

Courthouse View...from Page 1A

“I stepped back, did a lot of praying on it, did a lot of studying on it, but mostly did a lot of reflecting on is there any way I can make this thing work in a way that would reflect and complement the beauty of the Historic Courthouse,” Cockerham said. “And just over a period of literally months, it’s become more and more apparent to me that, as of today, I can’t make it work.”

During the design phase, Cockerham calculated about \$3 million in construction costs, which would have allowed him to recover his investment in retail rental income and condo sales. But when he bid the project, four contractors came back with bids in the \$5 million-\$5.5 million range.

At that point, Cockerham, his architect and his builders went back to the drawing board to cut costs on the building design before the final contract could be awarded. Unfortunately for the project, it remained cost-prohibitive at about \$4 million after re-bidding.

A couple of main factors have contributed to the project’s failure to launch, Cockerham said. For one, the economy is doing so well that construction has taken off everywhere, driving up costs by increasing the scarcity of contractors and materials.

Another force conspiring against the project is the fact that the going rate of retail rental

space in Blairsville simply can’t support the amount of rent Cockerham would need to charge to recover costs if he was to move forward with the project at current estimates.

“I can only charge what the market will bear,” Cockerham said. “I can’t charge twice what the going rate is just because I’ve got more money in it; people won’t pay it, and justifiably so.”

He would need either building costs to come down dramatically or the rental market to adjust significantly upward in order for “Courthouse View” to pay for itself, and Cockerham said he doesn’t see either scenario as likely to occur in the short term.

“The thing that’s frustrating for me is that there’s plenty of demand for that building,” Cockerham said. “I had the thing on paper rented out. I had people coming to me, (saying), ‘We want to be in this spot.’”

Added Cockerham, “I had a waiting list of 10-15 people who were ready to buy the condos. The demand is there, but the income just isn’t sufficient to pay it back.”

For now, the project remains on indefinite hold.

“There’s two sides to this equation,” Cockerham said. “No. 1, what it costs, and No. 2, what it will produce. So, if there comes a day when one or both of those sides of the equation changes so that it makes sense, then I’d be happy to do it.”

Since the project’s inception about three years ago, Cockerham has enjoyed a close working relationship with Blairsville City Hall and the DDA, and he looks forward to continuing to work with both

entities in the future.

Prior to this announcement, the city and DDA were hoping to use dirt removed during construction on Cockerham’s lot to help build a proposed 175-space parking lot with public restrooms behind City Hall, and the exact details of that arrangement are still being worked out.

Regardless of the change in plans, the city and DDA plan to move forward with construction on the parking lot and restrooms, with or without Cockerham’s dirt, as discussed in the DDA Board’s Feb. 10 meeting.

“Whatever they need to do going forward that doesn’t devalue that land, then I’m all ears and ready to work with them,” Cockerham said. “They’ve worked so hard with me; I owe it to them.”

As previously reported, Cockerham is perhaps best known locally as the former owner of the Zaxby’s restaurant here in Blairsville, and before that, he worked as chief credit officer for United Community Bank for more than a decade.

He ran Zaxby’s for about 13 years, and he sold it three years ago and bought some vacation rental cabins that he continues to co-manage with his Administrative Assistant Olivia Wilkinson at Cockerham Capital.

It was also about three years ago that W.C. Nelson and Paul Thompson of the Blairsville DDA Board, along with Mayor Jim Conley, approached Cockerham about developing the Haralson Property parcel across from Foodland.

“I was honored that they came to me and said, ‘Steve, we want you to do this,’” Cockerham said. “That meant a

lot to me. Every step of the way, they’ve done nothing but offer me help and support.”

Looking ahead, Cockerham said he can envision selling the land to another developer who is able to put a building at that location, adding that he’d give them a good price, too, as he feels a development there would greatly benefit Downtown Blairsville.

“I don’t want to stand in the way of what needs to happen,” Cockerham said. “In my opinion, that spot is empty, and it needs a building. It’s a great location, and the good people of this city need something like that there.”

