

Talk of new COVID-19 stimulus package produces mixed feelings

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

There has been plenty of discussion on the national stage lately regarding a new COVID-19 stimulus package

and extension of federal unemployment benefits to help alleviate some of the economic damage that's resulted from the virus and responses to it.

And this talk has generated some local buzz, too,

about the possibilities.

During a trip to Meeks Park on Wednesday, July 29, Stacy Sims of Gilmer County said she felt that the first round of stimulus spending in the spring didn't go far enough for



Meeks Park is as popular as ever with the weather so nice, even during COVID-19.

Photo by Jarrett Whitener

many people.

"A new check is a must right now," Sims said. "I know that might be a controversial viewpoint here, but that is how it is."

"That first check was not nearly enough for those that are truly struggling. I am talking about those living from paycheck to paycheck, and \$1,200 isn't even a month of bills, not even rent in some areas. I think when the first checks came, the thought was that this would be over in a few months at most."

"We are in August now, and there is no sign of this slowing down, so it is necessary to have that other check, because people aren't completely back to work yet. Without the help, this will get worse."

David Kelley of Florida was visiting Downtown Blairsville Saturday, and he shared a decidedly different opinion, saying the package would encourage more people

to "be lazy" and lose the desire to work for a living.

"What I think is that people need to stop taking these free handouts and get back to work," Kelley said. "I understand that people have been laid off and they can't help that, but instead of moping around the house all day, they can get a job. I haven't seen a town yet without a hiring sign."

"People will take advantage of a new check and will leech off that unemployment until they can't anymore. If we keep giving these people a reason to stay unemployed, they don't have a point in going back to work."

"Why would they go back to work if they are making just as much sitting on the couch all day? We don't need to support that."

Destiny Bowles of Union County fears the virus will continue spreading if people do not start taking the virus seriously again. She believes

individuals should better heed the importance of mask-wearing, physical distancing, regular handwashing and being generally more proactive about the virus.

"I just worry about this spreading more," Bowles said Saturday, also on the Blairsville Square. "We see more numbers every single day, and those numbers keep going up."

"At the beginning everyone was ready to flatten the curve and get back on track. Now, nobody wants to talk about that. It is almost like people are completely ignoring it now as if things are back to normal."

"I worry that if this gets out of hand, we will see more places shut down. We have already lost a few. Some are still struggling to make ends meet. They need our business and support, but they also need us to stay safe, because the day we shut down again is the day they shut down for good."

Shoe Factory Road...from Page 1A

projects enjoyable for the general public."

But he's become convinced that now is the time to start planning for a new jail, even if it is still years away, because as the county continues to grow, so will the already increased demands of the jail and Sheriff's Office – 2017 and 2018 saw over \$400,000 paid out to other counties to house inmates.

As to why the old vacant Georgia Boot property, Paris said Sheriff Mason approached him with the possibility last year, noting the location's many advantages, including roughly double the usable land than the current property.

Due to their current mountainside positioning, the Beasley Street facilities are straining the 3.5 acres of usable land there, whereas the much flatter property at Shoe Factory Road features double the current capacity at around 7 usable acres, and this site would also have access to all requisite utilities in a centralized location.

For his part, Mason said he's glad Paris is securing the property before it sells for another purpose and becomes more expensive in the future, as he believes the site will be perfect for new law enforcement facilities – a much larger jail, adequate office spaces, quarantine and training areas, and perhaps even a new 911 center down the road.

"Our county seems to be getting overrun with traffic and criminal offenses that require people to go to jail," Mason said. "Sooner or later, somebody at some point is going to have to build a larger jail and Sheriff's Office, because the county population has outgrown the facilities we have."

"I wish we could revert back a little bit myself with the growth, but we can't, and we need to be planning ahead. That is the finest piece of property in or around Blairsville that I know of to build a jail, and I want to commend Lamar and Mr. W.C. Nelson for coming to terms on it."

It's still too early to say how big a new jail might need to be, but Chief Deputy John George said he anticipates the county will eventually commission a study "to look at future growth and needs of the community."

Added Mason, "The question is, what kind of law enforcement do the citizens of Union County want? The answer: the best kind of law enforcement they can get, and that costs money. Fortunately, we've already seen a huge reduction in number of lost employees with the raises Lamar has helped us get without any effect on local taxes."

The future jail would actually be the fourth local county jail, with each one being larger than its predecessor, including the historic jail

at Blairsville City Hall, the Towns-Union Jail near the county line and the present-day Beasley Street facility.

Concerning what would happen to the current jail once a new facility is built, Paris said it's hard to find uses for old jails. After all, the Towns-Union Jail sits vacant and in poor shape, and the historic jail at City Hall is being used for storage only, though Paris said it's possible the Beasley Street jail could be converted to office space eventually.

Of course, it would take the passing of another voter-backed SPLOST referendum before the county could initiate construction of a brand-new, multimillion-dollar jail. Furthermore, it would be at least 2027 before collections could begin for such a project, so Paris is making the Shoe Factory Road purchase in hopes that he or any potential successor acts on the need he foresees when the time comes.

Should future voters decide to back the building of a new jail there, the Shoe Factory Road property would need to be cleared before construction could begin. In the meantime, Paris looks to use some of the old factory as storage space for the county.

A SPLOST, or Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, is a 1-cent sales tax collected by counties for up to six years to fund county

and city capital outlay projects such as roadwork, public safety equipment and infrastructure.

The sales tax in Union County is 7 cents and includes a penny for current SPLOST IV collections. SPLOST IV expires in 2021, at which point the county will start collecting on SPLOST V, approved by voters in 2018 and expiring in 2027.

Last week, the North Georgia News reported on the county purchasing property that belonged to former hospital CEO Mike Gowder as recently as January, with Paris stating the county acquired the 3.382-acre parcel from a new owner to enable possible future work with Union General Hospital on a large retirement living area.

In terms of purchasing property during the pandemic, especially property that won't be used for years to come, Paris insisted that it was important to plan ahead.

"Finding a suitable site for a new jail is always problematic," Paris said. "There are only so many opportunities available to acquire the perfect site for future purposes."

Additionally, he said sales tax collections have been higher since June, and that construction is strong as well, giving him multiple reasons to be optimistic about the county's short and long-term financial prospects, even with ongoing property acquisitions.