of a Union County shooting range is a testament to the level of local interest.

More than 200 members of the community raised over \$1,600 in the club's July 10, 2017, inaugural meeting, which was organized by Sheriff Mason, and support for the club has continued to grow.

The club's board has hit the ground running since that first meeting, acquiring an IRS number, achieving LLC status, lining up reference letters, incorporating bylaws and studying aerial maps of U.S. Forest Service land in anticipation of a lease agreement to build the range.

Sheriff Mason and the club are optimistic that the range will be operational within a year's time, though the club will have its work cut out for it if the Forest Service agrees to let members use the land.

That work will include site designs and several rounds



Photo by Shawn Jarrard
Katz, left, going over the plans with Seaver, Sheriff Mason and Club Chairman Paul Clark.

of evaluations, including environmental and other testing to verify that the land would be usable as a shooting range.

Fortunately, enthusiasm among club members is high, and the board is confident that funding will not be an issue, as members plan to continue their financial support, and it's likely grant funds will be available from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the National Rifle Association and others.

"What if some young boy or girl, man or woman, develops good shooting skills out here, and then winds up

on foreign soil defending the United States of America?" said Sheriff Mason. "What if that person is able to defend themselves, or their family, or stop an enraged person bent on doing harm to mass individuals?"

"The club asks anyone who will, to step out on faith and be a part of this historic effort to bring a shooting range to Union County. Please help us make this a reality for current and future generations."

For more information on the club and to obtain a membership form, visit UnionCountyGunClub.org or .com.

Fort...from Page 1A

historical place. So, we decided that it was time to tear the fort down."

Fort Sorghum was built during the first years of the Blairsville Sorghum Festival, back when the crowds were much smaller than the thousands that now flock to Meeks Park each year for the trademark festival.

During the early 2000s, the festival finally outgrew the fort, and after much consideration, the Blairsville Sorghum Festival Club, in conjunction with the Union County Commissioner's Office, decided to move the event to Meek's Park, where it has remained steadfast and consistently growing ever since.

And while the festival has not been held at the fort in some time, it has remained a constant reminder of the event's celebration of mountain living, Appalachian heritage,

and that sticky, sweet sorghum syrup.

With fond memories in mind, and after much consideration, the club decided to move forward with the demolition.

However, club members wish to assure locals they are doing everything in their power to make sure that the history of the fort will live on by preserving pieces of Fort Sorghum's red lettering, to be placed on display in the Old Union County Courthouse.

"We did have someone already remove the Fort Sorghum sign and some of the boards off of the fence and put it in safekeeping, because it's probably going to be placed into the courthouse with the Union County Historical Society," said Bridges. "It takes money to keep up."

"We're trying to raise money to put back into the community, so putting that money into the fort that really isn't used at all seems pointless. That money can be spent to help the county, versus putting it back into something that isn't being used."

"We're trying to do what we think is right. It's not about the money or anything like that. It's time."

Now, the club is working with the commissioner's office to combine and sell both the parking lot beside the fort as well as the Fort Sorghum site itself.

The county currently owns the parcel of land upon

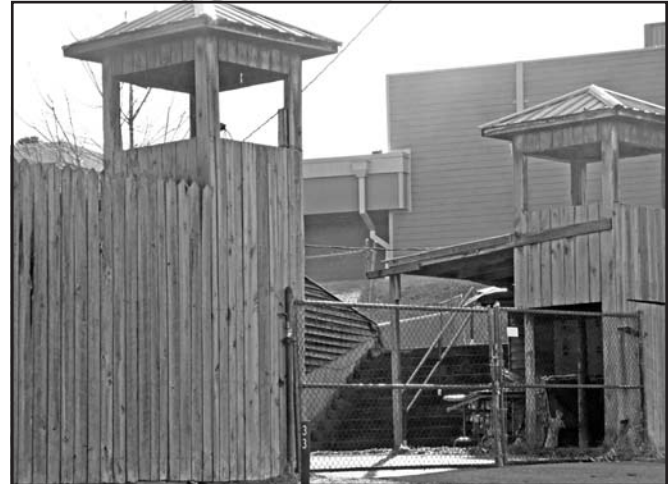


Photo by Lily Avery
The soon-to-be demolished Fort Sorghum in 2018.

which Fort Sorghum sits, while the club owns the lot beside it.

"About six months ago the Sorghum Festival Club called me and asked if I'd ever thought about selling Fort Sorghum," said Commissioner Paris. "Well, they had a parcel of land beside the fort and had decided they wanted to sell it."

"In addition to that, even though the county owns the fort, they've had storage and offices, and they've been meeting in there for years."

"I hadn't really thought about it until it was brought to me, but the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like a good idea. It's been sitting there for a long time, and it's rarely ever used."

"And we've never felt like, from the county's side, that we could do anything with it because there isn't enough parking for an event

or anything like that."

At this time, logistics concerning the selling and development of the land are still in the beginning stages, and while the occasion is bittersweet, Bridges reassures that it will have no impact on the importance of the Blairsville Sorghum Festival, or the legacy that Fort Sorghum brought forth all those years ago.

"The Sorghum Festival still goes on," said Bridges. "It was started at the fort, and we're very nostalgic about that."

Continued Bridges: "We're not trying to do away with our history. We're trying to preserve part of it, but we cannot preserve the whole thing."

The Blairsville Sorghum Festival Club plans to have demolition on Fort Sorghum completed in the coming weeks.

Conley...from Page 1A

"Certificate of Distinction" award during the GMA Mayor's Day Conference in Atlanta on Jan. 21.

"To receive a Certificate of Distinction, a city official must complete a minimum of 204 units of credit, including at least 72 hours from a required list of courses and the Robert E. Knox, Jr. Municipal Leadership Institute," according to GMA. "The training program consists of a series of more than 60 courses."

Conley was one of only 14 city officials in a group of more than 1,000 to receive a "Certificate of Distinction" at the conference.

"This is an outstanding achievement," said GMA Executive Director Larry Hanson. "We commend Mayor Conley for this accomplishment and for the dedication he's shown in using this valuable resource to become a more effective city official."

The mayor has been able to achieve his educational goals by making sure to attend two trainings every year, one at the Mayor's Day Conference in January, and the other during the Annual Conference in Savannah every June.

"It means everything in the world to me to get this Certificate of Distinction," said Mayor Conley. "It's hard to gain that many hours. You pretty much have to be dedicated to going to GMA functions where they're offering training, wherever it is."

Mayor Conley is grateful to the voters of Blairsville, who have trusted his leadership by voting him into office time and time again.

He's also thankful for the training that has allowed him to put his best foot forward in every aspect of city government.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to carry out my duties as a mayor and look out for the best interests of the city if I didn't go to these trainings," said Conley. "You can never get enough training, because just look at the changes going on in everything nowadays. This training, I can't say enough about it."

The mayor still has one more level of training to complete before attaining the highly esteemed "Certificate of Dedication," which requires 278 units of credit.

And while he doesn't know whether he'll ever reach that highest point of training,

Mayor Conley does plan to continue his education for as long as he is responsible for operating the City of Blairsville.

"I'm just happy that I've gotten to this level," said the mayor, "and the fact that we've been prudent enough with city funds to be able to pay for training for anybody on the council, and for employees who need training in their jobs to be able to go and it not affect the city coffers greatly."

The Georgia Municipal Association is a voluntary, nonprofit organization based in Atlanta that provides legislative advocacy, research, training, employee benefit and technical consulting services to its 521 member cities, per GMA.