

By Barry H. Hendrix

Byron Pittman, now mayor of Chickasaw, moved to the city seven years ago. Coming from midtown Mobile, "it was an act of faith."

He is the manager of Intertek Caleb Brett, a company that has been in Chickasaw for 20 years.

Pittman bought the home in Pirates Cove even before his wife saw it. "She could see it through my eyes (and)...she fell in love with it...When we moved in and we were standing out at the water, I said `now, if we are going to live here (and)...I'm going to have my business here. Now, we've got to clean the city up."

He founded the Concerned Citizens of Chickasaw in 2006. "We started cleaning the city, putting pressure on our council members to do the right thing," Pittman said. "I didn't really plan on running, but once I saw we couldn't get anything done, then I decided to run."

He is in his first term. The mayor and entire council of Chickasaw were replaced in the 2008 election except for veteran councilman Henry Phillips.

"I'm in it for the long haul. It's impossible to get in done in four years.

"...I feel like we have accomplished a lot in two years," the mayor said. "We had to go through our finances, update and upgrade." New software was installed. City ordinances have been changed, including business licenses and zoning. "We have been able to maintain stability. We have

brought in at last count close to 15 new businesses in this tough economy." Those new businesses include retail and industrial.

"Our port right now is almost at 100 percent capacity, where it was probably at 60 to 70 capacity.

"...When I took office even our state legislators didn't know we had a port," Pittman said. "...We started a port consortium, which is a group of our business owners at the port." Approximately 10 companies do business at the port, and they are involved in petroleum, shipbuilding and ship repair, steel fabrication and asphalt production.

"The very last piece of property that was available down there has sold." There have been \$30 million in improvements at the port in the last few years.

Other improvements to the city include a revamp of the police and fire department. Mike Reynolds was hired as public safety director. "He has done a fantastic job," the mayor said. "Before I took office all the policemen had to buy their own guns. Now we have department issued guns which is paid for by a grant."

The officers have new uniforms to bring up the morale, Pittman said. Ten new police vehicles were recently approved for the department.

A new "Safe Room" storm shelter is under construction and will be utilized for senior citizen activities and public meetings.

Costs in city government have been cut by 10 to 12 percent. "It was tough," he said. "A lot of it was cutting out

overtime. We had several of our higher paid employees that retired when I took office."

Revenue

The city has been able to increase its sales tax revenue. "We're based on small mom and pop (businesses)." Little Caesars Pizza, Huddle House, Cash and Carry, and Dollar General are among the steady businesses that provide revenue for the city government.

The gas tax was increased from two to five percent. It had not been increased since 1976. "That increased our revenue by about \$120,000-a-year," Pittman said.

Did the new mayor and council feel like they were starting over as a city government? "Basically, it was worst than starting over. It's easy to start a business and run it, but it is very difficult to clean one up and revamp it. The first year was digging out of a hole, and that was what we did."

For the last 20 years the city had been in decline, he said. Decisions were made that Pittman did not agree with such as "rent all of our commercial property out to a warehouse where we get absolutely no revenue off of it....I would never had rezoned it to allow warehousing....We're having to take what little bit of commercial property we have left and make sure we put the right businesses in there."

The new city government has been "very aggressive versus our predecessors," the mayor said. "You have to look for every business that you can think of," whether is it is the Old McDonald vegetable stand and restaurant, or

Little Caesars Pizza, which the mayor said is doing double the revenue that they projected.

The new Huddle House sits on a property that went vacant for 25 years. A property on the other side of the interstate bridge has been purchased and is being promoted for a potential business.

Garbage and trash service

Residents who attend council meetings complain about the trash service under contract to Advance Disposal until March 2012. The city is looking at starting its own service. Pittman feels the city could run it better. He is looking at the new service in Satsuma. "We're like a big neighborhood – 2,700 homes," he said. "We can take care of it ourselves."

Water

"The water situation has been a concern for the city for years. We've put together some numbers that I believe is very feasible (where) we can actually put a brand new system in. It would do us no good to buy Prichard's old system at a premium cost because it is still an old system. "They wanted \$15 to \$17 million for their old system," the mayor said. "We can put a brand new system in for \$7 to \$10 million. If we keep the rates the same, which we will have to do for at least the first 10 years or so, we can actually pay for the whole brand new system." The system would be purchased through the sale of municipal bonds. "Prichard is actually operating without a franchise agreement and have (for a long time). I have submitted one to them....I wanted them to start putting 25 percent of the

gross revenue back into...not just point repairs – that they are having to do all the time...(but) they haven't done any upgrades to the system in over 50 years."

Installing a new water system, "we won't have to worry about for our grandkids," Pittman said. "It will be there. That is something at the top of my list....Our ISO rating is actually higher due to the fact of we have fire hydrants that have low pressure. We have undersized fire hydrants. We have complaints of rusty water throughout the city. The only way to rectify that is to put our own system in."

Quality of life

There seems to be a lot of city pride as seen through the number of citizens who attend the council meetings.

"Overall, most of our residents are happy...They feel safe."

Pittman said he is told the city is moving in the right direction. "Believe me, if something goes on in Chickasaw, everybody knows. In Chickasaw, you have the best of all worlds. You have a small independent city that has a small town atmosphere and you are close to everybody and everything. You are 15 minutes to Baldwin County, 10 minutes to the mall, 10 minutes to downtown Mobile, three minutes to Saraland. You can get to all these places without going through the max of two red lights."

Pittman likes to call Chickasaw "the hidden paradise....I love the people, the convenience to everything."

New school system

And with the consideration of its own school system, the city will further improve the quality of life. The school

system will attract younger families to the city. The idea of a city school was considered by mayor J.C. Davis in 1971, Pittman said. Davis said at the time it was of "vital interest to our citizens." The idea didn't move further at the time.

"If you are going to have a rebirth of a city, the school system has got to be the root. Right now, we're estimating that we only have about 800 kids in the city. There are a lot of elderly and retired.

"Back in 1971, according to mayor J.C. Davis, they had 2,000 kids in the city because you had a lot more families.

"With our school districts being in the Prichard, Blount and Vigor (zones), people are not going to move into this city."

The first thing employees of TK or EADS are going to ask is what school district are you in, he said. "And it just kills us. It's a reality that you have to deal with. It's a fact – the school system is where people move."

A property between Hamilton and Clark school could be used for a baseball or football field if the city breaks away with its own system.

The city is looking at Millers Park on West Lee St. for a possible city baseball field, Pittman said. A recreation center/auditorium is being considered on Sutherland.

However, recreation funding is in short supply.

With the economic crisis, it is a brave time to be remaking the City of Chickasaw. "If we can do it now, then that will make us a much, much stronger city when the economy does turn around," the mayor said. "I love a challenge. I hate for people to tell me `no, you can't do

that.' When that happens, then I work harder to meet the accomplishments that everybody wants."