



Judge Executive's Report

By George Sparks

February has been another busy month, and the weather has required a lot of our attention. We have endured snow with extreme cold weather followed by rain, which flooded and washed out roads. We were extremely fortunate that no lives were lost and no homes were destroyed in our county.

To kick off the month's meetings, I headed to the Buffalo Trace Area Substance Abuse Policy Regional Prevention Center Board of Directors quarterly meeting. We approved the past meeting minutes and a financial report. We discussed traditional and harm reduction grants. We approved the mini grants for 2025-26. We also discussed the bylaws and membership. The board approved the purchase of a Drug Terminator by the Regional Prevention Center to be set up in Lewis County. The Terminator (sometimes called an incinerator) is a way to destroy unused, unneeded, confiscated pills and other drugs. The Lewis County Sheriff's Department will have possession of the Terminator and will allow other counties to come use it to destroy pills as well. I am excited about the partnership we have built over the past few years between the BT ASAP RPC, Sheriff Johnny Bivens, and the Lewis County Sheriff's Department as we continue fighting the war on drugs.

I also attended the Kentucky County Judge Executive Association Winter Conference in Lexington. We heard talks from Governor Andy Beshear, State Treasurer Mark Metcalf, Ag Commissioner Jonathan Shell, Secretary of State Michael Adams, basketball coach Kelly Wells, and many more. There were several breakout training sessions and time to interact with other judges and magistrates from across the state. Thanks to the KCJEA Executive Director Todd Ruckel and staff for hosting a great conference.

Then, I attended the Lewis County Board of Health Taxing District meeting. The meeting was opened with a prayer by Chairman Joe Bentley. The past meeting minutes and treasurer's report were both approved. Public Health Director Bertram gave an audit review/presentation followed by updates on several programs.

I presided over the February Fiscal Court meeting. The meeting

was opened with prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. Denise Dials from Tenco Workforce Development explained the partnership and renewal of the Innovation and Opportunity Cooperative Agreement, which the court approved. BTADD's Kristie Dodge spoke to the court about several grants they are working on for the county. First, the court rejected all bids on the Camp Dix Fire Department Project. The court approved BT to apply for the extra ARC funds needed to help with the construction of the Camp Dix Fire Department. We approved application for a FEMA BRIC grant for a tornado siren near Lewis County High School. Resolution 2503 was approved to apply for the KY 911 Service Board Grant. The court approved applying for a grant to fund having an architect look at the layout and design of the jail building to serve as an Emergency Operations Center (EOC). Buffalo Trace is also applying for a grant through the Department of Forestry to fund the development wildfire mitigation plan and a 319(h) Non-point Source Grant which is a Watershed Management Plan Grant for Kinniconick Creek. The court approved the purchase of two new dump trucks with snowplows for the Road Department. Several other projects were discussed by the court.

I received a letter from the Office of The Governor Andy Beshear/ Department of Local Government Commissioner Matt Sawyers. In the letter, they congratulated us for being selected to receive Land and Water Conservation Funds (LWCF) for phase two of the Black Oak Recreational Park. Phase two includes the creation of a sports complex consisting of a regulation size baseball field, a regulation size softball field, a Little League softball field, and a Little League baseball field. The grant will need final federal approval, and the amount will be \$250,000.00. The court has also been notified by the GRANT Program of the 100 percent matching funds of \$250,000.00 for this project. I want to thank the staff of BTADD for their great work in writing and preparing this grant.

Next, I traveled to Frankfort for two days to meet with state legislature to talk about roads, bridges, tourism, community development,

economic development, and industrial development. We attended the KACo Legislative reception, the Ky. Council of Area Development Districts meeting and luncheon. This was a great visit and several of our elected officials attended. Lewis County was represented very well in Frankfort.

Toward the end of the month, I went to the BTADD/Ky. Transportation Cabinet 2026 SHIFT Project Prioritization Cycle Kickoff meeting. Transportation engineers explained how the roads that are in the six-year plan are boosted to move closer or not to move to the next step. Several factors play into a road project from the time it is introduced to being funded and completed.

