

County Meeting  
January 31, 2022 6:00pm  
Minutes  
Union County Courthouse

The meeting was called to order by Commissioner Lamar Paris at 6:00pm. The Commissioner stated this was a rescheduling of the January 18, 2022 County Meeting that was cancelled due to persons in attendance not following the order issued by Chief Judge Raymond George of the Enotah Judicial Circuit requiring all persons in the courthouse to wear a mask. Commissioner Paris mentioned that one of his staff was out with COVID and she is a very valued staff member. He asked attendees to keep her in their prayers. The invocation was then given by Patrick Malone and the Pledge of Allegiance was led by Bill Walker. The minutes from the December 16, 2021 County Meeting were approved as presented.

Commissioner Paris announced that his staff has prepared a short summary of our SPLOST program and the most current Census information, both requested by previous meeting attendees. Pam Hawkins will present the SPLOST report and Renee Deibert will follow with the Census report.

Pam Hawkins stated, "So good evening. There are handouts on the table, so you may have them. It's got some of what I'm going to read over tonight. I'm going to add a little bit of things to it. Those are some SPLOST facts that we just came up with to put out there to help you understand some things. It's got some attachments, but I'm going to read those things and some other things for you. Attached are three charts showing the actual SPLOST collections for SPLOST three SPLOST four and SPLOST five programs. In 2007 during the planning process for SPLOST three to be placed on the 2008 ballot, the firm Morgan Keegan and Company calculated estimated revenues to be 31.5 million dollars in six years. Total collections were actually only \$20,419,015. Due to the respective economic downturn, even with this decrease in projected revenue, Union County was still able to complete items within each of the SPLOST three projects without abandoning any of these. In early 2013 during the planning process for SPLOST 4, the estimated revenues of 19 million was lower for SPLOST collections based on the SPLOST three actual collections due to the economy picking up and more people spending money in our county. During those six years, our actual SPLOST collections were \$28,005,975. This was actually an extra nine million dollars that we were able to spread out over the projects on the referendum. Four years ago, during the planning process for SPLOST 5 (which we're currently in now), we chose to be conservative in our estimated collections because of the uncertainty with the economy during the length of this program. We projected collections at \$24 million. So far in eight months of 2021, we have collected an amazing \$4,549,653.64. The January 31st check that posted today has actually come in at an amazing \$620,199.44, which puts our current collections at just over \$5.1 million in less than a year. As SPLOST programs are planned, the overall program amount listed on the referendum is only an estimate. However, as stewards of taxpayers' dollars, we must manage the program based on actual distributions received from the Georgia Department of Revenue while fulfilling the commitments as

articulated within the voter approved referendum. There has never been an abandoned project as listed on the ballot and approved by the voters. Also attached are three sheets showing the ballot questions for each of the SPLOST three, SPLOST four, and SPLOST five programs that were all approved by voters. The ballot questions list each project for the proposed SPLOST program. All SPLOST funded activity falls within the projects as listed on the ballot for voter approval, fulfilling our commitment to Union County taxpayers. Just for your informational purposes, we've also listed the actual election results for the last three SPLOST programs that were put on the ballot. Union County has not designated any SPLOST projects as tier one or level one. This would have been identified in the ballot question and intergovernmental agreement documents. While some of the projects we have are eligible to be designated as lead one projects, this designation was not utilized as all projects have equal priority. As stated earlier Union County has not abandoned any SPLOST projects for each approved referendum. Union County has adhered to all SPLOST related statutes as related to the administration of these SPLOST programs. Furthermore, this has been verified through independent audits on an annual basis. Union County completes the SPLOST annual report required by law each year, and this is published in the newspaper. Further regulations - we also post these on our county's web page, and this is the example. We have one of each of these for each SPLOST program. Some jurisdictions in Georgia put very specific projects in specific budgets on the SPLOST referendum. However, this is not required, and the Union County referendum is in compliance with SPLOST regulation. Here are some of our SPLOST project examples: roads and bridges, improvements and maintenance on our county roads, purchase of road department vehicles and equipment, and leveraging state or federal grant funds when made available. We are all very thankful to have tractors and mowers, long arm mowers, dump trucks, spreader trucks, motor graders, etc., when they are needed. Road striping and signage is also very important for our safety. County facilities - many of our county facilities are improved with necessary upgrades such as new roofs, new HVAC units, and many other renovations and additions to our buildings. Library - state funding for local libraries has been cut dramatically. SPLOST funds are utilized by our local library for books, videos, equipment, and any other eligible needs they have. If you haven't visited our local library, I encourage you to do so. It is one of the nicest in north Georgia and one of the busiest too. Back in 2011, 11 years ago, we actually renovated and expanded our library with SPLOST funds that we used as a match to a state grant. We are very proud of the Union County Library. Public safety - purchase of vehicles and equipment for our Fire Department and Sheriff's office as they serve to protect all of us in Union County. Public safety vehicles and equipment are necessary and expensive. SPLOST funds allow for the acquisition of these items without additional burden to the general fund budget. When emergencies happen, we are very glad to have reliable and safe fire trucks, rescue vehicles, and equipment. We also want our Sheriff's Office employees to be safe while they keep us safe. Parks and recreation - SPLOST allows for a significant community investment through our parks and recreation department. These projects increase the quality of life across all ages. Just a few examples are Meek's Park improvements, gymnasiums, ball fields, pickleball courts, bathroom facilities at Meeks Park, pavilions for public use and recreation facilities in the Suches community. The new sports center across from the high school not only houses our recreation department offices, but it has a meeting room available. People of all ages can walk there year-round for exercise. We

