

Generating Energy: Spotlight on Clayton Preble

By David R. Altman
Progress contributor

As the newest member of the Pickens County Planning Commission, Clayton Preble will not shy away from telling you what he thinks.

"I'm not afraid to express my opinion on things," said Preble, who lives on Sassafras Mountain and joined the Planning Commission three months ago. "It's a chance to hear from people who are worried about how things are going to impact them and I try to put myself in a position of understanding both sides of the equation."

Pickens County Commissioner Rob Jones said Preble brings "a great ability to think objectively on every issue...he's a thoughtful person who is always prepared."

Jones also credited him with helping to facilitate coordination between Pickens and Dawson county on many issues. "Clayton is sort of a Mayor Pro-tem of Sassafras - he's been a real asset in that area of the county," said Jones.

Preble, when he's not involved in Planning Commission issues or volunteering in his community, is CEO of GenSpring Power, a residential and commercial generator business he started after retiring as a senior vice president of Atlanta Gas Light. He has lived in Pickens County since 2000, but spent many family vacations camping at Amicalola Falls State Park with his family before settling on 15 acres on Sassafras Mountain, off Highway 136 on the border with Dawson County.

Preble, a Savannah native, has been active in the Sassafras Mountain helping to get roads paved in the area and by taking a leadership position in the Wildcat communities - a role he enjoyed. "There were a lot of great folks like John Edwards and Don Wells who worked tirelessly to get the Wildcat Communities designated a



Preble in front of the community's fire truck, purchased mostly with voluntary donations from neighbors in the Wildcat Communities, which includes parts of Dawson and Pickens counties.



"We spent many hours of 'wheel time' just learning how to operate heavy equipment," said Preble of the training he and nine neighbors went through to become Volunteer Support Firefighters.

'Firewise' community, by the U.S. Forest Service," said Preble.

The Wildcat Community is made up of connected commu-

nities in Pickens and Dawson Counties totaling about 2,500 acres. Preble said the impact of a "Firewise" rating meant not only better fire protection but



Preble and wife Chris at their Sassafras Mountain home. Chris is a former labor and delivery nurse and they are the parents of three sons, Adam, Glenn and Scott. They have one granddaughter and another one "on the way".



Preble runs GenSpring Power, a home generator business, with his son Glenn. He said they have more than 400 customers throughout north Georgia and metro Atlanta.

significantly lower insurance premiums for residents in the Wildcat communities.

Besides raising education and awareness, it was the beginning of establishing a local volunteer fire station on Sassafras Mountain where Preble and his wife Chris, a former labor and delivery nurse, joined

10 other neighbors and completed a rigorous training program to become Volunteer Support Firefighters.

Preble and his neighbors did not stop there. They raised voluntary contributions of nearly \$40,000 and - with the assistance and training from fire fighting officials in both Pick-

ens and Dawson counties - purchased a fire truck that is now housed in the Sassafras Mountain Fire Station. "The support from this community and from both Pickens and Dawson Counties has been terrific," added Preble.

As if learning how to drive a fire truck was not challenging enough, Preble and a small group of neighbors decided that a logical next step might be to get some additional training. Preble said the group, led by local Volunteer Support Firefighter Leader John Tarantini, was certified as Medical First Responders after attending courses and training offered by Pickens County. "While our primary role is to assist on medical emergencies, sometimes we are closer and get to the scene first," said Preble. "That allows us to advise incoming EMT's on what to expect when they arrive."

Preble, who has degrees in industrial management and law, and his son Glenn now run GenSpring Power, Inc., which has amassed more than 400 residential and commercial customers throughout north Georgia and metro Atlanta. Preble, who is 65, says and he has no plans to retire. He added, with a grin, "I've told Glenn you're going to have to put up with the old man for a long time."

Preble and his wife Chris met on a blind date in Savannah in 1974 and, after a short engagement, were married that same year. They have three grown sons. Preble notes proudly that all three sons were Eagle Scouts, two of whom are University of Georgia grads and one from Georgia Tech. The couple also has one granddaughter and another grandbaby "on the way."

