

FRANKLIN COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
PUBLIC HEARING MINUTES
July 21, 2015
6:00 P.M.

Present: Commission Chairman Thomas Bridges
District 2 Commissioner David Strickland
District 3 Commissioner Jeff Jacques
District 4 Commissioner Eddie Wester

Media: Shane Scoggins, Franklin County Citizen Leader

Staff: County Manager, Beth Thomas
County Clerk, Elaine Evans

Chairman Bridges called the public hearing for the millage rate to order. He welcomed everyone to the meeting. Chairman Bridges said that this is the second meeting for the millage increase; the first meeting was this morning at 10 o'clock. Three people attended the morning meeting. Two of the people were complimentary to the Commission Board concerning the increase.

Ken Ward was recognized and welcomed by Chairman Bridges. Mr. Ward said he is appreciative of the job that the Commission Board has done with keeping the tax rate low for the citizens. He said that he thought that Franklin County had the lowest tax rate of the surrounding counties. Commissioner Strickland and Commissioner Jacques said that Hart County actually has the lowest millage rate. One mill in Franklin County has a yield of around \$545,000. In Hart County one mill yields over one million dollars according to the 2014 budget information.

Mr. Ward said that he did not understand how rates were lower in Hart County but taxes were higher in Franklin County. Commissioner Jacques said that one mill which is an accumulation of the assessed values is higher in Hart County because the values are higher. County Manager Beth Thomas clarified that the values are higher in Hart County because their base line is greater. Mr. Ward stated again that he appreciates what the Commission Board does for Franklin County.

Commissioner Jacques said that the goal of the Commission Board is to build the tax base for Franklin County. The more that is paid will lessen the share for each taxpayer. Mr. Ward said that he had hoped that when the hospital located in Lavonia it would make more businesses decide to come in. Commissioner Jacques said that

Lavonia is beginning to receive a number of requests for rezoning and potential development in the medical park near the hospital.

Chairman Bridges said that he appreciates the coverage by Shane Scoggins of the *Franklin County Citizen Leader*. He said that he is frustrated by county citizens not attending meetings to find out for themselves what is going on in the County. He would like for the citizens to talk with the county manager and the Commission Board so that they would be informed. Chairman Bridges said that he appreciated all the people who have attended the town hall meetings; budget meetings and millage meetings. He also said that if anyone would like to talk with the county manager or any of the Commission Board that they would be glad to meet and discuss issues.

Mr. Ward asked how the property evaluations were being handled in Franklin County. Commissioner Strickland; Commissioner Jacques and Chairman Bridges said that this is an ongoing process and is being kept up to date. Mr. Ward said that he is pleased, that he did not want Franklin County to get into the mess that Hart County has.

Tommy Bentley was welcomed to the meeting. Mr. Bentley said that his understanding is that the County is in bad financial shape, that they are almost broke. Commissioner Strickland said that the County is out of reserve funds. Mr. Bentley said that the tax commissioner; probate and clerk of court offices all need to cut staff members. Commissioner Strickland said that he understood but that these offices are constitutional officers, not under the control of the Commission Board. The constitutional officers are all elected positions.

Commissioner Strickland said that around 12 years ago the Sheriff's department had 48 employees and now they have a total of 71 employees, which includes several part time positions. He said that major crime has not increased from that time period. Commissioner Strickland said that the Board does not have control over the elected officials' offices. The Commission Board oversees the county budget; hiring of the county manager; hiring of the county clerk; and hiring of the county attorney. He said that other counties are run by different forms of government.

Commissioner Jacques said that over the past several years there have been seven positions cut that are under the control of the Commission Board. Most of these positions came from the public works area. During the public hearings for the budget several of the concerns were for maintenance of roads and installation of water lines. Commissioner Jacques stated that over one mill of the FY2016 budget is to fund the Sheriff's current level of spending. State mandates and state laws have reduced the revenues received by the County. Property values have also decreased.

Mr. Bentley stated that if the citizens would pay their tax bills when they bought their car tags then the mailing fees could be eliminated. Commissioner Strickland told Mr. Bentley that the birthday tax has been done away with and replaced with TAVT. This was done by the State of Georgia legislature. Commissioner Jacques said that formerly counties and cities were exempt from excise tax on gasoline. He said that this

has made the expenses in budgets in local governments increase. Mr. Bentley said that Franklin County needs to get some businesses to locate in the County. Chairman Bridges agreed that this would help the economy of Franklin County. Commissioner Jacques stated that a lot is being done for economic development. A sewer project is currently being worked on which parallels I-85. This will add sewer capacity to all of the exchanges off of I-85. Franklin County is also working with the City of Royston to expand natural gas which is critical to be able to add new businesses. Mr. Bentley said that Georgia needs to be working like South Carolina is to get new industry. Commissioner Jacques said that is what the Commission Board is trying to do. Franklin County is working with Hart County and Stephens County to attract new businesses to the area which would help everyone.

Mr. Bentley asked Chairman Bridges if the former chairman, Sam Elrod is still receiving a check from Franklin County. Chairman Bridges said that Mr. Elrod is not on payroll as an active employee. Mr. Elrod is receiving a retirement check from Franklin County's plan. Prior to 2011 all commissioners and elected officials were eligible to participate in Franklin County's retirement plan. The retirement plan was set up so that vesting occurred after five years of employment. Early retirement option was at age 60 with 10 years of service. Chairman Bridges stated that the plan has changed and that he will not ever receive a retirement from Franklin County even if he stayed in office until he passed away. Mr. Bentley asked if the County writes a check each month to him. Chairman Bridges said that this comes out of retirement funds.