I attended and led the BTADD Executive Board meeting. We approved the Executive Director's time and travel sheets, the inclement weather policy, and discussed the upcoming Workforce Director Position before adjourning. The BTADD Full Board was opened with prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. Director Cornette introduced our guest speaker Laurie McKnight, the Senior Research Manager from Ohio University. She spoke about the future of drones and electric aircraft. The financial report and Cost Allocation Plan were presented and approved by Stephen Culp. Angie Cain from DLG and field rep. for Governor Beshear attended and gave an update on the severe flooding in southeastern Kentucky. Craig Shockly from Representative Andy Barr's office gave a Washington update. Staff reports were given by all departments. Thanks to the Executive Director Kevin Cornette and all of the BTADD staff. They are doing outstanding work for the Buffalo Trace region.

Next, I attended the Licking Valley Transportation Coordination meeting. During the meeting, we discussed the Transit Proposal for three of their grants related to the transit operation.

I headed to Maysville for the Tenco Workforce Development meeting at BTADD. The meeting was called to order by Chairman Michael Thoroughman. During the meeting, Michael announced Denise Dials will be retiring in August and Justin Suttles will be the

new Workforce Director starting in May of this year. Stephen Culp gave a budget review and a financial report that were both approved. Denise spoke about the Regional and Local Strategic Plan, 2025 NE Ky. Workforce Conference, and strategic goals. Several other things were on the agenda including youth employment program contracts.

HR Director Penny Lee and I interviewed applicants for the ground maintenance department position for the county.

EM Director Dennis Brown held the first 2025 quarterly Local Emergency Planning Committee and Disaster and Emergency Services meeting. The meetings were held in the fiscal court room. During the meetings, we were given updates on the E-911 Dispatch Center, EMS, Law Enforcement, Fire and Rescue, EHS plans, Extremely Hazardous Chemical facilities, the Health Department, the Extension Office, and emergency communications. Our plan is to work towards completing a tabletop and/or functional training exercise in August or November that will include all emergency services. Working, planning, training, and exercising together will help us all be better prepared should a real large-scale emergency or disaster occur in our county. I believe that it is important to be well-prepared for any emergencies or disasters. What can you do to help Lewis County be better prepared? Consider First Aid CPR or Community Emergency Response Team training! Both classes help you learn how to protect and care for your family, friends, neighbors, and community until first responders arrive.

Next, the Recovery Ready Community committee meeting was held at the E-911 EMA center. The meeting was led by Tammy Brown, who works with Fresh Start in Vanceburg. Tammy has done much research and work to help Lewis County become Recovery Ready Community (RRC). Governor Andy is encouraging all Ky. counties to become RRCs and, so far, only around twenty-two counties across the state have completed the requirements. RRCs are communities that have the resources and support available to help those struggling with substance abuse disorders overcome addiction and live productive lives. RRCs also have

the means and knowledge to help them get in (or back in) the workforce and contribute to their community.

I attended the Ohio River Way meeting via Zoom. We discussed tourism on and along the Ohio River. The Kentucky Ohio River Regional Recreation Authority was created in 2024 and Lewis County is part of this authority. Mr. Ben Collier agreed to serve on this board to represent Lewis County. Vanceburg and Lewis County hold a rich history, and being a part of this new authority is a starting point to help us capitalize on tourism and recreation in the county and along the Ohio River.

I watched Governor Andy Beshear's severe flooding and winter weather update on his YouTube channel. Many prayers were offered for Southeast Kentucky, where several lives were lost and the damage once again devastated the area. Lewis County was very fortunate to not have any fatalities or severe injuries during the flooding and winter weather. We have several roads that were flooded, and a few had culverts washed out which had to be replaced. The road crews were plowing and salting roads, all while trying to get washed out roads reopened. I appreciate Road Supervisor David Goodwin and his crew. It has been a rough winter season, and they have put in many overtime hours working to keep the roads open and safe.

