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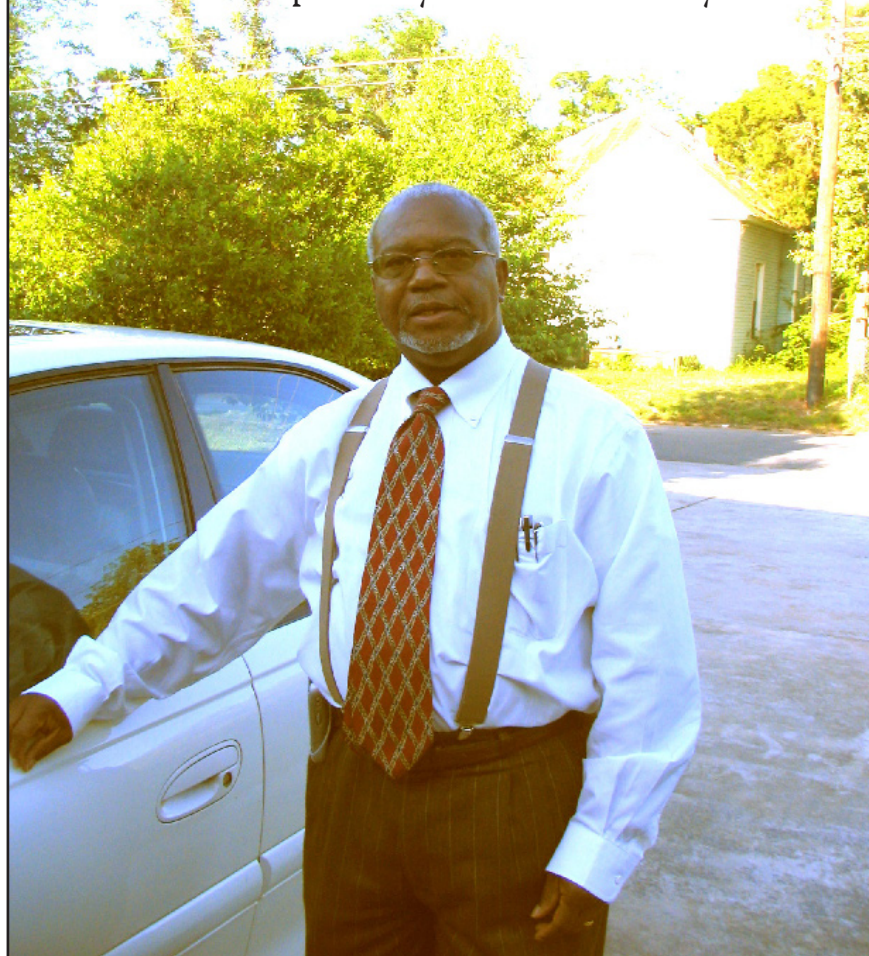
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17 YEARS, COUNTY JAIL HAS BEEN COMMISSIONER'S PERSONAL CROSS TO BEAR

Randolph County Commissioner Lathonia J. Wright has served on the Randolph County Commission for 17 years.



Charlotte A. Clark-Frierson
Associate Editor

Wedowee, Alabama
Randolph County's first and only black Commissioner, Lathonia Wright says that in many respects, Randolph County's jail has been his personal cross to bear.

By no means the easiest or most popular of duties that come under the jurisdiction of the County Commission, oversight of the jail has probably made Wright it's closest watchman and strongest advocate.

"During previous administrations, the Commissioners appointed me Chairman to oversee the courthouse and the jail. As a result, any complaints about the jail are placed at my feet, but often, they end up on my heart. I don't make the decisions but I take it back and present it to the Commissioners and say, "Here's the situation..."

Why that? He was asked. "I guess, because they know I'm concerned; they know my passion for the jail, and there are more blacks incarcerated than white."

But Wright confesses, "I used to take it home with me, but I had to let it go, because I don't want to have

a heart attack and die from it. If I just worried 24-7 about the thing...I mean, we've got seventy-something inmates in there.... I believe the stress of it would kill me."

