

**HARRIS COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**  
**CALLED SESSION**  
August 1, 2017  
6:30 PM

Commissioners Present: J. Harry Lange, Jim Woods, Susan Andrews, Martha Chewning, 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 II: 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 one more Public Hearing regarding same before the millage rate is set. He explained that the Public Hearings are required by law, and appropriately advertised, because of the increase in values of existing property in the County; that the proposed millage rate is 8.64; that the School Board M&O is 17.91 plus School Bond Indebtedness of .65; that the current 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-authorization of a 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 result of the implementation of the State TAVT tax on vehicles, the County's revenue was greatly reduced; and that due to the number of property owners whose property is under the conservation easement, revenue has been reduced by several million dollars. 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.

Carolyn Earley, citizen who lives on Troop Drive, appeared before the Board and asked where she could find the budget, to which Randy Dowling, County Manager, replied that the complete 140+/- page budget is on the County's website and can be reviewed by department. Ms. Earley asked if the full time Tax Appraiser would be certified, to which Wayne Morris, Chief Appraiser, said that the person hired will be certified by the state as they progress through tax courses, Ms. Earley questioned the 20% in insurance premiums, to which Chairman Lange said insurance rates are based on historical use and were negotiated slightly from the original cost quoted.

William Head, citizen who lives on Stonegate Drive in Cataula, appeared before the Board and said that he and his mother live on a fixed income and can't afford a tax increase and asked that those on fixed incomes be considered in this matter. Chairman Lange assured Mr. Head that the Board will take it under consideration.

Lisa Culpepper, citizen who lives on US Highway 27 in Cataula, appeared before the Board and said that she had concerns about the cost of the health insurance for employees; that the amount paid is higher than last year; and that the Board should consider becoming self-insured. Chairman Lange said that the Board had considered becoming self-insured several years ago but it had been determined that it would cost more, to which Mrs. Culpepper commented that it would be more expensive initially. Commissioner Woods said that the insurance was appropriate bid and Blue Cross was the only organization that cared to bid, which is classic in the country now, due to Obamacare, and 20% increase is relatively minor.

Melinda Messick, citizen who lives on Pinewood Way in Cataula, appeared before the Board and asked if the 911 system was a one-time expense, to which Chairman Lange said it was although there will be maintenance costs. Ms. Messick said that if it's a one-time expense, taxes shouldn't be raised and stay at that rate. Chairman Lange said that the Board will take that into consideration. Commissioner Langston said that during the budget discussion, her opinion was that some costs could be postponed. Ms. Messick said that known one-time expenses shouldn't be continued. She also asked about the

Community Center debt payment, and Chairman Lange said that up to a certain point, the payment had been from SPLOST funds. Ms. Messick said that she loves the Community Center and suggested that the rates be raised. She asked about the new Library, to which Chairman Lange said the current library has outgrown its building, that the new one will be three times larger than the current one, that more computer room was needed, and that \$2 million is from the State, \$2 million is from SPLOST, and private donations of \$1.5 million are being raised to pay for the Library. Commission Woods said that in addition are several million in one-time expenses that were not included in the budget.

3. **RECESS TO CALL REGULAR SESSION TO ORDER.** Chairman Lange recessed the Public Hearing at 7:00 PM in order to go into the Regular Session at its scheduled time.
4. **RECONVENE PUBLIC HEARING.** Chairman Lange reconvened the Public Hearing in order to continue discussion.
5. **COMMENTS CONTINUED.**

Harry Bannister, citizen who lives on Kennon Road in Fortson, appeared before the Board and said that regarding the website many people don't have internet access in many parts of the County; and he asked what is being done to assist in bringing a service provider. Chairman Lange said the board is looking into the issue; and that fiber optic has been run to handle the core of the County's operation, which will be expanded to make it more available to the citizenry. Commissioner Woods said that it is not a County nor state problem, but a national problem in rural communities, and that all are trying to do what they can, but that part of the problem is that technology has not reached the point of good, reliable internet. Mr. Bannister asked that the Board, in considering decisions on long terms items, such as the Community Center, determine if such is really needed and if the County can sustain such projects that are long-term pulls on the county's revenue. Chairman Lange said that the Board will do such.

