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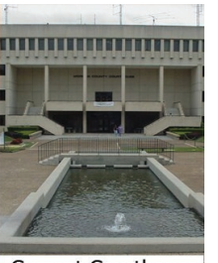

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MORGAN COUNTY COMMISSION **December 2013** **VOLUME 2, NO. 1**

Leadership shifts in Morgan sales tax office

Director retires, supervisor selected for replacement

By Sheryl Marsh
Communications Director

Eighteen years ago when Michelle Echols came to work for Morgan County's sales tax department she wanted to advance as high as she could through promotions, but she never imagined going to the top.

Well, it happened.

Just recently Echols was chosen director of the office, replacing Ed Sims whom the County Commission hired after creating the sales tax division in 1991. Sims' last day is Dec. 30th and Echols officially becomes director on Dec. 31.

Echols' first job was data entry clerk and from there she was promoted to sales tax supervisor. Being director was never a thought because: "At the time there were so many who had seniority and I felt like that would trump my chances of ever becoming supervisor," said Echols. "I was content with moving up as far as I could."

Echols has credentials for the post. She is a certified revenue examiner and has been a member of the County Revenue Officers of Alabama Association for over 10 years.

Please see Echols, page 6

Michelle Echols is the county's new sales tax director. She officially begins the new position Dec. 31.

From struggling to pay rent as law student to college mansion, judge tells story

Compiled by Sheryl Marsh
Communications Director

Morgan County District Judge Charles Langham is impressive.

He was a successful attorney of a private practice for more than 30 years, and voters elected him judge in 2008.

Behind his success, though, is a story about how he struggled to pay rent as a law student at the University of Alabama School of Law.

A change came. Unbelievable to him, but he went from struggling to keep a one-bedroom apartment to the college president's mansion.

No one can tell his story better than him.

Judge Langham

So here goes the judge's story in his words:

It was late August in 1975 and I had completed my second year of law school at the University of Alabama. Despite working three jobs that summer as a law clerk at a local law firm in Tuscaloosa, an instructor at

Please see Judge, page 7

Chunn retires from career, full focus on being coroner

By Sheryl Marsh
Communications Director

Morgan County Coroner Jeff Chunn dreamed of having multiple professions, and during his work history that spans more 25 years, he got to perform duties in three fields as well as his elected position.

Chunn, 50, retired in October as supervising captain of Huntsville Airport Authority Police and Fire Department.

Now, he has turned his full focus toward serving the county as coroner, a post voters elected him to in 2010.

Chunn

He worked for the Air-

Please see Chunn, page 6

Bidding for cause

Local, area businesses give generously , Morgan County Silent Auction a success

Local and area businesses, including some in Huntsville donated merchandise that lured bidders to Morgan County's silent auction for United Way on Nov. 5th. The annual event at the courthouse was a huge success because of their generosity. Huntsville International Airport donated a $500 airline ticket voucher; Lynn Layton Chevrolet gave a set of new tires and Kohl's provided five volunteers to help at the auction through the store's grant program . Communications Director Sheryl Marsh applied for a $500 grant for issuance to United Way for the county and the volunteers were part of the agreement. They were great. The day began with breakfast, which Chick-fil-A, Jack's and Steak & Shake gave, and coffee donated by Starbucks as well as milk and orange juice that Lucky's Supermarket gave. During and after breakfast county employees browsed and placed bids on items and at the end of the day all merchandise had owners. People should know that the merchants who said yes to our requests are loyal to this community and they obviously care about people.

Two of five Kohl's employees who helped at the auction.

License Commissioner Sue Baker Roan and employee Gertie Nicholson.

County employees enjoyed the auction.

More auction… Please see who donated on pages 14,15

Employees placed bids and checked them all day.

The Home Depot donated this gas grill with cover, utensils and hickory chips.

Work under way in all four county districts

By Sheryl Marsh
Communications Director

Work on roads, bridges and facilities continues in the county's four districts. Means Bridge that sprawls districts 1 and 2 is out for construction and so is a bridge on Wilhite Road in District 3.

"We are proud of the work that's in progress in the county," said District 3 Commissioner Don Stisher. "Our primary goal is to make Morgan County comfortable and safe for our residents. When the work is complete we believe we will have accomplished that in the respective areas. Then, we will continue to work every day to improve other areas of the county."

District 1 Commissioner Jeff Clark said he is proud of the Means Bridge project.

"We are really grateful that we were able to acquire ATRIP funds to replace this aged bridge," said Clark. "It will be a major improvement for both districts 1 and 2."