Commissioner Lathonia Wright, who was elected to the Commission in November of 1990, says, "Almost immediately after I came on board, overcrowding in the jail developed into a growing problem. Down through the years, I've witnessed the deterioration of the building; we've had jail riots. It's disturbing. Some of the overcrowding was due to the county having to hold state prisoners, because of overcrowding in the state correctional facilities."

A major question was "Is it absolutely necessary that everybody there be incarcerated?"

I think judges at times, in certain situations do take that into consideration, deciding not to incarcerate, especially for first time offenders.

We tip our hat to Judge Whaley for initiating the Community Service Program. In minor cases, if you'll do a certain number of days of community service, I've seen him decide not to incarcerate.

I am against incarcerating deadbeat dads and moms. We need to provide some other alternatives for them.

Wright, a Bishop and founding pastor of New Life Worship Center in Roanoke, says, "Drug addicts don't need to be incarcerated. They need deliverance.

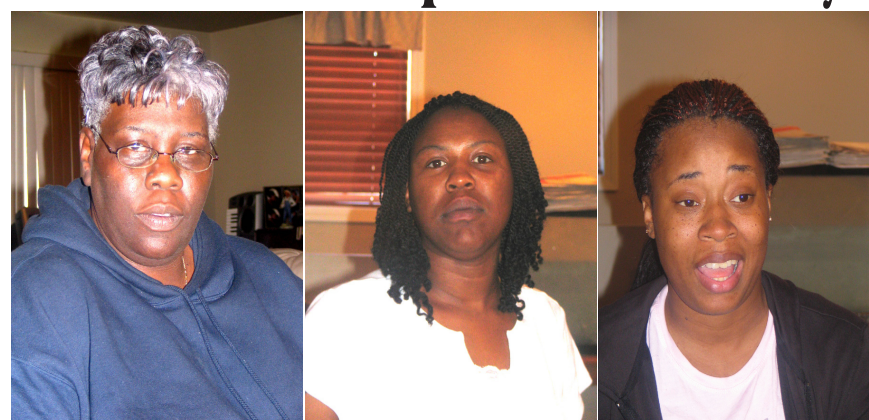
We have to come up with innovative programs to show people who've gone down the wrong road, a better way."

Wright can quote all kinds of facts and figures about the jail: legal requirements, populations and statistics, cost of repairs, when it was built, how it is funded, the cost to build a new facility. When it comes to Randolph County's jail, he knows his stuff.

Wright recalls, "Randolph County was a party to some of the lawsuits, that the Association of County Commissioners filed against the State for not removing State inmates in a timely manner from County facilities. So, I would often go by the jail to find out how many state inmates were there; how many have been sentenced and gone past their 30 days? I've literally gotten on my

PLEASE SEE COMMISSIONER WRIGHT, PAGE A3

Accused women To Appear In Roanoke Municipal Court Tuesday



Lizzie Gregg

Quail Nolan

Phyllis Johnson

PLEASE SEE DETAILS, PAGE A4

Mother and Daughter To Appear In Court on Tuesday, May 15



Kathleen McFarland

Crystal Staples

Mother and daughter Kathleen McFarland and Crystal Staples are scheduled to appear in Roanoke's Municipal Court on this coming Tuesday. The People's Voice will be there to cover the hearing.

Lanett's Mayor Willing To Help But Utility Bills Must Be Paid - IN FULL!



Cassandra Jones Briskey



Lanett Mayor Oscar W. Crawley

BRISKEY'S LIGHTS ARE ON!! THANK YOU MAYOR CRAWLEY

Charlotte A. Clark-Frierson
Associate Editor

The People's Voice appreciated having Mayor Oscar Crawley respond to our inquiries regarding the Cassandra Jones Briskey story "Wheelchair Bound and In The Dark" (April 13, 2007). Mayor Crawley was able to clear up several questions regarding the excessive

utility bills in question. We shared with Mayor Crawley, the assertions that several Lanett residents had presented to us. His responses appear in this article.

"Now, I don't know why they wouldn't call me, if they thought their bills were wrong, because

we would go out and re-read their meters. I've gone out to houses myself and re-read meters. And went into the home to see how they had their thermostat set. I've gone into my pockets to help these people" says Lanett Mayor Oscar Crawley.