have exercise classes there and two very nice gymnasiums for our Recreation Department basketball program. Before the sports center was built using SPLOST funds, the Union County Recreation Department has not had its own gymnasium for the recreation department basketball program all these years. We have been utilizing the old gyms that belong to Union County Schools for practices and games for many years, but those were not sufficient to support our growing program. In the current season we are in, the recreation department had a big increase to 42 overall teams. These are small children under middle school age, with a total of 305 little players. Solid waste - SPLOST funds make our transfer station, convenience center, and recycling facility a better place for everyone. This is continuing even now as the county has taken this over and will make it even better in the future. We can upgrade or build facilities and purchase machinery and equipment needed for operations - keeping our community clean and beautiful. Lastly is the City of Blairsville. Because of our intergovernmental agreement with the City of Blairsville in our SPLOST program, the city can use their SPLOST funds for their water and sewer facilities, public facilities, roads, sidewalks, crosswalks, etc. We are proud of our SPLOST programs in Union County, and we discuss needs with elected officials and department heads to see how the SPLOST program can help them as their needs change or become evident. I would like to share some details about an item back in SPLOST 3. When SPLOST 3 was being planned years ago, jail renovation and expansion was on the referendum. We believe based on what the sheriff's office and jail was experiencing back then with overcrowding - meaning they had more inmates than they had beds and space - that the jail would either need to be expanded or at least renovated. We had a feasibility study done to determine what was actually needed. However, by the time SPLOST 3 was approved and collections began, it was determined in 2009 and 2010 that the overcrowding in our jail had gone down, and it was not as big a problem as it was in the previous years. But there were some upgrades and renovations that were needed there. The total cost for this was much less than an expansion. We saw this as a very wise decision to not build or expand a jail that was not actually needed. That would be a true waste of money - especially during that SPLOST program that fell several million dollars short of projected revenues. Each six-year SPLOST program includes a lot of documents and record keeping, so it's easier to answer SPLOST specific questions in our office where we can access those documents and records and be accurate about the information we give you. Recently someone from a County Meeting brought a list of questions into our office the next day, and I was able to respond to all the questions with the information she requested and I actually asked her to come into the office and sit down with me to go over it if she had time. She did and during the 30 minutes she was there, she actually had additional questions that she thought of based off the other information, and I was able to go gather that information from my desk or the filing cabinets or the binders and bring it to her, so she was actually glad that she came in to go over that stuff. If anyone ever has questions or concerns about SPLOST please call or come by our office. We're more than happy to help. Thank you for your time.

Commissioner Paris asked Renee Deibert to come up and provide the information she had on the 2020 Census.

Renee Deibert stated, "Many people think that the U.S. Census Bureau only does its work once a decade, and the reality is that they're doing surveys - administering survey instruments -

