

## Commissioner Questions Aug 27, 2014

I held two public hearings on the property tax increase last week on Thursday, August 21, one at 11:00am and one at 5:00 pm. The third hearing will be this Thursday, August 28 at 6:00 pm. The following are some of the questions asked at the hearings and some comments that were made. I would like to thank everyone that came out to participate as they were all very civil and respectful of others.

**Q. You mentioned at the public hearing on the tax increase that the added security at the courthouse was one of the main reasons for the property tax increase. My question is why was it necessary to have a security station at two entrances of the courthouse instead of just one, therefore saving some money?**

A. That is exactly why I have avoided placing security at the courthouse for all these years - because I knew we would have to pay to handle both entrances and I did not think our county was ready or that the security screening was needed. When our courthouse was designed, the Brian Nichols courthouse shooting in Atlanta had not happened. Hardly any courthouse in Georgia had screening for firearms and other weapons. In fact, with this shooting where 4 people were killed, no one brought a gun into the courthouse, but one was taken from a deputy by a prisoner. However, following this event in 2005, every courthouse in Georgia had to have a security plan in place which involved the commissioners, sheriffs and judges and most of them installed security screening several years ago.

Since our courthouse was designed for the convenience of the public and not for security and since phase one was built in 1972 and phase 2 in 1977, the renovation and addition had to utilize the lay of the land and the building design already in use. Additional security was not contemplated. During court, the majority of citizens park in the lower parking lot and all the people utilizing the Clerk of Courts office park in the side or lower lot. If this entrance were to be blocked off, everyone would have to walk up hill a few hundred feet and walk through a parking lot, which would not be safe. So the decision had to be made to make the courthouse as convenient as possible for easy access for the more mature citizens of the county. The Sheriff's office is in charge of the security operation at the courthouse and they will be looking for ways to save money with staff adjustments, if possible, in the future.

**Q. When we voted on the last SPLOST it was stated that we should vote for SPLOST so a tax increase would not be necessary. So why is it now necessary to raise taxes since SPLOST passed?**

A. While it is very true that I did make the statement that if SPLOST did not pass, it would require a significant property tax increase, it was the absolute truth and still is. But thinking that we would never need a tax increase of any kind, no matter what, in the future would have been a mistake. If some people had a misunderstanding of that, then I apologize for maybe not being clearer. But at the time of the SPLOST election, no one could have anticipated that HB 60 (known as the guns everywhere bill) was going to be passed this year in the Legislature with several unimaginable sections added in at the last minute, parts of which many Legislators did not have any idea were in the bill.

SPLOST is the backbone of our county and the operation of our program is what makes our county head and shoulders better than most with SPLOST programs. Having said that, the passage of SPLOST did prevent a large property tax increase, probably four times or more what this one will be.

**Q. How much will our property taxes go up?**

A. They will only go up a little over \$18.00 on a house valued at \$100,000. While this will be an increase, it can also be compared to the cost of about 4 packs of cigarettes a year and it is about the price of going out to eat dinner for a couple, or the price of about 4 gallons of gas. This is not to minimize the cost, because several people have much larger houses and property, but also it is to emphasize that it is a very moderate property tax increase.

**Q. Is there any state funding that comes to the county?**

A. Yes, there is. All of our grants come from the State of Georgia. Some are pass-through's from the Feds, but many are funded by the Georgia Legislature. At the county meeting Thursday night, we received over \$300,000 in state grants for the accountability courts. The state funds our head librarian, one-third operation of our Health Dept., significant funding for most of our paving and resurfacing on county roads, DFCS (Department of Family and Children's Services) operation, and many others, but there is still a lot that we are left to fund.

**Q. Has state money available for grants and funding been reduced?**

A. Without a doubt. As the economy worsened during these past several Legislative sessions, the state budget suffered and they had to cut back on the amount of funding available and this certainly included some grants.

**Q. Has the total valuation of vehicles for tax purposes decreased?**

A. Yes, it has and will continue to do so in the future. In the past, vehicle value determined the amount of ad valorem taxes that were paid. But with the law change from last year, new vehicles will no longer be tied to the mil rate, but will be taxed at a fixed rate with 60% of those funds going to the state. Therefore, as older vehicles depreciate, their value decreases and the amount of ad valorem taxes the county receives on the vehicles will continually decrease.

**Q. When was the last property tax increase?**

A. It was 2006. Since that time the price of gas, tar, gravel, asphalt, office supplies, tires, and just about everything the county purchases has increased while we have kept our property taxes ranked as some of the lowest in the state. Even with this small tax increase, we will still be ranked as having the 5<sup>th</sup> lowest property tax rate in the State of Georgia out of 159 counties. I am still very proud of that.

**Q. Why did property taxes really go up?**

A. First, nearly half of the increase was due to the necessity of installing courthouse security, with other reasons involving increases in our court system cost, increased cost of property insurance, medical insurance, jail operations, indigent defense for adults and kids, library operation, just to name a few. So while our property tax increase will only be about \$560,000, just the increases in the above items are over \$700,000. We still have to make cuts and watch our spending very closely to keep our budget for next year intact.

I apologize for the need to have the small increase in property taxes of 1/2 mil, but when you call E911, the Sheriff's Dept., the Road Dept., the ambulance service or fire and rescue department, your call will

be answered swiftly and those coming to your aid will be some of the best trained in the best vehicles, with the best rescue or lifesaving equipment, as anywhere else in the country!! We will continue to provide you with the absolutely best services at the lowest cost possible.

Your kids and grandkids will continue to have some of the best recreation facilities available, we will be able to continue with the Farmers Market, and the pride it instills in so many. Our Arena will continue to offer some of the best livestock events in the region, our Civic Center will be able to continue to offer a place for very economical fundraising events for those in need, and our Community Center will be able to continue to serve the county as well as bring so many visitors to our area to spend money and help our economy. Our Senior Center will be able to continue their excellent Meals on Wheels program and many other programs, our Transportation program will be able to continue to get some of our elderly folks to the grocery store, drug store and for doctor visits. Our library can continue to serve our children and adults alike, our Health Dept. can continue to offer the many needed services including flu shots for our adults and school children. Our Road Dept. will continue to be able to answer your hundreds of calls per year for assistance, including paving, repairing and mowing and salting so many roads, and so much more. Continuing all of this for just about a nickel per day tax increase per \$100,000 is a pretty dang good deal.

I challenge you to find a better place to live than Union County, with the amenities and services we have and the very low property tax rate. Thanks to our caring and service oriented community members and the many outstanding county employees, many of whom are prepared to risk their lives for you in an emergency. Union County is the best and with your help we will continue to be the best.

Lamar Paris

Union County Commissioner