"If they are burning gas in the winter time, they could easily run up a \$1,000.00 gas bill. What she (Ms. Briskey) should have done was to have had her bill re-read."

It's only residents in poor black communities being billed excessively

Mayor Crawley stated that "That's not true." You know we can't just charge a different rate for blacks and whites. Do you think I'd sit down here and charge the blacks one rate and the whites another rate? I couldn't do that!

I don't know why the people in the neighborhood won't come talk to me. I'm in the neighborhood, I ride through the neighborhood. Ms. Briskey has never called me and said anything to me about her gas use

PLEASE SEE MAYOR WILLING TO HELP, PAGE A3

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."
—The United States Constitution

AS THE DOWN LOW
BROTHA TURNS
By Sheletta Brundige
THE DOWNLOW BROTHA
BY SHELETTA BRUNDIGE
THE FUNNIEST WOMAN IN THE TWIN CITIES
T-P-V ENTERTAINMENT SECTION

RCTS Reunion Weekend
A Dog Gone Good Time

June 1st, 2nd, 3rd 2007
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A ROSE FOR MOTHER

TRIBUTES TO MOMS
PAGES 8 & 9

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Commissioner Wright, Continued From Front Page

phone and called the State Department of Corrections at my own expense, and said, we need to move this inmate or that inmate. They would claim they couldn't get anybody. The last time I called, the former Director told the Chief, "Don't have Commissioner Wright call any more, because I'd call them and tell them, come get their inmates."

I'll still call if I have to.

Wright was elected in November of 1990, almost seventeen years ago. He says for the 17 years he's been in office, he has had to hear practically every complaint about the county jail. "During the first ten years of my tenure, I went there probably once or twice a week. I've even eaten the food over there...but, after the jail riots, it just got to be too stressful."

"The law says that The Commissioners are responsible to provide the financial means to take care of the jail. That's the first thing that comes out of the budget. We pinch pennies and try to do the best we can. But I know that we can't pinch pennies and build a new jail."

I have personally gotten on my phone and made phone calls to commercial electricians to come and make major electrical repairs to the jail. I used to try to oversee the maintenance of the jail, even though it is the Chief Jailer's job.

The present jail, which he says is outdated, was built in the mid-1980's, was built to house 36 inmates under a mandate by a Federal Judge. "I've seen the population grow from an average of 40 a day, up to roughly 70 inmates."

The money for jail

maintenance and upkeep comes from ad valorem taxes, automobile tags and taxes, sales taxes, TVA (Tennessee Valley Water Authority), and Court Costs imposed on individuals found guilty of crimes.

"In 2000, when I was chairman, I had my colleagues set up a blue-ribbon commission, to study the jail and make recommendations for resolving the problems that are in the jail. Each commissioner appointed one representative. We had Representative Laird and Senator Gerald Dial, the Mayors of each city, the Chiefs of Police, District Judge, Circuit Judge. We had cooperation from everyone but the City Of Roanoke. Then Mayor Betty Ziglar nor the Chief of Police Charlie Harris ever showed up. I have copies in my files, of letters that we sent to them notifying them of the meetings. The meetings were usually on Saturday morning, at the Hub Restaurant. They never came to a single meeting. After about six months of meeting, the consensus was that we need to build a new jail. We deliberated over how are could come up with the money to build the jail. So, we had someone to design some preliminary plans, so we could come up with an estimate and look at ways to generate the revenue to build the jail. As a result, Representative Laird and Senator Dial concluded that a court cost increase was the way to get the money."

One of my concerns about increasing court costs was that I knew that most of the people arrested were blacks, but I was willing to give in knowing that we needed a jail, and overcrowding is not safe... even healthwise it's not safe diseases, fire hazards, these are

all concerns.

A bill would have to be passed in the legislature to enact that. Representative Laird, and Senator Dial did what they had to do to get the local bill. When the City of Roanoke saw it being advertised in the paper, the Chief calls me one day....

"I need to talk to you!"

I thought it was an emergency. I drove from Wedowee down to the Police Department; he's cursing, and fighting mad! "What in the so-in-so is going on?"

