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CLEBURNE

# County LINES

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## Plan to provide clarity for county leaders

County commissioners and other community leaders will spend several months working with Auburn University's Center for Governmental Studies to create a vision for the county's future and strategic plan to reach those goals.

"Each county has its own ideas and experiences. Our goal is to piece those together to create a vision and a plan to respond to those goals," said Dr. Don-Terry Veal, Director of the Center.

The Center's team will gather basic information about Cleburne County including demographics, economic trends and county budgets for the past five years. They will assess the financial situation of the county government and review local policies.

While compiling the information, the Center will interview county commissioners, other elected officials, county department heads and employees as well as other community leaders. County residents will have a chance to participate in the process; 400 phone interviews will be conducted.

"The community will be in a position to provide input and the decision-makers will use that input to create the plan. County commissioners have an opportunity to hear good ideas and learn more about their constituents' priorities for the county," said Veal.

Through these interviews, a picture will emerge of the county's strengths and weaknesses, priorities and perception of county government, its operation and the services provided to residents.

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## Court system expansion provides better services for residents

Since the expansion of the judicial and circuit clerk's offices in the Cleburne County Courthouse, the local court system is working more efficiently and providing better service to county residents.

"More space allowed for an expanded schedule for circuit and district court. Our court system has operated more smoothly over the past two years," said Cleburne County Circuit Clerk Warren Sarrell.

With the grand opening of the Cleburne County Mountain Center in November 2012, the county commission and other administrative offices moved out of the courthouse, leaving the second floor available for the local court system.

"Now we can have three or four judges working in the courthouse at the same time," said Heflin attorney Patrick Casey, "before that would not have been possible."

When court is scheduled, the court system serves 250 people or more daily. Even without court, 50-75 people visit the circuit clerk's office daily, according to Sarrell.

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# Court system expansion

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The former county commission office has become a small courtroom used for confidential cases involving juveniles and other legal actions requiring privacy. The extra space provides more flexibility when circuit court is in session in the main courtroom.

## *School system moves into former county facility*

After the county emergency management agency and 911 dispatch center moved into the Mountain Center, the administrative offices of the Cleburne County School System found a new home at the former county facility on Davenport Drive. In November 2013, the County Commission transferred the property to the school system for \$10.

Along with the school superintendent, offices for finance, human resources, federal programs, special education support, curriculum, professional development and certification along with other school programs were moved. The school system's building on Education Street still houses the school system's transportation department, technology coordinator and lead nurse.

# County plan

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"The interviews will provide a good sense of the expectations of not only the elected officials and others in county government, but also representatives of local industry, agriculture and business as well as other groups in the community," added Veal. "It is a collective effort to set a direction for the county government and create an effective strategy to move forward."

After compiling the detailed data about the county and completing the interviews, a series of long-range planning meetings will culminate in a strategic planning retreat. Using the information, county commissioners and the county's senior administrative staff will work with the Center's team to prioritize goals, commit to a mission statement and core values, and develop a plan that will move the county towards the community's vision for Cleburne County.

"The process will provide clarity," said Veal.

By the end of the strategic planning process, the county commission will have a framework for achieving the goals set by the community. It also provides a resource in planning future policies and budgets to ensure they are aligned with the community's vision for Cleburne County.



District Judge Melody Walker hears confidential court proceedings such as cases involving juveniles in the new small courtroom on the second floor of the county courthouse.



## *Cleburne County Mountain Center*

The Cleburne County Public Safety and Administration Center shares the Mountain Center with Jacksonville State University's Field School and other JSU programs. County offices at the Mountain Center include the compliance officer, emergency management agency, 911 central dispatch center, emergency operations center, human resources, finance and county administrator. The county commission work sessions and meetings are held at the Mountain Center.

The facility is located at 6751 Highway 78, Heflin, just off Southwire Drive.

# New windows improve courthouse safety

The Cleburne County Courthouse was built in 1907 and, until last year, the original windows were still intact. They were still top-notch windows but a 20-year-old fix had created a dangerous problem.

“To make the single pane windows more energy efficient, a quarter-inch thick piece of glass was affixed to each window,” said Ryan Robertson, Probate Judge and Ex-Officio County Commission Chairman. “Screws held the sheets of glass in place and as the screws rusted, the heavy glass created a danger to people walking outside the courthouse.”