Wallace Mosely, citizen who lives on Quail Ridge in Midland, appeared before the Board and said that he has been retired since 1994; that a 10% increase is very high; that he would prefer that items be prioritized and carry some over to next year to avoid such a substantial increase; that those who receive retirement from the military or social security, received a 0.3% in COLA and fails to see why County employees should receive a 2%. Chairman Lange said that 2% is the raise given to employees, and 1.5% is the COLA; that County employees are paid pretty poorly anyway, and the Board understands the concern regarding retirement and COLAs. Commissioner Chewing said that after prioritizing and deleting several million dollars in costs, the items in the budget are what is left and are what need to be done; that even with a 2.5% increase in the millage rate, additional funds will still be pulled from Solid Waste, Water Works, and Jail Fund. Mr. Mosely said that what irritates him the most is that 66% of his property tax goes to the schools and he has never had any children or grandchildren in school, and that there should be a break on such. Commissioner Chewing said that is not something the County regulates, and to contact Tax Assessor's office regarding any exemptions that may be available.

John Griffin, citizen who lives on Lantern Lane in Ellerslie, appeared before the Board and said that he understands about the taxes for the schools, but he has a problem in that his son graduated last year and was very active in sports; that in addition to what the County was giving, it was requiring on the average 25 to 30 parents 6 to 8 hours a week to supplement to do the things needed to have safe sports environments on which to participate; that when it comes to baseball, it is even more; that they realize much of the funds go to textbooks; that the parents do it because their children are there; and that the homeowners just want to know what the bottom line of how much their tax will increase for an average house in Ellerslie Place. The response from the Board was that it is approximately an increase of \$225. Chairman Lange said that the School Board sets their own millage rate and the County only collects it. Mr. Griffin said there should be an oversight on the millage.

Jan Underdown, citizen who lives on Little Bear Court in Cataula, appeared before the Board and asked if there are any means to get the same revenue, but make it a one-time SPLOST or fee to pay for the one-time items such as the 911 system. Chairman Lange said that the Board tries to put capital items in the SPLOST, which expires in 2019, but that is too late for the items in the budget. Ms. Underdown said that to many people \$225 is a huge amount and asked if consideration to raise the revenue another way so the community could get involved to raise those funds. Chairman Lange said that is an interesting proposition; and that the Board is looking at ways to increase the income

stream such as with more retain businesses. Commissioner Andrews said that the Board is also looking at fee structures to make sure they are taking care of the expense for whatever item the fee is being paid.

Denise Wade, citizen who lives on Grey Smoke Trail in Cataula, appeared before the Board and said 10% is a lot (\$225 on a \$225,000 house); that she realizes there are things that need to be funded and are important, other than the Park and the Library. Commissioner Chewning said that the millage rate increase is only on the County portion of the tax bill, and Commissioner Andrews said that with the tax bill, delete the portion that goes to the school, and add 10% to the County tax. Commissioner Chewning added that there are other sources of income that are utilized for revenue, and that while there has been a slight decrease in the millage rate, the County has not increased its taxes since 2002. Ms. Wade said that it appears the County has a lot of new growth, to which Commissioner Andrews said that growth has been pretty flat.

Roy Saxon, citizen who lives on Rosewood Drive in Fortson, appeared before the Board and said that his taxes have been going up, to which Commissioner Chewning said that the County's millage rate has not gone up, but that of the School Board has increased over the years. Mr. Saxon said that if the County didn't have the money to build a Library, why build it, to which Commissioner Chewning said County taxpayer funds are not being used to build the facility; that the funds are coming from SPLOST, the State and donations. Mr. Saxon asked about the Grove, to which Commissioner Langston replied that she is in constant contact with the CEO of the development firm and that based on a recent conversation with him, there is nothing new to report, and that personally, the County probably won't see anything from the development for several more years. In response to Mr. Saxon's questions about growth, Chairman Lange said that several years ago, homes were built at the rate of about 450 homes a year, but that last year, it was only 130. Mr. Saxon said people are moving in every month, and Commissioner Andrews said that everyone requires services; and that approval of subdivisions should be stopped until the County can meet its obligations to the citizens who are here now. Commissioner Langston said that on more than one occasion, she had said that the County needs commercial, retail and industrial growth and cannot continue to support the County on the backs of the homeowners; that we need to be looking ten years down the road for a revenue stream other than taxes on property owners.