I said, well we invited you all to the meetings, you never showed up. So, we fussed, we fussed, the Commissioners and Roanoke's Mayor and Police Chief. Not the City Council. That was one reason why the Commissioners were glad to see a new Mayor elected in Roanoke, because we thought we'd have somebody who would work with us. It had gotten that bad. The City wouldn't even come to the meetings, wouldn't even send a representative. Could have sent a council member. Wouldn't do that.

We were excited, because we thought we would have a much better working relationship. We actually wanted a City-County Jail somewhat situated between Roanoke and Wedowee. We were looking at Needham's Hill, the old Hub Trucking Facility. We met with the Mayor once or twice, and then some other things politically came up, and I think he got upset with a couple of the Commissioners, and the next thing we know the City of Roanoke is building a new jail.

We had to go on and take care of business. So, eventually what happened was, we had to compromise. This meant eliminating Roanoke from the plan. That means that we don't get anything from the court cost charged in Roanoke. But, the felonies that occur in Roanoke, the City can't handle them. We have to handle that.

So, with the many road-blocks to funding for a jail, what can or will the Commission do?

When asked if he felt legalizing the sale of alcohol could potentially help our situation, Wright stated that according to studies conducted about 6 to 8 years ago, the county would lose more than it would gain from legalizing alcohol. "The county gets roughly \$180,000.00 to \$200,000.00 a year from T-V-A, because it stays dry. If we legalize the sale of alcohol, we would lose T-V-A money. However, he admitted that there have not really been any studies done to indicate how much money the county would gain from the legalization of alcohol."

"I don't advocate for, or against. Matter of fact, it's already wet. You'll probably find more more beer cans in Randolph County than soda pop bottles. I don't drink, I tell my congregation, don't drink. But, if it is legalized, the Commission is not going to turn the money down."

Wright is the only Commissioner who does not charge the county for in-county mileage. He is the only Commissioner who does not drive a vehicle provided by the county. He says the only time he charges the county mileage is when he drives his car out of town to attend meetings, otherwise, he travels locally at his own expense. "The only thing I have that the County pays for is a SouthernLink Phone, for which they pay half the expense, and I pay half."

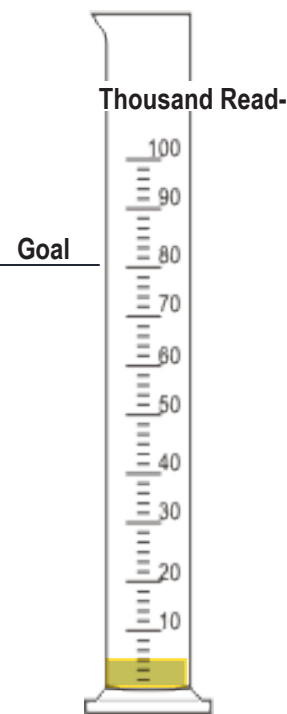
Despite the fact that most of his 17 years on the Commission, this jail has been his personal cross to bear, Wright says, "I would like to run one more time. I'd like to stay on the Commission long enough to oversee the building of a new jail, through to completion. I know we'll eventually get one. We will either find a way to do it, or a Federal Judge will order us to do it, in which case, the State Legislature will have to come up with the money."

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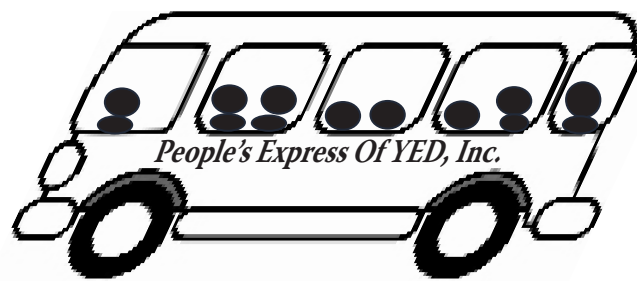
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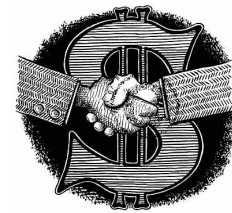


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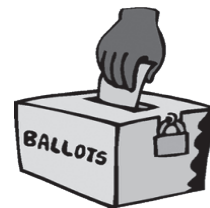
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AND, THE PEOPLE'S VOICE!