County residents who regularly go to senior citizen centers in districts 2 and 4 for activities and meals will have new facilities to enjoy soon.

The Somerville senior site appears to be nearing completion and so does one at Union Hill in District 4.

"I'm extremely proud of the center in Somerville and I anxiously await its finish," said District 2 Commissioner Randy Vest.

The Union Hill center will replace the facility at Morgan City and District 4 Commissioner Greg Abercrombie said residents will be proud of the new building.

"This center was built for their comfort and enjoyment," Abercrombie said. "I believe they will thoroughly enjoy it."

Please see work Photos on page 13

No grace period on property tax deadline

Dec. 31 deadline for tax payments

The Morgan County Revenue Commissioner's office has been receiving property tax payments since Oct. 1 and the deadline is Dec. 31.

In the past property owners have had grace periods that extended the deadline due to the courthouse being closed on New Year's Eve.

This year the courthouse will be open and the revenue commissioner's office will receive property tax payments. If paid late penalties may apply.

The office is located on the second floor of the courthouse.

Patriot Day Blood Drive draws 77 donors

Morgan County partnered with LIFESouth Community Blood Centers to hold a Patriot Day blood drive in September to commemorate 9/11, and it was a huge success with 77 donors.

LIFESouth stationed a blood mobile at Morgan County Area Transportation System (MCATS) on Sept. 10th and received 12 donors. Sixty-five people gave blood on Patriot Day at the courthouse.

"This was fantastic," said LIFESouth Donor Recruiter Cherry Hammonds. "This is an incredible gift to the community."

Hammonds said the donations will help save the lives of 231 people through various procedures.

"We are elated and most appreciative of the large number of people who came to give blood on this special occasion," said County Commission Chairman Ray Long. "We look forward to future blood drives with LIFESouth as well as Red Cross."

Life South Donor Recruiter Cherry Hammonds processes information for a donor.

Courthouse employees, officials and residents participated in the blood drive. Top left, Chief Assistant District Attorney Jerry Knight after having his blood drawn. Top right, Chief Juvenile Probation Officer Jeff Simmons relaxes after giving blood. Below, left, a resident was moved to donate blood in honor of the day , and right, Carla Bond, crime victims officer in the DA's office was glad to give.

They bled for their team

Total includes 12 donors at MCATS 0n Nov. 18th

LIFESouth/Morgan County Alabama-Auburn Blood Drive a first for Austin JROTC student

By Sheryl Marsh
Communications Director

When Woody Bond, 16, learned from his mother Carla Bond that he could be a blood donor he anxiously wanted to give, and he did at LIFESouth/Morgan County Bleed for your Team blood drive on Nov. 20th.

Bond was one of 61 donors whose blood will help with 161 medical procedures, according to LIFESouth Donor Recruiter Cherry Hammonds.

"It was another awesome event and we appreciate everyone who came to give blood," Hammonds said.

Carla Bond, who is crime victims officer for the district attorney's office, said she's proud of Woody, a junior at Austin High School.

"When I told him that he was old enough to be a blood donor and that we were having a blood drive at the courthouse he immediately wanted to give," she said. "Woody has really grown and matured into a selfless young man. I attribute much of that to his participation in the JROTC program at Austin through which he has learned self-confidence, commitment and consideration of others."

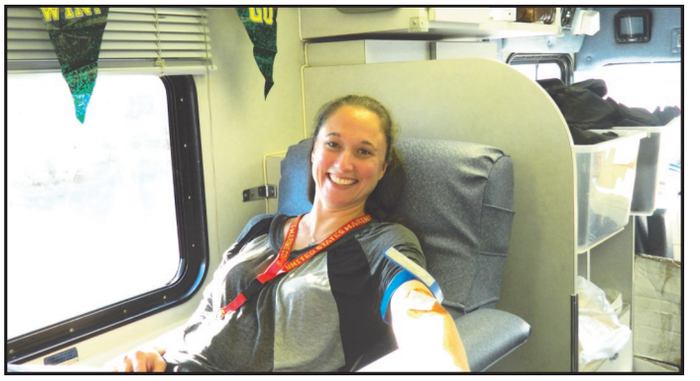
Woody agreed that the school program has helped with his development as a person.

"JROTC has taught me to look for opportunities to volunteer and to help others," he said. "Being a blood donor is a worthwhile way to do that. The blood that is donated through LIFESouth will stay in this area for our community. I can give blood when Austin has its next blood drive and since I know what to expect, I can encourage other students to donate as well."

