

Residents want locked gate across Eiler Road taken down

By Tommy Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER — Marvin Reese Turner, and some other residents who own property in the Melvin community told the County Commission on Monday that someone has erected a locked gate across what they say is a public road.

Eiler Road is a short dirt road that veers off to the northeast from Plantation Drive in the Melvin community, not far from the Mississippi state line.

Turner said that he owns property there but no longer has access to the land because some hunters out of Mobile who have leased property in the area have put up a gate across the road.

“We believe it is a public road and would like to find out what steps need to be taken to take the gate down,” he said. “We have lived there all our lives, and now I am not able to get to my land.”

Turner said that none of the adjacent landowners were notified ahead of time.

“They made no effort to give me a key,” he said. “They come out of Mobile County and put up a locked gate and I just don’t feel that’s right.”

Commissioner Henry Lovette said he was in complete agreement.

“If our lawyer researches it and finds it is a public road, then it needs to be open,” he said.

Commissioner Clyde Dixon, in whose district the road is located, said he believes it is a public road.

“Whatever steps we need to take, I’d be in favor of getting it started,” Dixon said.

Turner said that it is the lease-holder and not the owner of the property who is responsible.

Commissioner Dandy Brown also agreed with his two counterparts.

“You should have right to get to your property,” he said.

Assistant Co. Engineer Larry Singley said that a person with oil leases in the area came into his office last week also

complaining of not being able to get into the property.

Singley said that he had spoken to former engineer Jason Sturdivant about the matter and that since the road is shown on maps in the engineer’s office, that usually indicates that it is, in fact, a public road.

Probate Judge D’Wayne May and the commission directed Singley to work with attorney Lee McPhearson to research the matter and report back at the March 12th meeting.

Officials: Wilcox County tornado damage looked like “another Katrina”

By Tommy Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER — Bill Gibson, Director of the Choctaw Co. Emergency Management Agency, said at the March 5th meeting of the Choctaw Co. Commission that himself, Sheriff James Lovette, Chief Deputy Lee Henry McGrew, and Gilbertown Chief of Police Tom Abate all traveled to Wilcox County last week to see if they could offer any assistance in the wake of a destructive tornado that roared through the Miller’s Bend community.

According to Gibson, the scene of the destruction almost defies description.

“Try to remember what the Gulf Coast looked like when Katrina hit, that would be a pretty accurate picture,” he said. “We were there to help, but we also started looking at it as a training opportunity, and we asked ourselves, what if this happened in Choctaw County? The question was, are we prepared to respond to such an event here?”

Wilcox County — being a small, rural, county with population and economy very similar to Choctaw County — offered a good standard of comparison, Gibson said.

The powerful F-2 tornado, with winds approaching 160 MPH, ripped through the community out of the same line of severe storms that had also threatened Choctaw County

with a tornado warning just minutes earlier.

Among the things Gibson said the group learned was that incident command is essential, along with an accurate assessment of the damage and the needs, central staging areas, controlled access to the site to keep sightseers out, good communications, and the need to complete any search and rescue operations before the event shifts into a “recovery” mode and heavy equipment is brought in.

“There would be a need for some basic supplies such as barrier tape, spray paint, garbage bags, food, tarps, water, and making arrangements to borrow or rent portable restrooms, lights and tents,” he said. “We have some of these items but we do not have the quantities that we need.”

Gibson suggested that a \$5,000 grant recently given to the county for emergency operations needs be used to prepare for the eventuality of such a tornado disaster in Choctaw County.

At Millers Ferry, more than 40 houses were destroyed, one man was killed and several others seriously injured, he said.

“Along those same lines, I would like to get a list of all equipment and personnel that the Commission has available, so that, should an event like this happen to our county, we are as prepared as possible to deal with it,” Gibson said.

Gibson said he would submit a form for the board to fill out and return to him.

In other matters, Gibson said that he has been told that most of the federal funds from HUD that are allocated for Hurricane Katrina relief projects will be going to the Gulf Coast.

The county had applied for funding with which to replace the hurricane-damaged roof of the Courthouse, but Gibson said that it is unlikely that the Commission will be getting any of those funds.

“I have advised the Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission that we need to try to locate source of funding for a new courthouse roof and also a generator for the North Choctaw Water Authority,” Gibson said. “I have also put in a direct request with Rep. Artur Davis’ office for help with funding for a new roof.”

