

**HARRIS COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION**

April 2, 2024
6:30 p.m.

Commissioners Present: Rob Grant, Susan Andrews, Greg Gantt, Scott Lightsey, Bobby Irions. Staff Present: Randy Dowling, County Manager; Russell Britt, County Attorney (via telephone); Andrea Dzioba, County Clerk.

1. **CALL TO ORDER**. Chairman Grant called the Regular Session to order at 6:30 p.m. and said that he hoped that everyone enjoyed their Easter weekend.
2. **INVOCATION / PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE** Vice-Chair Andrews gave the invocation. Chairman Grant led those in attendance in the Pledge of Allegiance.
3. **MINUTES** The motion to approve the minutes of the March 19, 2024 Regular Session was made by Commissioner Gantt, seconded by Vice-Chair Andrews, and passed unanimously.
4. **APPEARANCE OF CITIZENS**
 - A. **Brian McKeen - Local Rules of Order**. Mr. McKeen, citizen who lives on O'Neal Road, addressed the Board related to the Local Rules of Order and stated that 15% of the document is administrative and 80% governs how individuals come before the Board; that there isn't a lot related to the conduct of the Board; that the conduct of citizens has been better than the conduct of the Board; that ACCG has a handout available on its website that provides a model ordinance and detailed guidelines related to decorum and executive sessions; that adopting a similar document would help ensure better run meetings; that everything should be clearly defined; that maybe then committee's appointed by the Board would not be run inappropriately; that the Board is elected and should serve as effective leaders; that the Board works for the public and are public servants; and that he suggests that the Board work on an ordinance and/or rules.
5. **OLD BUSINESS**
 - A. **Revised Concept Plan of the Harris County Agricultural Center**. Chairman Grant introduced the item related to the revised Concept Plan of the Harris County Agricultural Center. Jim Ingram from Studio 8 Design was available to respond to questions from the Board.

In response to questions, Mr. Ingram stated that they are "shooting for" a 125' x 250' arena; that they would put in holding tanks for sewage with a slow release so that the drain field could be smaller in size and fit between the buildings; that he doesn't have a survey of the site but that they may need to raise it up 3-4 feet so that there isn't water in the building; that a survey will be conducted if the project proceeds and that he is optimistic that it will work; that the building is approximately \$2 million; that the Board could put the arena where it will suit them.

Jim Woods, citizen and former Commissioner who lives on Rivers Road, stated that he has made his livelihood from horses; that he has been to twenty different arenas in the past year; that the best return that could be expected is \$.85 on the dollar; that the Board will need to spend \$400,000 on lights and \$100,000 on fans; that someone will have to run it; and that Heard County lost \$50,000 their first year.

Morgan Marlowe, citizen who lives on GA Hwy 18, said that he was more interested in the process; that the Committee and Studio 8 did what they were asked to do; that the Committee should have had the AG policy; that there were no minutes from the Committee; that the Committee only talked to Studio 8; that there seem to be conflicts on the Committee as one member is on the Cattlemen and that they have first right to the arena; that car shows and graduations would not be an allowed use of the facility; that the County Manager should have provided the AG policy to the Committee; that this facility should not be able to have a larger concession stand than what is allowed; and that the Agricenter was put in SPLOST between items like fire trucks and ambulances.

Brian McKeen, citizen who lives on O'Neal Road, said that he echos a lot of the sentiment expressed by Mr. Marlowe; that the whole process has been flawed

since its inception; that in retrospect he questions the appropriateness of the Board taking any action on anything from the AG Committee; that Committee did not operate appropriately under the Open Meetings Act; that it did not involve the public as part of the information; that he hates to waste money and throw good money after bad; and he recommends an investigation into the process.

Jenny Eckman, citizen who lives on Harold Williams Road, stated that she wants to speak about the cost after it is built; that she supports the Cattlemen; that this project will not make it on its own; that the only way to make money is with concessions and alcohol; that the public would have to foot the bill for the deficit; wondered whether there have been any studies of surrounding counties about how much traffic they get; that we do not have a lot of hotels for people to stay in; and that we are supposed to be conservative.

David Bill, citizen who lives on Rhodes Drive, stated that he has been part of three developments; that they have put the “cart before the horse;” that they have been spending a lot of money in a good way; and that more is needed for this to be a successful project.

Pam Avery, citizen who lives on GA Hwy 18, said that her opposition to the AG Center has nothing to do with agriculture; that public input is vital to good government; that this is a revised conceptual plan for an idea; that there are items missing from the plan; that items always cost more than what is projected; that this is going to take a professional to run; that there is no clear plan for promotion; that if this plan was presented to a bank you would walk away empty-handed; that people love to spend other people’s money so you better be careful who you give it to; and that people will not re-elect those who squander money.

Discussion of the Board included that the arena does not need to be in an area that floods; that the AG policy was revised to allow fireworks; that the policy reiterates what was planned previously for the Agricenter; that half of the SPLOST funds for Recreation would be used for one idea; that the majority of people want a top over what we already have; and that there was money in the last budget for soccer fields.