Carla says she's prepping Woody's younger brother Jonathan, 14, to be a donor when he becomes of age.

"I had my younger son at the courthouse blood drive to watch and learn as his brother was donating so that when he is 16 he can participate in the blood drive, too," she said. "Jonathan will be joining JROTC next year as a freshman at Austin High."

Woody Bond and his mother Carla



Jamie Hawkins

Shellia Mitchell

District 2 Commissioner Randy Vest was a donor.

Echols

Continued from page 1

When Sims' retirement came things had changed. Those who had seniority over Echols were gone and she applied for the chief position and was selected.

"I was already fulfilling some of the duties so I felt comfortable moving into the position because of the knowledge I have about it," she said. "It wasn't like starting all over from scratch. The work load just quadrupled."

As director she will oversee six employees. The average, annual sales tax collection is about $18 million.

The office is a dual operation with enforcement for businesses paying sales tax and mobile home owners complying with registration laws.

"Out of this office we make sure each business is properly licensed and mobile home owners are in compliance. We enforce laws. We are not responsible for issuance of licenses, that's done in the license commissioner's office. My goal is for this office to keep an open mind and always remember that we are here to serve the county and help the taxpayers understand the laws regarding sales tax and remittance."

Chairman Ray Long, who interviewed and chose Echols for the job, said he's pleased with her moving into the position.

"Michelle has been with the county almost 20 years and has been a faithful employee," said Long. "She knows the job and we are confident she's an excellent fit for it."

Echols said she's grateful for the opportunity.

"I will continue to apply a strong work ethic to do this job as I have in the past," said Echols.

Echols, her husband John and their children, Savannah, 11 and Jonathan, 10 reside in Decatur.

Chunn

Continued from page 1

port Authority 15 years and advanced to the rank of captain and was supervisor of the department. Prior to that he worked 10 years for Hartselle Fire Dept.

"I thoroughly enjoyed my career," Chunn said. "Most people do one career their entire life. I got to do all the jobs I wanted to do in my career. I grew up wanting to be a paramedic, a firefighter and police officer. In later years I saw myself being coroner. It's been amazing."

Although he didn't have any problems multi-tasking, Chunn decided to retire since he had worked the required number of years to do so.

Chunn is on call 24-7 as coroner and he keeps a steady pace when responding to death calls. Retirement gives him even more mobility.

He has an office at the courthouse where he meets with families who have lost loved ones, attorneys and others. He does reports there, also.

Mainly, he works from his home office due to his on-call schedule.

He gives clarity to the job description of the coroner, and he has made efforts to move with advancing technology.

"People shouldn't think that a coroner's sole duty is to pronounce a person dead," he said. "It doesn't end with a death certificate. The follow-up is tremendous. I am working a case from two years ago that an insurance company still has in litigation."

He has improved the office.

"We went to electronic death certificates and we established an inter-agency that's connected to the criminal justice system that gives us access to NCIC records which helps in matters such as death investigations. We are also able to submit fingerprints to the (Alabama) Department of Forensic Sciences to help identify a deceased person."

Chunn says working as a deputy coroner under former coroner Gene Shelton for 10 years helped prepare him to do the job.

"I still call on him. I go by and talk with him about various cases because I appreciate his wisdom and knowledge," he said.

Being a coroner is not depressing to him, but there are some touching cases.

"It's heart - breaking when I have to deal with a teenager's death…to have to notify a family of their kid's death," Chunn shared. "But, I don't get depressed because being coroner also allows me to help people during the worst time of their life."

Chunn stands near a framed arrangement of his multiple professions and accomplishments, a retirement gift from the Airport Authority.

Courthouse tour

Eighty-six West Morgan High ninth graders and their teachers toured the courthouse in September. Here, they listen to Judge Steve Haddock's Judicial Assistant Donna Hunter explain circuit court procedures.

Judge

Continued from page 1

a junior college, and a bartender at a Chinese restaurant, my funds were running so low that I had to supplement my apartment rent by maintaining the yard of my landlord, Mrs. Marc Ray Clement.

My prospects for completing my third year of law school were beginning to look bleak and hopeless to me.

Then, everything changed when my landlady knocked on my apartment door to ask me: "Charles, how would you like to live in the president's mansion?" My initial response was to ask Mrs. Clement if she was trying to get rid of me, knowing the awkwardness that I had caused her by being unable to fully pay my monthly rent. Mrs. Clement assured me that was not the case, but instead, informed me that a search was being conducted to find a student to live in the president's mansion while then, University of Alabama President F. David Mathews took a leave of absence to serve as a cabinet member under U.S. President Gerald Ford.