Operation Unite held their first coalition meeting in Lewis County. Cynthia Bohon, Coalition Coordinator, led the meeting. Officers were elected and Cynthia explained how the coalition is set up, when the meetings are held, and how the funding process works.

The Lewis County Recreation Committee met in the Fiscal Court Room. The meeting was led by Chair Jack Lykins. The past meeting minutes were approved. Treasurer Penny Lee gave a financial report that was approved. We discussed the capital campaign and a basketball/pickle ball concrete pad. A few other things were discussed before adjourning the meeting.

I went to the Comprehend Inc. monthly Board of Directors meeting. The meeting was called to order by Ms. Rebecca Cartmell, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance. Mea-

gan Brannon gave a Mission Moment IDD talk. Past meeting minutes and a financial report were approved. Several updates were discussed and CEO Melissa Greenwell gave a report.

Next up was the Licking Valley Community Action Program Monthly Board of Directors meeting. I called the meeting to order, and it was opened with prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. During the meeting, past meeting minutes and the financial report were approved. A presentation of the audit was done by RFH CPAs. Consultants were given by Tyler Fallin. The results were very good. We were given program updates by Executive Director Kenny Walters.

I met with Kessley Baker and Leigh Nedlo, Forestry program specialist from the Ky. Division of Forestry. The meeting took place at BTADD with Kristie Dodge and Sierra O'Cull also attending. During this meeting, we discussed the forestry grant for Lewis County. One of my goals is to work with BTADD, fire departments, and our citizens to build a wildfire plan for Lewis County. In just the past few years we have had one fire that burned 450 acres and another that burned 120 acres of property. We were fortunate that no lives or homes were burned during these fires. If awarded, this grant will provide us with the funding to build the plan, provide training for our fire departments, and provide some equipment needed to help us be better prepared should another wildfire occur in the county.

To conclude this report, I want to end on a note of gratitude. Our office has been working with the Small Business Development Center at Morehead State University for a while, and I want to express my appreciation for all of our business owners throughout Lewis County. You provide needed goods and services, and you provide jobs for our people so that they can put food on the table. However, being a business owner is demanding work. The SBDC is a great resource for business owners in Lewis County. They can help with creating business plans, projections, and many other aspects of running a business. If you would like assistance in connecting with the SBDC, please let us know. We would be happy to help!

JOURNEY

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I was generally healthy, a little overweight, and my cholesterol numbers could have been better. Much the same as my previous milestone checkups for the past several years.

He recommended Cologuard as a non-invasive screening. I had taken that screening a few years earlier and had received a negative result.

This time the result was inconclusive and Dr. Barcelona referred me to Dr. Donald Weller, a gastroenterologist in Maysville, for a colonoscopy.

The worst part about a colonoscopy is in preparing for it. The taste of the prep formula isn't so bad, it's the volume you are required to consume.

Dr. Weller came to the room where Tammy and I were waiting for a preliminary report following the August 4, 2022, procedure. He said he had encountered a "mass" and harvested a sample for testing. He would schedule us back to review those results.

We returned to his office on August 15, my birthday, where he told us the mass was determined to be cancerous.

Dr. Weller referred us to Dr. Bruce Belin, a colorectal surgeon in Lexington. On September 27, 2022, Dr. Belin removed my entire colon, 23 lymph nodes, and some connective tissue. I awoke after the

surgery with an ileostomy, a temporary digestive tract detour to allow my body to heal enough to reconnect things up later - sans colon.

Test results on the material that was removed determined the cancer to be adenocarcinoma, stage 2A. Dr. Belin called us with those results and added the pathologist who examined the tissue had indicated in the report that the cancer was entirely contained in the colon.

We were referred to an oncologist who suggested an experimental blood test to see if any cells matching that excised mass remained in my body. Just before Christmas (2022) he called to report the results were negative and stopped short of declaring me cancer-free.