“So, if somebody says, ‘Well, Steve, I can build it for \$3 million,’ then I don’t want to stand in the way ... I’ll sell them the property and make them a great deal on it. But as it stands right now, (building) doesn’t make sense for me.”

Still, Cockerham said he wished he could carry the project forward as planned, and he expressed his regrets to the people who were looking forward to the development and the new opportunities it would have brought to Blairsville.

“I’m sorry,” Cockerham said. “I gave it my best shot, and maybe one day the situation will change. I’ve been involved in real estate in various forms and capacities for most of my adult life; I have never seen an economy that makes it so expensive to build than it is right now.”

“And it’s just because the overall economy is booming right now, which is great. But it’s making building costs just out of line with what rental income will pay.”

Paris...from Page 1A

“It is such an honor to have been selected Second Vice President of this very prestigious organization,” Paris said. “Working directly with TVA and member counties throughout the TVA Valley, we are able to compare notes, search for local funding and learn so much about what and how other counties are dealing with issues and opportunities in their respective areas.”

Speaking of local funding, another major function of the ATVG Board is its capacity as a “watchdog of the revenues TVA provides to state and local governments through in-lieu-of-tax payments.”

Payments in Lieu of Taxes, or PILT, are federal payments to local governments “that help offset losses in property taxes due to the existence of nontaxable federal lands within their boundaries,” the U.S. Department of the Interior said. “The law recognizes the financial impact of the inability of local governments to collect property taxes on federally-owned land.”

These crucial PILT payments, made annually, assist local governments in carrying out such vital services as police protection and firefighting, construction of public schools and roads, and search-and-rescue operations, according to

the Department of the Interior.

PILT payments made by TVA to Union County in the past three years include \$249,603 in 2017, \$249,001 in 2018 and \$267,007 in 2019, and the Union County School System also benefits from TVA PILT payments.

The ATVG Board consists of 28 members and holds regular meetings throughout the year, each with an average attendance of 45 representatives from area local governments. Union County has been dues-paying member of ATVG since 2010 at an annual cost of \$400.

Paris has gone to several ATVG meetings since joining, though he began attending regularly about three years ago when the organization started actively recruiting greater local government involvement.

ATVG reached out to Paris and another area commissioner – Clay Logan of Clay County,

North Carolina – at the same time, and both men are now board members.

Each of the organization’s quarterly board meetings is held in a different location throughout the Tennessee Valley, and Paris was proud to host one of the meetings in the mountains last year, which he said ended up being one of ATVG’s best meetings ever thanks to the beautiful locale.

Yet another benefit of ATVG networking and meeting attendance, Paris said, is “getting to see the people in their environment, and them getting to see you in your environment,” which facilitates even more exchange of ideas on good governance.

For more information about ATVG, visit www.atvg.org or contact Executive Director Mike Arms at Imikearms@gmail.com.

Early Voting

...from Page 1A

is the registration deadline for voters looking to participate in the Presidential Preference Primary.

For information on applying for an absentee ballot, visit the Georgia Secretary of State’s Office website at sos.ga.gov; swing by the Union County Registrar’s Office at 65 Courthouse Street in Blairsville; or call 706-439-6016.

The Registrar’s Office will continue to host demonstrations of the new voting equipment being used in this year’s elections through Friday, Feb. 21, after which office employees will be busy setting up equipment for the March 2 start of early voting.

Instructions for using the new equipment will be available during early voting and on Election Day.

Voters can access mvp.sos.ga.gov ahead of the election for information on voter registration status, mail-in application and ballot status, poll location, registration information on file with the county office, sample ballots and more.

The next election to be held after the Presidential Primary Election is the General Primary Election on May 19, during which voters will be selecting candidates for various local, state and federal offices to lead their party of choice in the Nov. 3 General Election.

The voter registration deadline for the May 19 General Primary will be April 20.