

**HARRIS COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION**

August 20, 2024
6:30 p.m.

Commissioners Present: Rob Grant, Susan Andrews, Greg Gantt, Scott Lightsey, Bobby Irions. Staff Present: Andrea Dzioba, County Clerk; Brian Williams, Community Development Director; Shalee Mallory, Chief Appraiser; Brian Griffith, Public Works Director; Ashley Marston, Recreation Director; Mike Fuson, Assistant Recreation Director; Pam Jackson, Administrative Division Chief.

1. **CALL TO ORDER.** Chairman Grant called the Regular Session to order at 6:30 p.m.
2. **INVOCATION / PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE** Vice-Chair Andrews gave the invocation and stated that a young deputy was killed in the line of duty in Paulding County and asked that everyone join her in prayer for our Public Safety officers who put themselves in harm's way. Chairman Grant led those in attendance in the Pledge of Allegiance.
3. **MINUTES** The motion to approve the minutes of the August 6, 2024 Special Called Session and Regular Session was made by Commissioner Lightsey, seconded by Vice-Chair Andrews, and passed unanimously.
4. **PRESENTATION**
 - A. **Harris County Youth Track and Field.** Chairman Grant and the Board of Commissioners presented Certificates of Recognition to the State GRPA Track and Field winners for their accomplishments. Coach Brad Johnson and Assistant Coach Justin Gazda were in attendance to honor the winners. Certificates were presented to Victor Douglas, 4th Place 14U Softball Throw; Preston Sok, 8th Place 12U Shot Put; Carter Seto (not in attendance), 6th Place 14U High Jump; Aubrey Gates, 3rd Place 14U Running Long Jump; David Rivera-Mujica, 14U 6th Place 14U 1600 m; Genevieve Trunck, 5th Place 8U 800 m; Luke Riley, 3rd Place 14U 3200 m; Francis Trunck, 8th Place 10U Javelin; Jackson Gates, 2nd Place 12U 3200 m; Deklin Seto (not in attendance), 2nd Place 12U High Jump; and Kadarin Smith, 1st Place 12U 100 m (set State record of 12.56 seconds), 1st Place 200 m, and 1st Place Long Jump.
5. **THIRD PUBLIC HEARING AS REQUIRED BY THE STATE ON THE COUNTY'S 2024 MILLAGE LEVY - To hold a Public Hearing as required by State Law on the County's intent to levy a millage rate that differs from the calculated "rollback" millage rate for ad valorem tax purposes.** Chairman Grant called the Public Hearing to order and said that the purpose of this meeting is regarding the notice of intent to increase the property tax and that this is the third of three hearings the County is required to hold regarding same; and that this is the last public hearing before the millage rate is set later this evening. Chairman Grant said that the County has tentatively adopted a 2024 millage rate which will require an increase in property taxes by 3.57 percent County Wide less West Point and by 2.09 percent in the West Point area; that this tentative increase will result in a millage rate of 9.13 mills.

Chairman Grant asked if anyone wished to comment on the millage rate.

David Haas, citizen who lives on Wildwood Plantation Drive in Cataula, appeared before the Board and asked about the necessity for all of the new equipment included in this fiscal year's budget as well as improvements at Pine Mountain Valley Park, the new Public Works Facility, Courthouse renovations, and new vehicles. He asked why values and associated taxes can't be "locked in" at what it was when the property was purchased and stated that Harris County grows daily; that more people paying in should make it cost less; that if they don't pay that they lose their house; asked if they are trying to discourage growth; and asked what it will take to "trim fat."

Commissioner Irions advised that he also had his values go up based upon sales of others in the area and that all that he has done is cut his grass and that Public Works has never had a building and that the County is trying to bring things back in-house to cut expenses. Chairman Grant informed citizens that the County is required by law to re-evaluate a certain percentage of properties. Commissioner Lightsey advised that he also had an increase in his property taxes and that the costs for services has gone up drastically.

David Watson, citizen who lives on Hunter Road in Cataula, addressed the Board and asked what they are doing for retirees.

Vice-Chair Andrews stated that there is a homestead exemption for individuals over the age of 65 within a certain income; that they should meet with the Tax Assessors office; and that the Board will be meeting with the Board of Education and discuss what can be done for people over the age of 65. Chairman Grant said that people should speak with Pam Jackson in the Tax Assessors office and that she will help. Commissioner Lightsey stated that vehicle maintenance shops around to get the best prices on vehicles; that Department Heads do their due diligence; and encouraged citizens to continue to provide feedback. Commissioner Gantt stated that when costs go up that taxes go up; that the Board grapples with balancing costs vs taxes; that homeowners pay more since there isn't a large commercial base; that there have been economic studies regarding services provided vs the break-even costs and that if new home costs more that \$309,000 that the County is not losing money; and that they should always look at cutting costs.