A motion was made to not accept the revised Concept Plan of the Harris County Agricultural Center by Commissioner Irions, seconded by Commissioner Lightsey; and passed unanimously.

- B. **Proposed Improvements to and Funding for Existing Harris County Agricultural Arena.** Chairman Grant stated that he had made a motion at the Regular meeting on March 19, 2024 which was seconded and Commissioner Lightsey requested that the item be tabled until this meeting. County Attorney Russell Britt advised that per the Local Rules a second reading was requested for the motion; that the Board can now discuss the motion; and Mr. Britt reviewed the options available to the Board when considering the motion.

Morgan Marlowe, citizen who lives on GA Hwy 18, said that the Commissioners are not involved on a day-to-day basis; that he blames the County Manager; that he is made due to the hypocrisy; that the Board has developed a plan that he can’t do himself; that they should amend the motion to only spend \$100 from 2025 SPLOST; that he wants to know that what happened with the Committee does not happen again; that anyone involved with the Board, Cattlemen’s, or Committee should recuse themselves from any further votes; and that he feels there is a conflict of interest.

Pam Avery, citizen who lives on GA Hwy 18, stated that she knows that being on the Board is a time consuming, thankless job; that she worked for the Harris County Journal for seven years and covered the School Board; that the Board is elected to manage taxpayers money; that they need to manage needs; that they should not service wants; that people are supposed to figure out how to get their wants; that they are trying to fulfill the wants; and that there should be a more conservative approach.

Commissioner Gantt stated that he believes that they should all weigh in; that he always thought he was a fiscal conservative and that he believed that they had worked out a compromise; that he has attended a Cowpunchers event and that these kids have decided to do this instead of some other sport; that parks do not make money; that he thinks that those kids deserve something; that for a long

time people have asked for a roof on a structure to allow events to be held in inclement weather; that do we really want to just provide the bare essentials for people; that he was prepared to support a \$2.5 million dollar budget to build the facility; that there are probably people that are just living their life and haven't weighed in; and that he isn't certain where they should go from here.

Commissioner Lightsey said that he is in the AG area a lot more than some other people; that the Cowpunchers have been very vocal; that these individuals speak loudly to him; that he appreciates what Studio 8 and the AG Committee have accomplished; that we want to be a rural county; that people deserve to have a covered arena; that he doesn't want to spend the money but what do you tell the rodeo kids; that he sees a lot of farms and livestock; that he wants the lifestyle that we have; and that he is also torn on the money.

Commissioner Irions stated that they have talked about spending money on the lights at the soccer fields; that the soccer lights were a joint venture; that this is an extension of recreation; that there are existing facilities that need to also be maintained; that he doesn't want to put money toward a concept without knowing what it will look like; and that he has an issue placing money toward a project that they don't know what it is going to be.

Vice-Chair Andrews said that a lot of people have been talked to about a covered arena; that an arena has been discussed for a long time; that it is a quality of life project; that she has had many phone calls through the years asking for a covered arena; and that the best communities invest in quality of life projects.

Chairman Grant stated that he voted "no" on the SPLOST verbage; that he doesn't believe that the current location is not the right place for it (the proposed Agricultural Arena); that the motion was his attempt to compromise; that a top on the existing arena is what people came and talked about; that the use of the citizens is what determines the worth; and that the purpose is recreation.

Discussion of the Board included that they still don't know what this would cost that if; there is a cap that maybe the details can be worked out later; and that each member of the Board has to decide whether they believe they have any personal or financial benefit from voting on a particular item.

The motion on the table is as follows: A motion to put a top and concrete apron on the existing arena that we have now and that the County's portion is not to exceed \$2.5 million with \$1.5 million coming out of the Recreation part of SPLOST 2025 and anything over the \$2.5 million may be fund-raised or donated by a private entity but that the County will maintain control over the arena and its operations was made by Chairman Grant and seconded by Commissioner Gantt. The motion failed unanimously.

A motion for Staff to look into placing a top on the existing arena as it sits and how much it would cost was made by Chairman Grant, seconded by Commissioner Lightsey, and passed with four in favor (Grant, Irions, Gantt, Lightsey) and one opposed (Andrews).

Chairman Grant requested that the Board receives information so that they may discuss it at the upcoming planning session in June.

6. NEW BUSINESS

- A. **Harris County Board of Elections and Registration.** Chairman Grant provided information related to the agenda item and advised that Fredarius Marshall declined his appointment to the Harris County Board of Elections and Registration and that he has recommended the appointment of Tamara "Tammy" Mahand Pierce to serve on the Board of Elections and Registration and complete the term of Mr. James Ethridge who resigned on February 19, 2024. The motion to accept the appointment declination of Fredarius Marshall and to appoint Tamara "Tammy" Mahand Pierce to serve on the Board of Elections and Registration for the unexpired term that expires on December 31, 2025 was made by Chairman Grant, seconded by Commissioner Gantt, and passed unanimously.