He added that the county may be getting closer to receiving grant money to help with the purchase of emergency generators for two other public water systems in the county.

A National Strategic Stockpile exercise was completed last week, and the county received a final report on a terrorism-response exercise which was held at Southern Choctaw High School in January.

A consultant will be here this week to do a risk assessment study on number of public buildings in the county, he said.

Citizens encouraged to take part in “Operation Clean Sweep”, March 31

BUTLER — A group of concerned citizens has been meeting for several weeks to plan “Operation Clean Sweep”, a day in which the entire county is being encouraged to participate in a pick-up campaign to help clean up the littered, ugly rights of way on county roads.

Choctaw Co. Commissioners Clyde Dixon and Henry Lovette said at the March 5th meeting of that board that they would like to use county dump trucks to pick up collected trash from central pickup points and haul it to the landfill, if that is allowed by law.

Probate Judge D’Wayne May asked attorney Lee McPhearson to research the question of whether the county can lawfully participate in such a manner, as well as provide plastic garbage bags for use by volunteers, and report back at the March 12th meeting.

May, Commissioners Lovette, Dixon and C.D. “Budd” Ruffin have all participated as concerned citizens themselves in the series of community meetings to prepare for the countywide cleanup day. Ruffin was not present Monday because he was in Washington attending the annual Legislative Conference of the National Association of Counties, but has pledged his full support for the project.

“A group of citizens has met twice on this now,” May said. “There’s also been good discussions about recycling, too.”

Lovette said that while the people are enthusiastic and willing to get involved, the commission should use the opportunity to help in any way it can.

“One thing’s for sure, if people do decide to visit our county and they find it looking like a pigpen, they aren’t coming back,” Lovette said.

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Tommy Campbell said that the group of citizens from all over Choctaw County is encouraging individual communities “from countyline to countyline” to organize clean-up efforts in their own areas.

“If we could get every school, every fire department, every church, every business, and every citizen committed to picking up trash for four hours that day in their own communities, just think about what a difference that would make in our county,” Campbell said. “Our county is a mess, we all know that, and if it’s going to get any better it has to start with each one of us.”

Several churches, fire departments, youth groups, and others have already indicated their willingness to get a group of volunteers together and help pick up trash on the county’s littered rights-of-way.

Campbell said if people can’t pick up trash on that Saturday, any day of the week before or the week after will be fine.

“We just thought it would be nice to give our county a good scrubbing, a clean, new ‘face’ in time for Easter,” he said.

Garbage bags will be provided to any group that needs them, and it is hoped that donors can be found to help provide brightly-colored safety vests, food and water for the volunteers.

Terry Kelley, manager of the Choctaw Co. Regional Landfill and district manager for Arrow Waste Disposal, has also been a part of the discussions, and has offered to place large dumpsters at central locations around the county, and to pick them up and haul them to the landfill afterward at no cost.

Commissioners have indicated that — if allowed by law — they would be willing to station dump trucks at churches, fire departments or other central drop-off points so

that volunteers could also load bags of trash directly onto the trucks.

Persons or groups who plan to participate in the countywide effort are asked to call Campbell at **The Choctaw Sun** in Gilbertown (251-843-6397, or 800-838-4SUN) and get their name on the list so that volunteers will know which groups are working in specific areas.

Also, this will help in getting “before” and “after” pictures of the cleaned-up areas, he said.

Volunteers are asked to wear bright-colored t-shirts on that day, preferably a t-shirt yellow, if they have them.

Adult volunteers will also be available to sign voucher forms for high school students who work during the event who need to earn “community service hours” toward graduation.

The group is meeting each Tuesday at 7 p.m. — alternating between Town Hall in Gilbertown and Old Buddies Restaurant in Butler — to plan the event, and volunteers are most welcome to come and take part in the discussions. The next meeting will be March 13th at Old Buddies.

The group of citizens, which is made up of people of all races, from all over the county, hopes to eventually partner with PALS — People Against a Littered State — for future clean-up projects, to hold the countywide clean-up days at least twice a year, in the spring and fall, to encourage local schools to add an anti-litter curriculum to their instructional programs, and to look into what it would take to set up a wide-scale recycling program.