Steven O'Neill, citizen who lives on Turkey Trail in Fortson, appeared before the Board and said that retirees are getting pushed out; that taxes should not keep going up; that there needs to be industrial business; and that Harris County will become a suburb of Muscogee County.

Colleen Watson, citizen who lives on Hunter Road in Cataula, addressed the Board and stated that she was here 15 years ago in opposition to the Grove; that she does read the *Harris County Journal*; and that she is discouraged.

Chairman Grant advised that they are working to bring in commercial business.

David Gray, citizen who lives on Birchwood Drive in Fortson, appeared before the Board and stated that there are 14 counties where those over the age of 60 don't pay school tax; and that it isn't a County tax but it is a State tax; and that he doesn't like paying school taxes.

Lillie Mae Williams, citizen who live on GA Hwy 116 in Hamilton, stated that she has lived here all of her life - 79 years - and that she has learned to "roll with the tide."

Pam Jackson, citizen who lives on Johnson Mill Road in Hamilton and also works in the Tax Assessors office, stated that she invites citizens to come to the Tax Assessors office and property market values and exemptions can be reviewed.

Dr. Justin Finney, citizen who lives on GA Hwy 219 in Fortson and who is the Harris County School Superintendent, advised that he will visit with groups or individuals; that he echoes Ms. Jackson; that he freely shares his contact information; and that the Board of Education discusses issues monthly.

Shalee Mallory, citizen who lives on Macedonia Church Road in Hamilton and who is the Chief Appraiser in the Tax Assessors office, advised in response to questions from the Board that approximately \$640,000 is from inflationary growth; that when reassessed, it is home improvements to raw land; that values do go down; that they perform a statistical review of home sales; and that they revalued 22% of properties in the County. She also advised that HB 581 will be on the ballot in November and that SB 345 will be negated.

There being no further comments, Chairman Grant closed the Public Hearing at 7:36 p.m.

Vice-Chair Andrews advised that approximately 78% of properties should have no tax increase as only approximately 22% of properties were reassessed.

Chairman Grant stated that they appreciate everyone that came and spoke this evening and that he does talk to people.

6. OLD BUSINESS

- A. Application of James Claxton, for a Special Use Permit for a private kennel on a 0.77-acre parcel located at 142 Mountain Laurel, Waverly Hall, GA; located on Map 097A, Parcel 999B, Land Lot 32, Land District 22nd, and zoned A-1 (Agricultural/Forestry). Chairman Grant introduced the item that was tabled on August 6, 2024 after the public hearing was held. In response to questions from the Board, Brian Williams, Community Development

Director, stated that the address will be corrected to 142 Mountain Laurel; that this is not a commercial kennel; and that they will need to decide whether or not Mr. Claxton can have twelve dogs. Additionally, Brian Griffith, Public Works Director, stated that the initial call was a noise complaint; that Animal Control said that the dogs are well kept; and that Animal Control's recommendation was so that Mr. Claxton could keep his dogs.

A motion to approve the Application of James Claxton, for a Special Use Permit for a private kennel on a 0.77-acre parcel located at 142 Mountain Laurel with the condition that the number of dogs is reduced over time by attrition was made by Commissioner Gantt, seconded by Chairman Grant, and failed with two in favor (Gantt, Grant) and three opposed (Andrews, Irions, Lightsey).

A motion to deny the Application of James Claxton, for a Special Use Permit for a private kennel on a 0.77-acre parcel located at 142 Mountain Laurel with the condition that the number of dogs is reduced over time by attrition was made by Vice-Chair Andrews, seconded by Commissioner Irions, and passed with three in favor (Andrews, Irions, Lightsey) and two opposed (Gantt, Grant).

