

Commissioner Questions August 6, 2014

These questions are presented by me to give you information on our property tax increase that will be necessary this year.

Q. You mentioned earlier that because of the new courthouse security measures, you would probably have to increase property taxes. Do you know more about that yet?

A. Unfortunately I do have additional information and we will definitely require a property tax increase this year, but not only because of the addition of courthouse security. There are several other increases that have caused an increase to be unavoidable.

Q. How long has it been since the county has raised property taxes?

A. Since 2005. In 2005 the property tax mil rate was 6.65 mils, 2006-5.10 mils, 2007-5.05 mils, 2008-4.95 mils, 2009-4.94 mils, 2010-4.93 mils, 2011-5.419 mils (this was actually a \$77,000 tax decrease, but the mil rate increased to reflect the reduced property values), 2012-5.410 mils, 2013-5.408 mils. For the past five years we have received less revenue each year than the year before, while cost of services have continued to go up and we just cannot continue without an increase.

Q. Do you know how much the property tax increase will be?

A. We will be raising the property taxes about 1/2 mil. Currently our property tax rate is 5.408 mils and this will increase to around 5.9 mils, but we will settle on an exact number next week prior to public hearings on the property tax increase. Even this amount will not be enough to cover all our increases, but we will utilize reserves to help fill in the difference and will continue to look for every way possible to cut costs while at the same time maintaining services and hope for a continued better economy.

Q. Will the public have a chance to come to a public hearing?

A. Yes. The State law requires three public hearings be held for a property tax increase. These hearings will be advertised in the North Georgia News with the first notice being in the August 13th issue. For the convenience of the public we will have two hearings on the same day, one during the day (11:00 am) and one at 6:00 pm. The third hearing will be a week later. The property tax rate (mil rate) will be set at a meeting the following week.

Q. When will we receive our property tax bills this year?

A. We hope to have all of our information to the state of Georgia by the end of August and have the property tax bills mailed out sometime the first week of September.

Q. When will the property tax bills be due?

A. They will be due the same as last year on December 20th. But we are all working really hard to get them sent out early so that taxpayers will have longer to pay and more time to prepare. For those who want to pay the bills prior to Christmas, there will be

plenty of time to do that as well, so that everything does not come due near the end of the year.

Q. Why are you raising property taxes in this still slow economy?

A. I refused to raise property taxes over the past several years because the economy has really been terrible and I knew the public simply could not afford it. While the economy is still not fully recovered, we feel like we must have a modest increase this year. The economy in Union County is recovering ahead of many areas with an improved job market and we simply cannot wait any longer for an increase, especially with the new courthouse security requirement.

Q. Can't you make more cuts to the budget instead of increasing our property taxes?

A. We have already cut the budget over the past several years to the point that if we are going to continue to provide exceptional services to the public, we have no choice. If you call for an ambulance, fire engine, sheriff's vehicle, or county road vehicle, we not only want the best life saving equipment available, but the best trained and capable personnel, and reliable equipment capable of performing any needed task. Likewise, if you attended any of the many baseball or softball regular and tournament games this year, walked in our park, visited a festival, attended the Farmers Market, Library, Horse Arena, Community Center or Civic Center, or many of the other county facilities, you know we have one of the best equipped and maintained recreation programs, facilities and parks in Georgia. The list of assets is long and the quality of life for our citizens is second to none.

Q. How does our property tax rate compare with other counties?

A. Even with all the amenities that are provided to our citizens, we have an exceptionally low property tax rate. Union County government currently has the 3rd lowest property tax rate in the entire state of Georgia out of 159 counties!! Our school system, which will NOT be having a property tax increase this year, currently has the fifth lowest property tax rate in the state. And when you combine both the county and school current mil rate (county 5.408 mils, school 11.798 mils- total of 17.206 mils) Union County as a whole (school and county combined) currently has the 2nd lowest property tax rate in the entire state of Georgia.

Q. Will our current low property tax ratings change with the upcoming property tax increase?

A. That will be impossible to know until later in the year when all counties have set their mil rate. But based on the current rates, we would only drop from 3rd lowest to 5th lowest mil rate in the state and when combined with the school, we will either still be second lowest in Georgia or possibly drop one spot and that is still exceptional.

Q. What will this property tax increase cost a typical property tax payer?

A. While we still do not have the actual numbers, if you have homestead exemption and a home valued at \$100,000 your estimated property tax would increase from \$205.50 to \$223.82, an increase of \$18.32. If you have a piece of property valued at \$200,000 with no exemptions, your property taxes would increase from \$432.64 to \$471.20, an increase of \$38.56.

Q. Can you be specific on why our property taxes will have to increase?

A. Yes, I certainly can. The new courthouse security is about half of the increase at \$250,000. County insurance increased \$35,000. Indigent defense for youth (those who cannot pay) \$113,000, indigent defense for adults \$25,000, new aerial photography, \$20,000, public works \$52,000, library state required benefits increase \$25,000, and while we are still working on the final budget, fuel is higher, insurance is higher, wages and benefits are higher, court costs are increasing and public safety, sheriff's operation and jail costs are increasing, just to name a few.

Raising property taxes is something as a commissioner I never want to do, but we all are working very hard to keep the cost as low as possible and the employees have done a dang good job maintaining services and taking on more duties to keep our payroll down, all to help make this one of the best counties anywhere in which to live.