Judge May and members of the Commission are expected to sign a resolution at their March 12th meeting designating Saturday, March 31st as “Operation Clean Sweep Day” in Choctaw County.

Commissioner has productive NaCO meeting in DC

By Tommy Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

WASHINGTON, DC — Choctaw Co. Commissioner C.D. “Budd” Ruffin attended the National Association of Counties annual Legislative Conference this week in the nation’s capital, visiting with local legislators and getting an opportunity to hear from a variety of other federal officials, including several presidential candidates.

Overall, Ruffin told the **Sun**, it was a productive trip and gave him insight on a number of issues that could potentially or will affect people in Choctaw County as well as the rest of the nation.

The annual gathering, held March 3-7, brought together almost 2,000 county officials to discuss the needs of their areas with federal officials, and to learn of pending legislation that could impact their counties.

Ruffin spoke to the **Sun** by phone on Wednesday shortly before leaving Washington for home.

“We saw the need to urge Congress to restore funding to key state and local Homeland Security assistance programs,” Ruffin said. “Since September 11, communities of all sizes have had to enhance their level of preparedness to deal with potential chemical and biological attacks, and other hazards for our citizens.”

Also discussed was the need to pass the Methamphetamine Remediation Research Act.

“Currently, there are no federal standards to determine if a former ‘meth’ lab site is safe and livable,” Ruffin said. The legislation was first introduced in 2005 but died after it became bogged down in a committee.

Clandestine ‘meth’ labs have become one of the nation’s top drug problems in recent years.

Ruffin said that local airports were also on the agenda.

“This year, Congress is scheduled to reauthorize the federal government’s airport and aviation program,” he said.

The program, known as Vision 100, expires on September 30 and provides substantial assistance to county-owned airports.

“It is important for the reauthorization of this bill so that airports in small counties like Choctaw would not have to close completely,” Ruffin said, adding that he had an opportunity while in Washington to talk about the local facility with federal lawmakers.

The commissioner has been a proponent of increasing security at the local airport, which is located on Ala. 10 east near Lavaca.

Another issue which will eventually affect all Americans is the “Real Identification Act”.

“In 2005, Congress passed a bill that requires individuals entering into airports and federal buildings to have a federally-recognized ID,” Ruffin said. “In other words, a new type of identification other than what most of us carry around today. If we get a call to go to the IRS office, we will need this ID. If we go to visit an individual at a VA hospital, we will need this ID. If we go into a federal courthouse or even a post office in many cases, we will need this ID.”

Many people, he said, are not even aware of the act.

NaCO attendees also urged Congress to support funding for Community Development Block Grants.

“As many of us should know, CDBG is the grant program that brought public water to many citizens in Choctaw County, as well as other programs,” he said.

Ruffin said that many more issues were discussed, but that he just wanted to give readers of the Sun a brief synopsis of his participation in the event.

“I came to Washington, DC in support of Choctaw County,” he said.

Ruffin said that, at the time he called on Wednesday afternoon, that it was snowing in the nation’s capital.

“When you go from one office to another and look back, you find you have walked several miles,” he laughed. “I will be glad to return home to Choctaw County!”

Special guest speakers during the week included presidential candidates Sen. John McCain (R-Arizona), Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Delaware), Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Nebraska), and Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), as well as Gov. Brian Schweitzer (D-Montana), U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters, and former Louisiana Sen. John Breaux.

Bill would ban teens from using cell phones while driving

By Tommy Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

MONTGOMERY — Teenagers who can’t stop yacking on their cell phones while driving may be in for a big change in their 21st-century-communications lifestyles if the Alabama Legislature has

its way.

Legislation to ban teen drivers — who are 17 years old or younger — from using cell phones was approved on a voice-vote Wednesday by the Public Safety Committee of the Alabama House of Representatives.

Rep. Jim McClendon, R-Springville,

sponsored the bill and said that it would affect both hands-on models and hands-free types of cell phones.

McClendon, who said that his bill is patterned after similar legislation in Tennessee, Colorado, Maine, and several other states, is based on the fact that teen drivers lack experience, and talking

to their friends on cell phones while trying to navigate traffic situations often distracts them and leads to accidents.

If approved, the bill would carry a fine of up to \$150 for persons caught violating the law.

The bill now goes to the full House for consideration.

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