I truly did not regard my chances of being selected to be very good, but, in retrospect, I believe Mrs. Clement had the inside track on the selection because of her close friendship with dignitaries such as Paul "Bear" Bryant and Munny Sokol, a prominent Tuscaloosa businessman.

To my surprise, I was notified that I had been picked to be the first student to live for a year in the stately and beautiful mansion of the University of Alabama! Suddenly, I could see the light at the end of the tunnel for my dream of becoming a lawyer and I have always felt a deep sense of gratitude to Mrs. Clement for her part in this incredible stroke of good fortune. I moved into the president's mansion in early September 1975.

In a matter of weeks, I went from living in a small one -room apartment to residing in a beautiful, three- story, Greek Revival mansion, completed in 1841. It was located less than two blocks from the Farrah Law School building. Not only that, but I did not have to pay any rent or utilities, and a WATTS telephone line was available to me so that I could call my parents in Pine Apple, Alabama long distance at any time for free!

To add icing to the cake, a full -time staff consisting of a butler, maid and grounds keeper maintained the mansion! Since I no longer had to pay rent, I was able to give up my job as a bartender but continued to clerk at the law firm of Zeanah, Donald, Williams and Hust and to teach economics at the Tuscaloosa campus of Brewer State Junior College.

I lived on the ground floor in the bedroom situated on the southwest corner of the mansion. This room was primarily used by guests of the university president. Under my living arrangement, I was allowed to let my parents stay with me at the mansion several weekends, which was quite a special treat for them.

I moved out of the mansion in September 1976 after taking the Alabama state bar examination in Montgomery, but I have many special memories of when I, a struggling law student, working three jobs, had the amazing opportunity to reside at the president's mansion on the campus of The University of Alabama. I have been, and always will be extremely humbled and grateful to the late Mrs. Marc Ray Clement for the kindness she showed me by making it possible for me to live in the mansion, and complete my legal education at the University of Alabama School of Law.

Remembering what that opportunity meant to my ability to finish law school, I have always tried to be a part of organizations that make opportunities available to people who might be in a similar situation of needing help. I have come to realize that all of us have the unique possibility of making a life -changing difference in the life of another person.

District Judge Charles Langham

Courtesy photo

Judge Langham poses near the UA presidential mansion where he lived for a year. He was a student at the university's School of Law.

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About *The Voice of Morgan County*

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Please be sure to view community videos on our website by going to www.co.morgan.al.us. There, click on county departments, then select Communications/Community Relations and click on multimedia.

Holiday closings

The Morgan County Courthouse will be closed in observance of the following holidays:
Christmas: Dec. 24 & 25
New Year: Jan. 1

Garbage collection

Morgan County Environmental Services Department runs regular garbage routes on all holidays with the exception of Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day. Garbage routes are re-scheduled for those two holidays. Other county offices are closed on holidays. Occasionally district shop workers have to work holidays if there's an emergency with roadways.

Florette Seniors enjoy log cabin activities

By Sheryl Marsh
Communications Director

In expressing her feelings about the Florette Senior Citizen Center Betty Fuqua may have shared where her "fountain of youth" is hidden.

"It keeps me active and keeps my brain working," Fuqua said about going to the center. "If I stayed at home I wouldn't do anything but sleep and watch television."

The 94-year-old is one of 15 who go to the center located in rural Morgan County, and she and the others are aging gracefully. She was once director of the center but gave up that position last year. Sherry Bradford is now the director.

Like at the other nutritional sites, the Florette seniors have fun playing cards and other games.

"We play spinners or dominoes if we don't have enough people to play cards," said JoAnn Johnson, 80.

All like the fellowship and nutritious lunch, but some have other reasons for going to the center.

"I like it to get out doing a lot of stuff at home," chuckled Margaret Mitchell, 74.

Before relocating to the cabin in the park, seniors gathered at the community's volunteer fire department.

MCATS/Commission on Aging Director Debra Gardner said the cabin became the Florette senior center about 11 or 12 years ago.

"We were really happy to get to come here because of all of the space," Gardner said. "

The rustic walls are decorated with old paintings and a wood heater keeps the cabin warm on cold days.

