



Lamar Paris
2010 recipient of the Holman Award

**Union County and its leader set an example of water quality
protection for local government**

By Tom Bennett

High up on the north-facing slope of the great granite bulge that defines north Georgia and its beauty, people and politics, one molecule of water began its journey to the Gulf of Mexico this morning. Oh, my, what lies ahead for it!

Fortunately for that tiny particle, its maternity ward, if you will, is Union County which has good leadership and an understanding of water science. Lamar Paris is sole commissioner. Paris' governing style is to strike the right balance between growth and environmental protection. He's a model for other elected officials in the watershed to follow. If enough do so, then the tiny particle of water I mentioned earlier can stay crystal clean. Your grandchildren in their dotage will marvel at the same sparkling water you see now.

"The Holman Award is a great honor," Paris said. "I know not many have gotten it. The coalition does so much in Georgia and North Carolina. They work so well with the elected officials. Because of that, we've always looked at the coalition as a partner, and not as an adversary. I'm a property-rights person but know we've also got to protect the environment. The coalition helps us do both."

Paris' fellow Georgia commissioners recognize his people skills, leadership qualities and charisma. He's first vice-president of the Association County Commissioners Georgia and is set to take over as president of the powerful force in Georgia politics in 2010-11. This comes at a time when Gov. Sonny Perdue and the General Assembly are scrambling to identify new water

sources in the north. Federal judge Paul Magnuson's ruling in July 2009 spells an end to ready use by Atlanta and its suburbs of Lake Lanier, formed by the 1957 impoundment of the Chattahoochee River (which also arises in north Georgia on the massif's south-facing slope).

In 2006-07, Callie Moore and the Hiwassee River Watershed Coalition assisted as Paris led Georgia counties to craft smarter rules for water supply watersheds. Georgia's Environmental Protection Division was doing a write-through of its environmental planning criteria. Paris and his group led the agency's board to endorse new optional buffer standards for counties and cities. Being by the water is what matters to every builder. Now the state's criteria give local governments the option of a setback standard of 100, 75 or 50 feet. As the buffer gets smaller, best management practices that protect the water quality must be employed. These include.

Implementing a public education program; re-planting the 50-ft buffer with native trees and shrubs; adopting a stormwater ordinance; inspecting septic tanks every seven years; disclosing development restrictions on survey plats and deeds; and gaining/maintaining certification as a Local Issuing Authority.

Paris' pride and joy is Union County's gleaming Meeks Park that he put in as county recreation director. It's for youth sports, hiking, cook-outs and for families just having fun together. A highlight of the park is the lovely stream coursing through it. I asked Paris, did working on protecting that while putting in the park shape your views about water quality?

"It certainly helped," Paris replied. "Just being brought up here and around lakes and waters and mountains did that. The views here and the water are our two strongest assets. As much as you want to allow development and growth, it's also important to protect what people see and what people use. It's a balancing act, which is what I end up doing most of the time."

As a key ACCG board member, Paris isn't making all those drives over Blood Mountain to meetings in Atlanta without a conviction that state government, however flawed, can help people. That's a striking difference from the old approach in the rural South of staying in office by portraying the petulant child, bedeviling at every turn any efforts at progress.

"In this day and age, people look at government as a big waste of their money," Paris said. "We're in a bad time. When you get down to the county level, we're still conservative in our spending. We have to balance our budget. We realize that if we don't work with adjacent counties and states and cities, we'll be in a gridlock like Washington is. We're proud to still be able to function without a lot of help."

I once asked Lamar Paris, what is the most amusing thing ever said to you at an ACCG convention? He thought for a minute and then replied, "It was: 'I wish I could be like you.'"

Union County is one of the last 11 sole-commissioner counties in the nation. All 11 are in north and south central Georgia. I asked Paris, isn't there potential for mischief if someone ill-suited comes in after you? "I guess I think about that, but most counties with sole commissioners have had them because there are good people there," Paris replied. "The sole commissioners who aren't any good know they're not, and so they let someone else do it for them."

“When you’ve got a (three-, five- or seven-member) board, everyone’s got their own ideas. I think any sole commissioner more often than not gets more input from the public into the decisions than a general board does.”

When the then sole commissioner decided to try to sell some of the land in Meeks Park for a Wal-Mart, an upset Paris decided to get into politics. He is now in his third four-year term as sole commissioner.