7. NEW BUSINESS

- A. **Pine Mountain Valley Park Playground.** Ashley Marston, Recreation Director, and Mike Fuson, Assistant Recreation Director, addressed the Board related to the Pine Mountain Valley Park Playground. Ms. Marston thank the Board and the citizens for their support and takes great pride in pulling together their budget and tries to get the most for the funding and utilizes sponsorships and partnerships. She further stated that this is the first time that they have put money into this park in 25 years. Mike Fuson advised that GameTime had a matching grant on the play structure and to get the best pricing available they applied for and received the grant; and came in under budget. Mr. Fuson said that this playground will have the first poured rubber surfacing in Harris County; that it is ADA compliant and accessible; has shade structures for swings; has components for every child ages 3 and up; that he wants to bring excitement to every park; and new features that kids want to see. In response to questions from the Board, Mr. Fuson stated that the poured rubber has at least a 20-year life cycle, has a color fade warranty, and that the structures are produced in Alabama and they expect to have the project move forward in the next four weeks. Commissioner Lightsey said that he has great feedback related to this new playground. Commissioner Irions thanked Ashley Marston and Mike Fuson for obtaining the best pricing possible and stated that every little bit counts.
- B. **2024 Property Tax Millage Rate Adoption.** Chairman Grant stated that all State required documents have been prepared, published in the newspaper, and posted to the County's website for public review. Chairman Grant advised that based on the 9.13 millage rate that three public hearings were required and that the first public hearing was held on August 6, 2024 at 11:00 a.m., that the second public hearing was held on August 6, 2024 at 6:30 p.m., and that the third public hearing was held earlier during this meeting. He said that the Board can now adopt the 2024 property tax millage rate and that, if approved, the property tax bills will be distributed during early October and due in December. The motion to adopt the proposed resolution and the Board of Commissioner's 2024 property tax millage rate at 9.13 mills, the millage rate for the portion of West Point that is located within the County at 5.478 mills, and the Board of Education's 2024 millage rate at 17.50 mills was made by Vice-Chair Andrews, seconded by Chairman Grant, and passed unanimously.
- C. **Resolution to Accept Orchard Drive, Linden Avenue, Bristlecone Trail, Juniper Lane and Morus Lane in The Orchards of Mulberry Grove, Plat 3A.** Chairman Grant introduced the item related to acceptance of Orchard Drive, Linden Avenue, Bristlecone Trail, Juniper Lane and Morus Lane in The Orchards of Mulberry Grove, Plat 3A. The motion to approve the Resolution to Accept Orchard Drive, Linden Avenue, Bristlecone Trail, Juniper Lane and Morus Lane was made by Commissioner Lightsey, seconded by Commissioner Gantt, and passed unanimously.

- D. **Appointments to the Board of Family and Children Services.** Chairman Grant introduced the item related to appointments to the Board of Family and Children Services. Mr. Derick Pinkney, County Director for Harris, Talbot, and Taylor County Department of Family and Children Services and requested that the Board reappoint Ms. Mary Ann Cheek and Ms. Lillie Williams to the Board of Family and Children Services; they advocate for the workers they have served together for 20 years.

In response to questions from the Board, Mr. Pinkney stated that the Board of Family and Children Services is an advisory board; that they directly support the workers; that they share fundamental data with the advisory board; that they are provided budget information; that he listens and receives guidance from these ladies related to Harris County; that they are able to provide important information related to “poverty pockets;” and that he values their input as citizens of the county. He further advised that the members have not received training in years and that any training now would be via a virtual slideshow by a different contractors depending upon the topic.

Vice-Chair Andrews stated that she would like to add two additional members to the Board of Family and Children Services so that additional people could help with the mission of the Board of Family and Children Services - to include first responders, individuals in education, pediatric health care providers, the medical community, and/or the mental health community - to help strengthen the ability to assist them.

The motion to reappoint both Mary Ann Cheek and Lillie Williams to the Board of Family and Children Services for terms from July 1, 2024 until June 30, 2029 was made by Commissioner Gantt, seconded by Chairman Grant, and passed unanimously.

- E. **Agreement with Traylor Business Services Inc for Business Personal Property Verification Program.** Chairman Grant introduced the item related to a yearly contract with Traylor Business Services for the Business Personal Property Verification Program. The motion to approve the contract with Traylor Business Services, Inc for the Business Personal Property Verification Program was made by Chairman Grant, seconded by Vice-Chair Andrews, and passed unanimously.

8. **COUNTY MANAGER.** Chairman Grant inquired about several topics that would be of interest to the Board. In response to those inquiries, County Clerk Andrea Dzioba provided a brief update related to that items included in the budget were being purchased - three new vehicles for Water Works, one new vehicle for Animal Control, and a new vehicle for Public Works; that the Solid Waste Transfer Station had a fire in the lower area possibly caused by a lithium batter that was thrown out and then picked up by one of the trucks; that the fire was extinguished and Community Development sent an inspector to look at the structure; that there is no immediate danger; that the power has been turned off and Jamie Webb, Facility Maintenance Director, would contact an electrician to access the damage to the electrical system; and that a claim would be filed with our insurance so that an adjustor would come out. Ms. Dzioba further advised that Finance is still diligently working to be able to provide the budget-to-actuals and that there appears to be an issue related to Caselle, the County’s financial software system, that seems to be affecting revenue/deposits, and has been making it difficult to reconcile the last two accounts that are being worked on. She further explained that Caselle has been contacted and that it is hoped that there will be a resolution to the problem. Additionally, Ms. Dzioba advised that information is being added to the current fiscal year’s budget document - audited numbers from FY 2023 - and she expects to the budget books to the Board by the next meeting.

9. **COUNTY ATTORNEY.**

10. **ADJOURNMENT.** There being no further business to discuss, the motion to adjourn was made by Vice-Chair Andrews, seconded by Commissioner Lightsey, and passed unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 8:35 p.m.

Rob Grant, Chairman

Attest:

Andrea Dzioba, County Clerk