About 15 residents in this rural community gather daily at the Florette Senior Citizen Center for activities and a nutritious meal. The center is located in Danny Huskey Park in District 4. Seniors in photos above and below enjoyed conversation while playing card games earlier this month.

MCATS director one of 50 in U.S. chosen for national transit summit

MCATS /Commission on Aging Director Debra Gardner is one of 50 transportation officials from throughout the United States chosen to participate in a Transit Summit that will be held in Scottsdale, Ariz. in February.

She will share information with 49 peers on how she runs the county's transportation program and she will also receive data from them on their respective operations.

Gardner

"I am very excited and looking forward to attending the summit, " Gardner said. "I am honored to have been one of 50 chosen on a national level. I hope to share ideas about our program that may be new to my peers and I'm sure I will gather some that are new to me."

Gardner will spend two days at the summit and there will be no cost to the county.

"I'm confident she will represent the county well," said Chairman Ray Long. "Debra does an excellent job as director of our transportation system and aging programs."

County offers Coast2Coast Rx card to help residents with drug, dental, vision costs

By Sheryl Marsh
Communications Director

The Morgan County Commission is offering residents a card that could save up to 75% on prescription drug costs and provide other savings on dental, vision and hearing services.

The Coast2Coast Rx card is free to county residents and may be presented at 60,000 participating pharmacies and many independent drug stores. The card may be used by the entire family.

"This is a benefit that we tapped into about a couple of years ago and we haven't had a lot of participation," said Chairman Ray Long. "It's free and could help a lot of people save money on those costs."

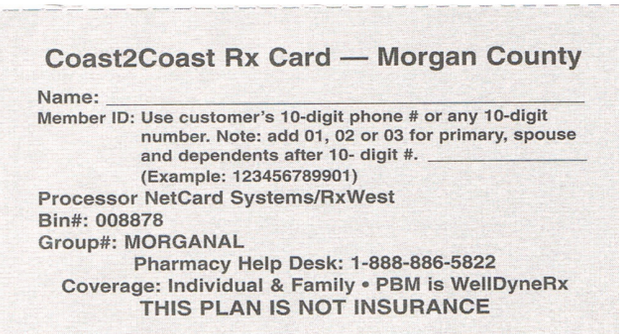
The card is ready to use, no activation required, and has no limitations on usage. Individuals do not have to fill out an application or any other documents and there is no expiration date on the card. It covers drugs that are not covered in healthcare plans. You cannot be denied, everyone is accepted.

In addition to the prescription drug costs you may enjoy these savings as well:

Save up to 60% on family dental needs.

10% to 50% on vision

50% to 80% on lab and imaging tests. (Pre-payment for this field required).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Walking a mile in her shoes

The Morgan County Domestic Violence Task Force and Crisis Services of North Alabama held the annual "Walk a Mile in her Shoes" on Oct. 18th at the courthouse. As in the past, elected officials put on women's shoes, mostly high heels, and strutted around during the event. Left, Decatur Mayor Don Kyle tries to find his size. Right, young boys and Chairman Ray Long show off theirs during the program. Later, Kyle joined the crowd in flip flops. He didn't find a pair of heels.

Sheriff develops program for safety of communities, schools

By Sheryl Marsh
Communications Director

Morgan County Sheriff Ana Franklin has built a program that she says will make the county and schools safer.

The sheriff's new "10-33" program was developed from almost $1 million of free equipment, grants and networking.

"The 10-33 program is a military surplus program that has been put into place had been available to law enforcement, but had not been utilized by the sheriff's office in previous administrations," Franklin said. "Capt. Ron Livingston, Sgt. Danny McDaniel and I, with a team of support personnel have been diligently working to acquire the much needed equipment and provide training to our staff in case of a future natural disaster or for any type of emergency response or active shooting/hostage situation."

Franklin's department has received equipment worth more than $731,660 and she has partnered with the city of Priceville, which donated office and storage space for the equipment at a central location in the county.

"This gives us access to this equipment and also provides an Incident Command Center for us to operate from," said Franklin. "This is just some of the equipment we have been able to obtain free of charge for Morgan County citizens."

In addition, the sheriff's office has acquired grants to place more resource officers in schools.

"This would not have been possible without the cooperation of the school board, local municipalities and our County Commission," she said.

Training is a part of the program, also.

"We have begun to train the entire sheriff's office and jail staff for active shooter tactical entry and deployment to answer the call if we should have a situation in any of our schools, businesses or government offices," Franklin explained. " Our goal is to provide the best training and equipment possible to respond where there is a need. Thanks for everyone's hard work and dedication in helping me provide necessary equipment and training that will enable us to keep our citizens safe and provide service in the event of an emergency."

