

UGH...from Page 1A

a Five-Star status. We've put in a robust compliance team, and we're monitoring everything, making sure all the i's are dotted and all the t's are crossed.

"We're doing everything we can to protect ourselves from slipping back into this. So, we have paper contracts for everything we do with all of our physicians."

Added Kelley, "In the eyes of the government, we were basically viewed as having done something incorrect. These physicians were performing services for us, and just because they didn't have a contract doesn't mean that we were paying them in excess to do that, because we went back and wrote contracts, and we're paying them about the same.

"But now, we've got written contracts, and we're not violating the law."

So, how did this happen, and why didn't anyone notice that the hospital was violating federal law?

As it turns out, hospital administrators, physicians and members of the Hospital Authority were simply unaware of the hospital's noncompliance with the law during that time.

"We didn't know about it until we started digging in and found out all of this was there (in 2016)," said Kelley. "When we found it, we self-disclosed it."

It's important to note that the hospital has admitted no wrongdoing as far as the federal government is concerned, as the settlement resolves allegations only, "and there has been no determination of liability," according to the DOJ.

"We want to move forward, and we want our community to be proud of what we do," said Kelley. "All of our employees are proud of what they do, and I've asked them to hold their heads high through all of this.

"They have not done anything wrong, and I want the public to know our employees and physicians are here to do a good job, and that's the most important thing."

Kelley is set to retire as CEO on March 1, and his replacement, Kevin Bierschenk, will start on Feb. 25.

Bierschenk knew all about the internal investigation and impending DOJ action prior to his acceptance of the job, said Kelley, who considers this fact a testament to Bierschenk's confidence in the hospital he's about to be helming.

The many physicians

of Union General have also expressed complete confidence in their local hospital, sharing with the North Georgia News a group photo and collective letter of support penned by Dr. Thomas Gary to the public.

"We believe in the board

and the current administration," said Gary. "We believe in our colleagues, the thousand-plus people who work tirelessly to provide top-level care. And we believe in our community's ability to move forward, together.

"We take pride in our hospital and reassure you that we, the medical staff, are committed to doing what we do best – taking care of our extended family in North Georgia."

Colwell...from Page 1A

took over that GDOT position after his father's death in the late 1950s.

"What prompted me to run (for state office) was the Rural Roads Authority," said Colwell. "We had never got any money from it. I had gone to the representatives before me, as had my father."

The Rural Roads Authority was a state program in which road construction was financed by the selling of bonds, though, as Colwell pointed out, Union County had never benefited from the program.

Of course, all of that started to change after Colwell won election to the General Assembly in '64, when he was finally able to get some money flowing into the county for road construction.

Colwell credits his dad with his initial victory.

"The people, they didn't know me as well, and they'd ask whose boy I was," said Colwell. "I said, 'Pat Colwell,' and I think he really elected me the first time."

When he first made his way to the state legislature down in Atlanta, he quickly developed a reputation as both a hard worker and someone who was willing to strike a compromise, which nobody did better than Carlton Colwell.

Many of today's

politicians could learn a thing or two from Colwell, who made it his life's work to promote the wellbeing of his constituents, even if it meant compromising.

In fact, Colwell can only remember backing one bill in his entire career that didn't have enough votes to make it out of committee, and the key to his success was cooperation.

No matter who he was working with, be it Joe Frank Harris, Tom Murphy, Ralph Twiggs, Zell Miller, Johnny Isakson, etc., Colwell proved himself a man in search of real results through shared compromise.

But how was he able to garner such consistent cooperation? Because in his time, legislators took it upon themselves to forge close relationships with their political counterparts, enabling his generation of lawmakers to accomplish any number of goals.

This, in turn, yielded countless benefits for Union County residents, as local leaders – including those in the school system – knew they could count on Colwell to represent the community's needs in Atlanta.

Colwell's advice for today's political leaders, especially given the oft gridlocked nature of national

politics, is to "not get so personal, and do what needs to be done for the country."

"It's a public service – that's what you go in for, that's what you're doing," said Colwell. "You're supposed to go in there and help the people with problems that come up.

"It used to be that they could work together. Now, it's about evenly divided, and I think it's wrong. At my age, I guess I'm just maybe old-fashioned and don't know what I'm talking about, but I think they ought to work together to make this nation a better nation."

At 92 years old, Colwell is doing remarkably well for a man his age, and he says the secret to long years is plenty of hard work.

As always, he enjoys staying up to date on current events and spending time with his family, which now includes great-grandchildren.

Admittedly, he has a soft spot for kids, and he believes that education should remain the top priority for Georgia lawmakers.

Colwell is a co-founder of the longstanding local, family-owned Colwell Construction Company, which has built innumerable roads, bridges, structures and more for decades in Union County and beyond.

Police Station...from Page 1A

entail all new floors, including joists, and extensive sheetrock work throughout.

Conley reported that he was pleased with the ongoing demolition ahead of the building's transformation into a standalone police station, and he looks forward to continuing to use detainee labor, perhaps even to put it back together when the time comes.

"We're moving right along with it," said Conley. "I'm not sure how long it's really going to take us to get to the point to where we can put a dollar and cent amount on what it's going to cost us, but the sooner we get to that point, the better off we'll be. It's a win-win for all of us."

Councilman Dyer said that his initial take on the building when the city first acquired it was "to put it in a dumpster and get rid of it."

"But I kept thinking about it and dwelling on it, and I think I woke up a couple times in the night and thought about it, and the more I looked at the building, I thought it was salvageable," said Dyer. "You've got block walls, okay? You've got a good, sound roof. You just need to do some floor work and a drop ceiling and electrical and plumbing, routine stuff.

"I think, when it's all said and done, it will look good, and we'll move them over there with plenty of room. And we'll have the option down the road to (expand council quarters), we can enlarge this, so I think it's a win-win, I really do."

SPLOST monies will be used to renovate the building, which has housed a number of restaurants and even a grocery store since it was originally built in the first half of the 20th century, though it has sat vacant in recent years.

"We're excited, this is something that needs to happen," said Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter. "It's just going to be a really good thing for not only the Police Department, but City Hall."

For the past couple of regular city meetings, the

mayor and councilmembers have welcomed standing-room-only crowds of people, most recently the 2019 Leadership Union class on Feb. 5.

Expanding the council quarters would allow for more seating in an increasingly cramped space, said Mayor Conley.