

HARRIS COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
CALLED SESSION
August 1, 2017
11:00 AM

Commissioners Present: J. Harry Lange, Jim Woods, Susan Andrews, Martha Chewing, Becky Langston. Staff Present: Randy Dowling, County Manager; Nancy D. McMichael, County Clerk.

1. **CALL TO ORDER.** Chairman Lange called the Called Session to order.

2. **PUBLIC HEARING I: NOTICE OF INTENT TO INCREASE PROPERTY TAX @ 9:00 AM.** Chairman Lange called the Public Hearing to order and said that the purpose of this meeting is regarding the notice of intent to increase property taxes and that there will be two more Public Hearings regarding same before the millage rate is set. He explained that the Public Hearings are required by law, and were appropriately advertised; that the proposed County millage rate is 8.64; that the School Board M&O is 17.91 plus School Bond Indebtedness of .65; that the current County millage rate is 6.14, which is the same as in 1991; that the tax digest has stayed pretty much the same over the last few years; that the Board has worked hard in keeping the millage rate down the past few years, for which they have been successful, but this year it may not be possible. He then reviewed the various items contributing to the proposed increase to include four new deputies, 911 upgrade (telephone, CAD and radio systems), GIS system, increase in VFD equipment stipend, accounting software package, Community Center debt payments, GIS system, IT Department, improvements to Jail and Prison, development of Ellerslie Park, re-authorize full-time Tax Appraiser position, equipment for Vehicle Maintenance, Library, 2% COLA for employees, and 20% increase in employee health care cost. He said that the last millage increase was in 2002; that if the rate is increased, it will still be less than adjacent counties; and that it remains one of the lowest in the state. He asked if anyone wished to make comments, reminded all that they would have a five (5) minute time limit, and that they are to give their name and address.

Jesse McKinney, citizen who lives on Ossahatchee Creek Road in Ellerslie, appeared before the Board, thanked the Board for all they do, and said that it appears several items caught the Board unaware - the 911 system and the financial software. Commissioner Andrews said that the Commission was unaware of several things and that when Randy Dowling was hired as County Manager, he was quick to identify the items that were absolutely necessary. Mr. McKinney asked if there was a possibility there would not be an increase to which Chairman Lange said that Board is open to hearing comments and the increase is not a forgone conclusion; that in trying to balance the budget, the Board looked at various sources of funding from sources to include the Jail Fund, Solid Waste and Water Works enterprise funds and ended up taking some of those funds; that from a financial standpoint, the County is still financially sound, but by taking funds from General Funds and Enterprise funds, it leaves a balance lower than what it preferred; that most funds come from property taxes; that having a balance of below six months of operating funds really puts the County in danger of running out of funds should there be emergencies; that to increase the millage at a lower level will almost guarantee another increase next year; that the millage rate increase is not a done deal at this point. Commissioner Langston said that the millage rate is not a done deal and she wants to hear comments from every citizen, good or bad. Mr. McKinney asked how many more years the County is obligated to the Community Center debt, to which Randy Dowling, County Manager, said the debt is scheduled to be paid off in 2030, another 13 years. Mr. McKinney asked what will be his benefit from the millage increase - he can't even get the grass cut on the right of way, to which Mr. Dowling said that the budget is available to citizens on line and he reviewed the various benefits to citizens, and he provided the County's website (www.harriscountyga.gov). Commissioner Andrews said that she too is concerned about the grass/mowing of the right of way, which is a basic service that needs to be provided; that she learned it has been 12 years since additional deputies have been included in the budget; that if the 911 system is not upgraded, come December the County will not have a viable 911 system; that Ellerslie Park, which is in her district, will be a wonderful passive recreation park and should be opened next year; and the support for Ellerslie VFD will continue.

Earl Cheal, citizen who lives on Wagon Wheel Drive in Ellerslie, appeared before the Board and thanked the Board for what they do and said that while he does not like to pay taxes, he thanked the Board for its efforts to control spending; that he has lived in many areas of the United States and feels Harris County is one of the best governed counties he has lived in as far as services and responsiveness; that it takes hard work to keep the

millage rate low; that many times, citizens are unaware how much the various departments do; that it is astounding what is accomplished with the funding that is available; that while he doesn't appreciate having to pay more taxes, he also wants the services; and that the Commissioners need to hear from citizens as to what is going right or wrong, otherwise action can't be taken to make corrections. Commissioner Langston said that she agreed with Mr. Cheal on communication and feedback from citizens.

David Bill, citizen who lives on Rhodes Drive in Hamilton, appeared before the Board and said that he is concerned about the new 911 system; that the County needs to make certain it is purchasing the correct software; that he hopes the County will not purchase another hybrid analog system as it did about 20 years ago; that cell coverage needs to be increased in order to have a better digital 911 system; that the County needs to make sure it is getting the proper 911 fees from cell phone use. Chairman Lange said that the County is looking at the new system very carefully and is getting the funding that is allowed from cell phone fees.