Commissioner Strickland said that all of the current constitutional officers are under this same retirement plan. Mr. Ward asked if this was state mandated. Commissioner Strickland said that the COLA's were state mandated but that this plan is a county plan. He said that if any of the constitutional officers run for reelection and win that they will automatically get a five per cent increase in their salary. Commissioner Jacques said that the base levels of pay for constitutional officers are based on the populations of the county. As each constitutional officer is reelected there are additional state mandated increases. Commissioner Strickland said that when Judge Fowler retired and Judge Eavenson came into office there was a substantial savings. Commissioner Jacques said that this was because the salary went back to the base pay because of a new incoming judge. Mr. Bentley asked if there is a cap on the pay. County Manager Beth Thomas told Mr. Bentley that there is a calculation book provided by ACCG to calculate the elected officials' salaries each year.

Commissioner Jacques stated that part of the financial shortfall to the County is that the TSPLOST did not pass. The counties who did not pass TSPLOST have to give a thirty percent match instead of a ten percent match. The average LMIG funding per year is \$400,000. The match increased to \$120,000 from \$40,000. This is an additional \$80,000 to qualify for the LMIG funding. Chairman Bridges said that he and others were concerned that the funds for TSPLOST were going out of Franklin County to other counties. Mr. Bentley said that sales tax is the best kind of tax because everyone has to pay that regardless of where they live if they purchase in the County. Mr. Ward said that he thought the reason TSPLOST was rejected was because it was a regional tax.

Commissioner Jacques said that the County has to pay an additional \$80,000 each year to get the LMIG funding. He said that the repeal of this portion of the law would save the County. The Commission Board should ask the legislators to do away with this penalty. Chairman Bridges said that this is the path that the Commission Board needs to take.

Chairman Bridges said that the Commission Board worked with Senator John Wilkinson on Senate Bill 82 to keep the trucking funds in Franklin County. Within the next five years the funding will be reduced by twenty percent. This is over \$200,000 that the Commission Board has worked to keep in Franklin County. Commissioner Strickland said that this is the amount saved so far this year. Commissioner Jacques said that a lot of defense has been played by the Commission Board to keep Franklin County from further harm financially.

Chairman Bridges said that it is a misconception that the Board Commission controls all of the county offices. The four constitutional officers (tax commissioner; sheriff; probate judge; and clerk of court) run their own offices. There is also another elected official (magistrate judge) that the Commission Board does not oversee either. The Commission Board works with and encourages each of these offices to stay within their budget but these offices are not controlled by the Commission Board. Chairman Bridges said that the departments that are controlled by the Commission Board have had tremendous savings for the County.

Mr. Bentley said that the County should not be paying for the hospital that it should have stayed in Royston. Commissioner Jacques said that at this time the County is not paying for the hospital. The County has been made whole for the two payments that have been paid. The County also has a plan to repay the bond to have the payments put on SPLOST. Commissioner Strickland said that this is the tax that Mr. Bentley had referred to as the fairest tax. This would also keep the property owners from having to bear the burden of the repayment. Chairman Bridges said that this will be on the November ballot for consideration. Commissioner Strickland said that thirty percent of SPLOST is received from people outside of the host county. Commissioner Jacques said that no one wanted Ty Cobb to become financially insolvent. He said that he was on the Board that voted to back the hospital bonds. Mr. Bentley asked if this was voted on by the citizens of the County or just the Commission Board. Commissioner Jacques said that it was not something that could be voted on by the citizens, it was something that a decision had to be made on. If the hospital had left Franklin County several problems would have arisen. The first problem would have been the economic hardship with the loss of jobs. The second problem would have been with the emergency services because of not having access to a healthcare facility. Property taxes would have increased because another EMS station would have had to be built along with the purchase of a med unit; equipment; supplies and additional personnel. So far this year the EMS has responded to 4,400 emergency calls. Approximately seventy-three percent of the EMS calls are being transported to Sacred Heart Hospital in Lavonia instead of transferring out of the county.

Chairman Bridges thanked the people who attended the meeting. Mr. Ward said

that he is thankful that the hospital was able to stay in Franklin County. He said that he knew that there are numerous hospitals closing. Commissioner Jacques said that most of the adjacent counties are helping fund the hospitals in their counties. Elbert County and Stephens County help support the hospitals in their counties. Habersham County took on over twenty-eight million dollars in debt service to keep the hospital open. Most of the rural hospitals in the State of Georgia are supported by the local governments. Commissioner Jacques said that he is pleased that there is a local hospital that provides quality medical care. He is also pleased that the County does not have to pick up the financial burden for indigent care. Chairman Bridges thanked everyone again for coming. He said that the next meeting is July 28th at 5:30 p.m. for the last millage public hearing. The regular work session will follow at 6 p.m. where the vote will be taken for the millage increase. The meeting adjourned at 6:50 p.m.

Signed on the _____ day of _____, 2015

Chairman J. Thomas Bridges

Robert L. Franklin, District 1 Commissioner

David R. Strickland, District 2 Commissioner

Jeff Jacques, District 3 Commissioner

Eddie Wester, District 4 Commissioner

Elaine H. Evans, County Clerk