On Valentine's Day 2023 we returned to Lexington where Dr. Belin would reverse the ileostomy. During this procedure he encountered an "ominous" mass the size of a mango and removed it.

Turns out it was just scar tissue and some other stuff that had taken up residence in my abdominal cavity.

Dr. Belin referred me to Dr. Scott Pierce, another oncologist (the first one moved out of the area) who researched my case and gave me a thorough examination.

I had some CT scans which set a baseline to compare with future

scans to monitor for any changes and see if cancer should become established somewhere else in my body. I had a few subsequent scans with the next scan to be in April.

Now, get ready for some statistics.

- After a first colon cancer, 80 percent of recurrences happen in the first two to three years.

- Once you get beyond five years and there's no sign of recurrence, the patient is likely "cured."

- The five-year survival rate of people with localized stage colorectal cancer is 91 percent. About 37 percent of patients are diagnosed at this early stage.

The World Health Organization notes that many people will not have symptoms in the early stages of the disease. Regular screenings are important to catch the disease early and begin treatment.

When cancer has spread outside the colon or rectum (later stages), survival rates are lower.

By all indications, I was diagnosed at an early stage. The cancer was discovered through a screening not prompted by any symptoms or family history. I had neither.

The screening was performed because it is recommended for people my age (and younger). It wasn't my first screening. It was my first screening that indicated further testing.

According to the American

Cancer Society (ACS), in the United States colorectal cancer is the second most common cause of cancer deaths. It's expected to cause about 52,900 deaths this year.

The number of deaths (per 100,000 people per year) from colorectal cancer has been dropping for several decades. One reason for this is that colorectal polyps are now more often found by early screening and removed before they can develop into cancers.

The ACS reports that about one in three people in the US who should get tested for colorectal cancer have never been screened.

Since I began publicly sharing details of our experiences, several people have told me they have scheduled a screening or colonoscopy.

I have heard from several others who have also taken this journey.

When Tammy and I chose to share our story, we didn't know how it would end. We still don't, but the prognosis is improving with time and it's now more of a dime store novel than the short story it could have been.

It's been 30 months since the surgery to remove my colon. I'm past that two-year period when recurrence is most likely.

A primary goal of telling my story publicly was to create awareness. If you're like me, you can

read statistics all day long and they have no real impact. It makes a difference when you attach those numbers to someone in your community.

"Dennis' five-year survival rate is 91 percent because his colon cancer was detected early. Later detection would have dropped those odds significantly."

I can relate to that.

There are lots of variables. Age and overall health, whether the cancer started on the left or right side of the colon, if the cancer cells have certain gene or protein changes, how well the cancer responds to treatment, and other factors must be considered.

My message today is take advantage of health screenings. I have no doubt that by the time I realized I was having symptoms, the cancer would have spread beyond my colon and my prognosis would have been much different.

I had an opportunity to talk with Dr. Barcelona last week and our conversation turned to advances being made in early cancer detection and treatment.

He told me about a test he learned about while watching a big football game on TV.

It is a blood test that screens for a signal shared by more than 50 types of cancer.

Wow. Strides are being made in cancer detection and treatment.

I have no doubt that in my case, prayers have been answered.

There are no words to describe how thankful and blessed we are. The support from our family, church family, friends, coworkers, and the community has been tremendous.

March is Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month.

And now this message, in my best radio voice . . .

"Cancer screenings save lives."

SUNSHINE

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bring a little sunlight into your life. Celebrate Sunshine Week. Justice Brandeis would be pleased, and you and your fellow citizens will be better off for the effort.

Gene Policinski is a veteran multimedia journalist and First Amendment advocate. He is one of the founding editors of USA TODAY and is senior fellow for the First Amendment at Freedom Forum.

The Bluegrass Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists is hosting an Open Government discussion Tuesday, March 11, at The Foundry in downtown Frankfort.

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