Ken Napier, citizen who lives on Sweetwater Drive in Cataula, appeared before the Board and thanked the Board for holding the hearing and asked what percentage increase is being talked about for the millage and the time frame it will cover. Chairman Lange said that the percent increase to the millage rate is about 41.25%, if it goes from 6.14 to 8.64. Mr. Napier asked how much additional revenue will be realized from such an increase and what will it do for capital reserves. Randy Dowling, County Manager said that the County is basically funding itself from its reserves; that to fund the budget expenses will require almost a 2 mill increase, which does not increase the reserve; that the proposed 2.5 mills will fund the budget and stop the decline of the fund balance, but will not increase fund balance. Chairman Lange said that while the fund balance of 2016 was \$9.6 million, it is less than that now. Mr. Napier asked what cash return is expected, to which Mr. Dowling said it would be an additional \$3 million. Mr. Napier asked if the Board is going to request to revote in the SPLOST tax, to which Chairman Lange replied the Board plans to move forward with renewing the SPLOST. Mr. Napier said that SPLOST reaches a different tax base. He said that something needs to be done to increase the tax base and suggested that more dollars be allocated for economic planning. Chairman Lange said that the Board is looking at ways that will help the County do exactly that.

Thomas McNerney, citizen who lives on Elmwood Drive in Fortson, appeared before the Board and said that the Board recently turned down a request for a cell phone tower; that cell phone coverage is sparse in much of the County; and asked if thought had been given to rental of County land for cell towers to increase coverage and bring in revenue. Commissioner Langston said that has been discussed, and regarding the cell tower that was disapproved, she had hoped to be able to have the tower moved because it was a safety issue for the Airport; and that she agrees that more cell phone towers are needed for not only cell phones but for the internet as well. Mr. McNerney said that while no one likes to pay taxes, no one likes to see an increase, and asked if consideration had been given to phase in a millage rate increase. Chairman Lange said that the Board worked really hard to try not to increase the millage, which has not been increased for some time; that the proposed 2.5 mills will allow the County to hold its own, and any less will cut into existing fund balances and put the reserves dangerously low. Mr. McNerney asked about the status of the Grove development as a means of increasing the tax base to which Commissioner Langston said that she the Grove was approved in 2007; that she stays in contact with the CEO of the development company of the Grove; and that she learned yesterday there is nothing new to report, so there is not yet an increase in the tax base and probably won't be for several years. Commissioner Woods said that end result of gradually increasing the millage rate will end up being a higher millage rate. Commissioner Chewning said that County wants to keep good employees, so the cost of living goes up, and because salaries are not all that high for employees, the County has opted to pay the employee's share of health insurance, and that next year, it is hoped that the emergencies this year will be taken care of so that an increase won't be needed again for a while.

Billy O'Hearn, citizen who lives on Lakeside Drive in Cataula, appeared before the Board and said that there is a house on Jones Road at West Bon Acre that is a two-story shack; that the house and the other houses along there, except for one, pays \$50 to \$75 in taxes; that his property backs up to these properties and he can't sell his property due to the trailers and "crap" around them; that he has reported the house and understands the owner was given so many days to make repairs; that he offered to buy the house and three acres at \$20,000 an acre, but the owner did not want to sell; and that something needs to be done about the place. Chairman Lange said the County has looked into this particular situation and will follow-up on the progress.

Mr. McKinney asked if the Board had considered an ad valorem tax on vehicles to which Chairman Lange said that the County already receives the ad valorem tax paid on vehicles; but that because the State changed to the TAVT tax, when new vehicles are purchased, the tax is paid at one time, which has affected the revenue for the County. Commissioner Chewning said that taxes are also offset by other County fees such as the fee paid to file a court document, fines on speeding tickets, business license fees, alcohol license fees, and building permits; and that the millage rate is what is not covered by such fees. Chairman Lange said that another detriment to County revenue is when citizens place their property in conservation easement, which results in reduced taxes, and the County has lost several million dollars in revenue as a result of same. Commissioner Chewning said that on the positive side, the conservation easement, which is state law and not controlled by the County, helps keep properties rural and undeveloped.

Commission Langston thanked everyone for their comments. Chairman Lange also thanked those in attendance for their comments and said that increasing the millage is not something the Board wants to do, but which may be necessary to help the County remain financially healthy.

3. **ADJOURNMENT.** There being no further comments, Chairman Lange closed the Public Hearing and said that the next Public Hearing will be tonight at 6:30 PM.

J. Harry Lange, Chairman

Attest:

Nancy D. McMichael, County Clerk