7. **COUNTY MANAGER**

- A. **Pine Mountain Valley Park Concept Plan.** County Manager Randy Dowling introduced the Pine Mountain Valley Park Concept Plan. Recreation Director Ashley Marston appeared before the Board and stated that 142 surveys had been returned from citizens; that the concept plan is for an inclusive park with a miracle field and a multi-purpose inclusive field which is a huge stride for all children; that Recreation will work with organizations like Little League and the Harris County Chamber and look to obtain grants, donations, and maybe a future “Friends of Pine Mountain Valley Park;” and that people will drive to play pickleball. Discussion of the Board included that the Board is not “locked in” to this plan; that the park was not maintained and residents have reached out; and that the plan looks great but that the miracle field/adaptive playground would be better by the Community Center.

Connie Guy, citizen who lives on Bugg Road, addressed the Board and stated that twenty-six property owners may lose their homes or businesses due to being unable to pay property taxes; that there will be more forced sales; that she doesn’t believe that phases make things cost less; that given the age and demographics that maybe the pickleball courts first and then expand if they are used; and that she does not want to Board to be the Board who incurred debts.

Chairman Grant requested that this item be tabled until the next meeting on April 16, 2024 with a revised plan showing the original six items with costs.

- B. **2024 Local Road Assistance (LRA) and 2025 Local Maintenance Improvement Grant (LMIG) Projects.** County Manager Randy Dowling advised the Board that the County has been allocated \$1,103,024.99 in Local Road Assistance (LRA) funds from the Georgia Department of Transportation and that these funds were not budgeted, are a one-time allocation to be used for LMIG type projects, that the LRA funds are in addition to the annual LMIG funds, and that the deadline to apply for LRA funds is June 15, 2024. Mr. Dowling advised that the Public Works Director has identified four County roads (a total of 4.97 miles) that need resurfacing and are being recommended to be submitted to GDOT for the 2024 LRA. Mr. Dowling stated that the Public Works Director has also identified one County road that needs resurfacing and is recommending that this road is submitted to GDOT for the 2025 LMIG allocation which will be approximately \$930,000 with a required 10% match (\$93,000) for a total project budget for LMIG of \$1,023,000.

Discussion of the Board included the Five-Year Road and Bridge Master Plan; that the County is currently in the RFP process to obtain a firm to obtain the data and design a plan; and what criteria is utilized to determine the roads to resurface. Public Works Director Brian Griffith appeared before the Board to respond to questions. In response to questions from the Board, Mr. Griffith advised that they do drive the roads to determine where there is a need for resurfacing; that they do not perform traffic counts or lay down traffic counters; that most of the roads that are being recommended have caused damage to vehicles; that they also know which roads they are spending money on to patch potholes on the most; that the decisions are his and not based upon which districts they are located; that if potholes are noticed that they should be reported to Public Works; that some of the roads continue to get potholes because the base is failing underneath the road; that paving a dirt road has not been done in a long time; and that funds have not been included in the budget to pave dirt roads on the list that was approved by the Board.

The motion to approve the submission of Warm Springs Road (from SR 315 to Ellerslie VFD), West Bon Acre Road (from US 27 to Fortson Road), Mountain Hill Road (1,100 feet +/- each side of the I-185 bridge), Barnes Mill Road (from Mountain Road to Fortune Hole Road) for the 2024 LRA allocation and Fortune Hole Road (from US 27 to Johnson Mill Road) for the 2025 LMIG allocation and authorize the County Manager and County Clerk to execute the necessary documents was made by Chairman Grant, seconded by Commissioner Lightsey, and passed unanimously.

- C. **Project Updates.** Randy Dowling, County Manager, reviewed various projects as follows:
- (1) **Five-Year Road and Bridge Master Plan.** The Request for Qualifications was prepared and is being advertised and the deadline for the submittals is March 27 and it will go to the Board for consideration on May 7, 2024.

- (2) New Public Works Facility. This project is under construction and should be finished late this year.
- (3) Observation Tower at Ellerslie Park. This project is almost complete and there will be a ribbon cutting on Saturday, April 13th at 10:00 a.m. In response to a question from the Board, Mr. Dowling stated that there will be coordination with First Responders to be able to train for an emergency event prior to the observation tower ribbon cutting/opening to the public.
- (4) RFP for P25 Standard 911 Radio System. The submittal deadline is April 26, 2024 with Board consideration on June 18, 2024.
- (5) Conduct Airport Open House. Annual open house will be held on May 4, 2024.
- (6) New Elevated Water Tank. This project is out on bid with a bid deadline of April 10th with Board consideration on May 7th.
- (7) Phase II Courthouse Renovations. This project is ongoing and the project is being costed out.

In response to a question from the Board, Mr. Dowling stated that the sign for the Public Works building will be facing the road approaching the building.

8. **COUNTY ATTORNEY**. Russell Britt, County Attorney, said that he had no additional business to come before the Board this evening.
9. **ADJOURNMENT**. There being no further business to discuss, the motion to adjourn was made by Commissioner Irions, seconded by Commissioner Lightsey, and passed unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 8:20 p.m.

Rob Grant, Chairman

Attest:

Andrea Dzioba, County Clerk