Sheriff Ana Franklin

Sheriff Ana Franklin says her department uses all of this equipment and more to help with special tasks and it would be valuable in severe emergencies.

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Chairman announces final round of ATRIP funding for county...grand total $19 million

By Sheryl Marsh
Communications Director

Morgan County has $11.9 million to replace aged bridges and resurface roads, County Commission Chairman Ray Long announced in October.

Long held a press conference to inform the public of the county's final award of money through the Alabama Transportation Rehabilitation and Improvement Program (ATRIP).

The grand total is $19.1 million, which is divided between the county, Decatur and other municipalities. The county received the largest allotment.

Decatur's allotment is $6.4 million; Trinity, $448,000; and Priceville, $320,000.

The county's money will replace six bridges and resurface two roads. Decatur's funds will pay for adding lanes to two streets, resurfacing three streets and rehabilitating a bridge overpass. Trinity's allotment is for resurfacing Old Highway 24 from Woodall Road to West Town limits; and Priceville's money will replace a bridge on Cave

Please see ATRIP, page 13

Attending the press conference from left, Priceville Mayor Melvin Duran, District 2 Commissioner Randy Vest, District 4 Commissioner Greg Abercrombie, Long and County Engineer Greg Bodley.

Birthday celebration at the courthouse

Morgan County District Court Judge Charles Langham surprised his judicial assistant Jackie Lansdell with a party and guests to celebrate her 50th birthday in September at the courthouse. Above, Lansdell reads one of the cards she received while daughter, Shyanne and son Ethan listen. Right, Lansdell and Langham. The judge said Lansdell has worked for him over 30 years, first in his private law practice, and she continued to do so after he became judge in 2008.

ATRIP

Continued from page 12

Springs Road at Ginhouse Branch.

Currently, in Morgan County bridges are being replaced on Danville and Wilhite roads, according to County Engineer Greg Bodley.

The county has paid its 20 percent match of the funding for the projects and the state will pay the remainder. Cost for the two bridge projects is $3.9 million and the county's share is $780,000. The county's total share for all projects is $2.9 million.

"On our own we wouldn't be able to replace all of these bridges ," Long said. I'm happy that we have an engineer who is on top of prioritizing projects and getting all information and documents to the state to in insure our county is eligible and gets its part of money when it's made available."

Other commissioners praised Bodley as well.

"Greg is one of a kind," said District 3 Commissioner Don Stisher. "He does his job with a spirit of excellence and precision."

ATRIP projects

Bridge replacement on Danville Road: ATRIP, $2.4 million; county, $600,000
Bridge replacement on Wilhite Road at Flint Creek: ATRIP, $720,000; county, $180,000
Bridge replacement on Kirby Bridge Road: ATRIP, $3.2 million; county, $800,000
Bridge replacement on Rescue Road: ATRIP, $300,000; county $75,000
Bridge replacement on Vaughn Bridge Road: ATRIP, $3.2 million; county, $800,000
Bridge replacement on Cedar Creek Church Road: ATRIP, $720,000; county, $180,000
Resurface Cotaco-Florette Road and replace Cotaco Creek Bridge: ATRIP, $1.2 million;
county, $300,000
Resurface County Highway 35 from county line north to Eva: ATRIP, $200,000; county, $50,000

Work in districts

Work is under way on Means Bridge on Danville Road. Half of the bridge is in District 1 and half in District 2.

Progress is being made toward completion of the Somerville Senior Center in District 2.

Work is still in progress on replacement of Wilhite Bridge in District 3.

This concession stand at Brindlee Mountain ballpark in District 4 is almost finished.

Chairman guest speaker for Lions Club

Chairman Ray Long was keynote speaker at a Lions Club weekly luncheon in October. Long told the group about the financial condition of the county and various projects under way in districts throughout the county. Also, he talked about how the commissioners work together in unity. Club president Chip Miller, right presented him with a certificate after his speech.

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Happy Holidays

From us

To you

THE MORGAN COUNTY COMMISSION

SEATED: DISTRICT 2 COMMISSIONER RANDY VEST AND DISTRICT 3 COMMISSIONER DON STISHER. STANDING: FROM LEFT, DISTRICT 1 COMMISSIONER JEFF CLARK, CHAIRMAN RAY LONG AND DISTRICT 4 COMMISSIONER GREG ABERCROMBIE.

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