Inside the windows were painted shut. No one could open the windows for cleaning. Of course, spiders and bugs found their way inside the windows which looked terrible inside and outside the courthouse, Robertson added. As the Cleburne County Commission began restoration work on the courthouse, it was discovered the single sheets of glass made it impossible to repair the outside window trim.

In August 2014, the County Commission chose Traywick Contractors of Birmingham through a bid process to replace the courthouse windows. Forsyth Building Company of Aniston served as the construction manager for the project.

“Our job was to help the county commissioners review the project specifications, set a schedule and oversee installation. We worked to ensure the county received a good warranty on the windows and the job was done properly,” said Harold Forsyth, owner of Forsyth Building Company.

The old windows were replaced with new ones from Anderson Company, which had built the original 1906 windows. It took about three months to replace the 86 windows, Forsyth said.

“We chose windows that were compatible to the aesthetics of the building to preserve the historic value of the building. The new windows are top quality and have a 20-year warranty. Unless a major storm hits the courthouse, we shouldn’t have to worry about them for a long time,” said County Commissioner Emmett Owen.

When he was elected to his first term as a county commissioner, Owen asked to help with the job of maintaining the county’s buildings.

“The courthouse was in desperate need of work and the county needed a schedule of maintenance work for the other



The Cleburne County Courthouse was built in 1907 and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

buildings,” Owen added.

Since 2012, major projects have included a new roof, restoration of the clock tower, painting the dome and adding a Lady Justice similar to the original statue which graced the courthouse dome.

“We can’t do it all in one day. We’ve made good progress in past five years and we’ll keep at it one step at a time,” Owen said.

He added teamwork was key to the successful restoration. The county administrator and county commission have ensured funds were allocated to the courthouse work and the Sheriff’s Department provided inmate labor to help save on the cost.

“Along with the county custodian Ronnie Allen, we’ve worked together to make the courthouse a priority,” Owen said.

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# Cavender appointed county 911 director

The Cleburne County Commission recently appointed Crystal Cavender as the new 911 director. Cavender was the chairman of the 911 Senior Communication Officers Committee and an on-call duty officer for Cleburne County Emergency Management Agency (EMA). She also serves as the county's human resources officer.

Cavender brings a background of hands-on experience and education to her new role. She worked as a 9-1-1 dispatcher for four years. As a member of the 911 Senior Communication Officers Committee, she helped manage the department's day-to-day activities. With the local EMA, she has assisted in coordinating the response to severe weather and other hazardous events that have impacted the county.

Cavender earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Emergency Management from Jacksonville State University and has supplemented her education with training from FEMA. She is certified in emergency medical, police and fire dispatch. Cavender began working with Cleburne County in 2009.

"My role is to serve as the 911 department's primary point of contact for op-



*Crystal Cavender*

erations and to make sure the department continues to run smoothly. The senior communication officers will help manage the everyday tasks," Cavender said.

The director's responsibilities include handling personnel issues, oversight of training and staffing of 911 positions, monitoring of the department's budget, and ensuring that equipment is properly maintained.

Cleburne County 911 began in 1996. A new dispatch center was opened in 2012 as part of the Cleburne County Mountain Center.

"We are very proud of our new facility. Our 911 has remained current in training and stays on the cutting edge of emergency dispatch technology," said Cavender. "Our dispatchers are responsible for five 911 emergency phone lines, three non-emergency lines and they act as an after-hours contact for local public works entities."

The 911 Central Dispatch is a hub for all emergency calls in the county. The department contracts with Cleburne County Emergency Medical Services, Sheriff's Department and the police departments in Heflin and Ranburne to meet their dispatch requirements. It also donates dispatch services to the 12 volunteer fire departments in Cleburne County. Along with the dispatch services, the department maintains the database of all physical addresses in Cleburne County.

*To reach Cleburne 911 for non-emergencies or for questions about physical addresses in the county, call 256.463.3820.*

# Pavilion sits at former water tower site



Until the 1990s, the water tower behind the courthouse was the tallest structure in Heflin. When the water tower was removed, a concrete pad remained near the pumphouse (the smaller building pictured left). Later the City of Heflin deeded the small area to the Cleburne County Commission. The pumphouse was converted into an office for county facilities management. A pavilion was built over the concrete pad.

*Water tower photo source: City of Heflin on Pinterest*