Mayor Willing To Help, Continued From Front Page

being excessive.

Since this new council came in, we have two council members who were on the old council, Tony Malone and Kyle McCoy.

The old gas rate was set by the previous Council, and already in effect before I came into office. Under the old administration, the more money the city paid for gas, the higher %age profit the city made. It took me two years to get those rates changed. We lowered the rate, probably by 7% to 8%. We took that part out that the city would make more profit. We decreased the City's profit margin on the gas. This

Malone was on that Old Council. The old rates were there when we walked in the door. It took us two years to change the rates the citizens were paying for that gas.

At this point, we had to remind Mayor Crawley that it was not the gas, but the electricity that caused Ms. Briskey's bill to be so high. Mayor Crawley didn't really address this.

The city won't work with citizens on their utility bills. The former Administration would help citizens out by allowing them to make partial payments and keep their service on. Your administration will not do this.

"They are correct. But, that was illegal. When we walked in the door, there was \$1.4 million dollars out there that was owed to this city. There were people working

here that went ahead and wouldn't make those folks pay that money, and made adjustments, that could go to jail for that, and they are correct. There's 1.4 million dollars out there that's missing right now, because they did stuff like that for the people.

I'm not going to go to jail for them. And I will tell them up front that I will help them financially out my pocket, but I'm not going to take the citizen's money of this city and not let them pay their bills and have the citizens to keep the city going.

Let me tell you when we walked in this office, we were \$800,000.00 in the red, and we were in the red because we had \$1,400,000.00 on the books, where people wouldn't pay their utility bills. We had people still living in the city who owed us. Yeah! And not only was it poor people, we had school teachers! A school teacher was asked, why he wouldn't pay his utility bill, and he said, because I taught school here for 35 years.

So, they are telling you right. Before we got here, they didn't have to pay their utility bills. They could pay \$200.00 and owe \$500.00. They could pay \$800.00 and they owed -- whatever...."

Mayor claims it is illegal not to collect payment in full for utilities

"When I got in here, (that is illegal, and you know that's illegal). Yes it is illegal for them not to pay their bills!

What about a payment plan to help relieve them of the strain of paying it all at one

time, when they don't have it?

I have. That's what I did with those people who owed us that \$1.4 million. And do you think they paid it? They paid a little bit of it, and they still walked out of here owing the city. They moved out of the City of Lanett still owing us \$800.00 and \$900.00, those folks I worked out plans with. Some of them walked away owing us \$2,000.00 and \$3,000.00 back bills. I've got the records to prove it!

So, I've been trying to run this city as a business, and I'm not going to go to jail for giving away the city's money. Now, we have tried to help these people; we've worked out plans, like I told you, I've given money out my pocket to help these people pay their bills; and I am willing to do it for some of those folks...Tony (Malone) called me about a lady today. Tony told me that she needed \$200.00 to keep her utilities on.

I'm retired, I don't have an income coming in. I make \$2.00 an hour. And, I'm willing to give \$100.00 out my pocket. I'm not going to ask the city to pay these people's bills,

when I'm not helping them, or my church or some organization of this city. I'm on the Valley United Fund. We raise money to give the different agencies that help people in need. I can help them *that way*.

But I'm not going to sit here and put this city back another million dollars in debt, illegally, helping people in the community when there's other agencies that can help them."

If the agencies have exhausted their resources, then what are residents to do?

Ms. Briskey had previously told us that all the agencies she contacted had exhausted their resources.

Crawley commented, "When that happens, that's when you go to the churches. I meet with the ministers every three months. And when they come to me, I'm willing to ask the members and the churches, to take up a donation, to help them pay their utility bill, and these churches will do that..."

But see if the people don't talk

PLEASE SEE MAYOR WILLING TO HELP, NEXT PAGE

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ARE YOU WITHOUT POWER IN LANETT?

The People's Voice is interested in learning out how many individuals are currently without power in Lanett, Alabama due to excessive bills, or because you have been unable to make payment arrangements to satisfy your utility bill.

If you are in this situation, please contact The People's Voice through Mr. Tony D. Malone, 706-585-2711; or Charlotte A. Clark-Frieson, at 334-375-7160.

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