6. **RECESS FOR REGULAR SESSION PUBLIC HEARING.** Chairman Lange recessed the Public Hearing at 7:30 PM in order to go into the Regular Session to hold the scheduled Public Hearing for a Zoning Text amendment.
7. **RECONVENE PUBLIC HEARING.** Chairman Lange reconvened the Public Hearing to continue discussion.
8. **COMMENTS CONTINUED.**

Sam Teel, citizen who lives on GA Highway 219 in Fortson, appeared before the Board and asked if the Board is listening to comments or are the Public Hearings just a formality, to which Chairman Lange said that the Public Hearings are a formality as they are required, but it is not a done deal; and that the Board is very much interested in what the citizens have to say. Mr. Teel said that he is in favor of the additional deputies, but the other items should be filtered in over the years.

Chairman Lange said that the vote on the millage rate will be taking during the next Commission meeting on August 15 following the third Public Hearing, which also takes place during the next meeting.

Harry Bannister, citizen who spoke earlier, asked, regarding other ways to raise taxes, that with the Grove, a 2000 acre development, it has been estimated that it will have impact on the school district due to the number of homes, as well as other homes being built throughout the county, if any thought has been given to having an impact fee on developers who are building in the County. Chairman Lange said that the Board looked at impact fees several years ago; and that when developers do put in subdivisions, they are responsible for putting in the streets and water, which are not expenses to the County, but must be constructed to County standards. With the largest portion of taxes, Mr. Bannister, asked what is being done to offset what is going to have to be paid for the school. Commissioner Andrews, former School Superintendent, said that money is earned from the State per student so as the number of students increase, so does the funding from the State, but that it doesn't pay the total cost of the facilities; and that the Grove will be built in phases and hopefully, the school district will be able to absorb the growth in those phases. She also said that the implementation of impact fees will

probably come back up as growth continues in the County. Chairman Lange thanked Mr. Bannister for bringing up the issue of impact fees, and Mr. Bannister urged the Board to be pro-active in addressing the issue before growth takes place.

Myrna Pizarro, citizen who lives on Ruth E. Willett Drive in Midland, appeared before the Board and asked if there was a plan as to how much growth the County is expected, to which Chairman Lange said that he can't give a definitive answer about that, but that population growth estimate for the County for the year 2050 is about 50,000 to 60,000 people, and that we are now close to 34,000. Ms. Pizarro asked if the minimum lot size will increase, to which Chairman Lange said there has been no discussion as to increasing the minimum lot size. Discussion included that businesses look at rooftops (homes), and without the rooftops, the businesses won't locate in the County, so to have an increase in businesses will also result in an increase in rooftops.

William Head, citizen who spoke earlier, asked where new industry can be located in the County, to which Chairman Lange said that there are two business parks, the Northwest Harris Business Park and the Hamilton Business Park, and that the County has the help of the Georgia Economic Development, the Georgia Power Company, and the Valley Partnership Joint Development Authority in attracting new industry.

Don Tillary, citizen who lives on Grey Smoke Loop in Cataula, appeared before the Board and asked about the SPLOST funds. Chairman Lange said that current SPLOST will be ending in March 2019, and plans are to ask the citizens for a continuation of the SPLOST in May 2018 to continue with capital projects; that it won't be a new tax but a continuation of a 1% tax. Mr. Tillary said that the SPLOST is the most fairest tax and it should be spent wisely. Chairman Lange said that by State law, the County is limited to 1%, and John Taylor, County Attorney, said that it is paid not only from purchases by citizens in the County, but also by anyone passing through the County who purchases items, and such a tax can only be used for capital outlay purposes, and the millage rate, for which the Public Hearings are required, is for maintenance and operation to run the County year to year and is raised only by property owners. Mr. Tillary thanked the Board for the work they do.

9. **CLOSE PUBLIC HEARING & ADJOURNMENT.** There being no further comments from the citizens in attendance or the Commissioners, Chairman Lange thanked everyone for their comments, said that raising the millage is not something the Board wants to do and will continue to give much thought to same, and he closed the Public Hearing and announced that the next Public Hearing will be held during the 7:00 Regular Meeting on August 15

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J. Harry Lange, Chairman

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Nancy D. McMichael, County Clerk