Preble, who enjoys fishing, says his work is his real "hobby" and what he likes to do. "It's fun and keeps me out of trouble," he said smiling.

Chimney Swift numbers swell as fall migration nears



The chattering sound of chimney swifts will begin to grow this month then fade to silence by early November as the fall migration increases swift populations in Georgia before drawing the small, speedy birds south to winter in the upper Amazon Basin.

"Most are gone by mid-October and all ... by early November," said Todd Schneider, a wildlife biologist with the state Department of Natural Resources' Wildlife Resources Division.

Sometimes, the gathering is memorable as chimney swifts crowd into roosts. Schneider recalled seeing a swarm of these "flying cigars" form a living vortex as they swirled down into the large chimneys of an old building in Savannah years ago.

The seasonal exchange is less dramatic for most Georgia residents. Young swifts fledge in mid-summer and the groups of four to five birds now circling fireplace chimneys and snagging airborne insects are probably family units, Schneider said.

The link between homes and chimney swifts is crucial. The

species that once depended on tree hollows for nesting and roosting has long since adapted to chimneys and other man-made structures, a change prodded by the loss of natural sites through deforestation.

But residents can help. Here's how:

- Leave chimneys suitable for nesting and roosting uncapped from March through September. Appropriate flues will be made of stone, firebrick or masonry tiles with mortared joints, materials the swifts can cling to with their strong feet and four sharp claws.

- Cap chimneys that have metal flues when they are not in use. Chimney swifts cannot grip the metal sides. Covering the top decreases the chance wildlife will get trapped in the shaft.

- Use swift-friendly materials when building chimneys.
- Let older buildings and old home-place chimneys stand if they are used by the birds and pose no safety hazard.

Proper maintenance of fireplace chimneys also is important. Chimneys should be professionally cleaned of any flammable creosote residue by early March, before the swifts return from South America to nest. Those nests, described by Schneider as a bundle of twigs about half the size of a man's palm, are not considered a fire hazard.

Georgians can help conserve endangered and other nongame wildlife by purchasing or renewing a bald eagle or hummingbird license plate, contributing to the Georgia Wildlife Conservation

Fund through the state income tax checkoff or donating directly to the fund. Each option provides vital support for DNR's Nongame Conservation Section, which receives no state appropriations for its mission to conserve wildlife not hunted, fished for or trapped, as well as rare plants and natural habitats.

Visit www.georgiawildlife.org/conservation for more information or call Nongame Conservation offices in Social Circle (770-761-3035), Forsyth (478-994-1438) or Brunswick (912-264-7218).

Chimney Swifts at a glance

- One of four species of swifts regularly found in North America and the most common east of the Rockies. Chimney swifts range from the Midwest to the East and into southern Canada. Naturalist John James Audubon called them American swifts.

- The species once depended on tree hollows for nesting and roosting sites. Chimneys, airshafts and abandoned buildings now provide critical habitat.

- Chimney swifts are gray and about 5 inches long. They have wingspans up to 12 inches. Sexes are identical in appearance.

- The birds generally raise one brood a year. The nesting season runs from March through August.

- The swifts do almost everything in flight, stopping only to nest and roost. They are unable to perch like other birds. But strong feet and stiff tail bristles allow them to cling to rough, vertical surfaces.

- Most chimney swifts migrating through Georgia come from southeastern Canada, New England and the Mid-Atlantic states. By early November, they cross the Gulf of Mexico to the Yucatan peninsula, then travel over land to the upper Amazon Basin. They return in spring over land around the Gulf.

- How to help: Keep suitable chimneys uncapped during the nesting season. Cap others to prevent wildlife from being trapped. Have chimneys cleaned before birds return in March (use a swift-friendly service). Preserve other structures used as nest and roost sites. Support conservation efforts.



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