throughout the year, every year, using different types of instruments. You're familiar with the Decennial Census; they also do some economic census work; they do census of governments; and then there's the American Community Survey that they do annually. They are gathering information on demographics and on economics. There are sponsored surveys when different branches of the government might ask them to do some surveys, and most recently they're doing some poll surveys on the COVID-19 pandemic. You'll probably hear more about that in the future, but what they do is they put all of this census information together and when you go to the U.S. census bureau website you can pull up this information - it's just coming from a lot of different surveys that they've done. We were asked if we would provide some bullet points on some information that was important to the general public so that's kind of what we've done. What we're going to discuss in this time is information specifically about Union County. If you would like to obtain additional details about the census data here's where you can go you can go: [data.census.gov](https://data.census.gov). That will take you to an advanced search area where you can select your geographic area such as Union County. You can look at different topic areas and pick the year for which you'd like to look at the data. Just from a basic Union County informational perspective, the U.S. Census Bureau states that Union County consists of approximately 322 square miles of land area and out of the 159 Georgia counties Union County is the 92nd largest by total land area. If you're wondering who the largest is, that would be Ware County at 892 square miles. The census bureau gives a date of April 1 2020 on their data regarding population and on this date it was reported that the population of Union County was 24,632 now the prior census in 2010 reported a population of 21,356. This is not an unexpected increase. I think the available estimates also show that 33.7% of the Union County population is over the age of 65 years. When compared to other north Georgia counties - just to give you something to compare it to - the census data shows that residents over the age of 65 in Towns County make up 34.9 percent; Fannin County 30.6%, Gilmer County 25.5%, and White County at 23.3%. It seems reasonable to expect that the total number of homes or dwellings in Union County would increase over that same 10-year period of time. The Census Bureau defines a housing unit as an apartment, a mobile home, a group of homes, or a single room that is occupied as a separate living quarter, and the 2010 data - 10 years ago - shows 14,052 housing units. The 2020 data shows 14,995 housing units and that's right around a 7% increase within that 10-year survey span of time. The total number a number of households as opposed to housing units in 2010 was 9,471 while the total number in 2019 was 9,743. This is up an increase of right around 3%. The owner-occupied housing rate in 2010 was 78%. The owner-occupied housing rate in 2020 77%. Persons per household in 2010 was 2.18 persons per household in 2020, it was 2.33. With regards to ancestry, the top four in order of highest percentage - starting with the Irish ancestry, 14% of Union County residents report Irish ancestry; 13.1 percent report German ancestry; 12.9 percent reports English ancestry; and 3.8 percent report Scottish ancestry. Again, this information came from the U.S. Census Bureau website. You can locate the same information and much, much more at [data.census.gov](https://data.census.gov). Thank you.

Commissioner Paris continued with the county business portion of the meeting.

The Commissioner accepted a Contract between ClearGov, Inc. and Union County for web-based budgeting books and transparency centers to communicate the budget with the public in a method that is easy to understand. The amount of this contract is \$30,400.00 and is effective from December 21, 2021 to December 20, 2024. This decision by staff was based on some confusion from the public in understanding the budget this year and a simple way to be sure it is clearer and more simple to understand in the future.

Commissioner Paris accepted an agreement between CSRA Probation Services, Inc. and Union County for probation services to Union County Superior Court. There is no cost to Union County for this service.

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Commissioner Paris accepted an agreement between Rushton and Company and Union County to perform the 2021 Audit of the Union County Financial Statements. The cost of this agreement will not exceed \$59,500 for the financial statement audit and \$5,000 for the single audit.

The Commissioner accepted an agreement amendment between Union County and CorrectHealth Union, LLC for inmate health services at the Union County Jail. This is a renewal of a 12-month contract effective January 1, 2022 through December 31, 2022, for a contract total of \$155,573.33, which is an increase of \$3,794.47 from 2021. Commissioner Paris then stated this gives some idea of the tremendous cost of operating one small part of the jail.

The Commissioner appointed Denise Kelley to the Union County Board of Health for the term of January 1, 2022 to December 31, 2027. This appointment comes as a recommendation of the Board of Health.

Commissioner Paris approved Resolution R-2021-14 which is an emergency resolution accepting the material terms of the Distributor and Janssen Settlements pursuant to the Georgia Memorandum of Understanding and consistent with the terms of the July 21, 2021 National Opioid Settlement Agreements. Approximately three years ago, give or take, Union County signed on with the group of law firms who filed suit against the Opioid Pharmaceutical Supply Chain Participants. This lawsuit was filed to hold these companies liable and responsible for their distribution practices and alleged falsehoods surrounding opioid safety and distribution. Union County along with the State of Georgia, many other states, and hundreds of municipalities and counties joined this lawsuit. This resolution is authorizing the law firm representing counties, cities, and states to enter into the National Opioid Settlement Agreement on our behalf. The hope is to get some financial compensation at some point but after three years it is still too early to tell if this will actually happen.

The Commissioner approved Resolution R-2022-01 to Set and Fix the Qualification fees of candidates for each county office to be filled in the upcoming primary. The only offices that will appear on the ballot this year are three seats for the Board of Education. Commissioner Paris set the qualifying fees for the Board of Education at \$130.00 for each qualifying individual. The dates for qualifying are March 7, 2022 through March 11, 2022 at 12:00pm.

Commissioner Paris approved Resolution R-2022-02 appointing Melissa Ekeberg to the Board of Directors of the Union County Governmental Finance Corporation for a four-year term from February 1, 2022 to January 31, 2026.

The Commissioner approved Resolution R-2022-03 appointing Bo Wright to the Board of Directors of the Union County Governmental Finance Corporation for a four-year term from February 1, 2022 to January 31, 2026.

Commissioner Paris approved Resolution R-2022-04 appointing Robbie Colwell Weaver to the Board of Directors of the Union County Governmental Finance Corporation for a three-year term from February 1, 2022 to January 31, 2025. This term is only three years in order to stagger the board so when terms expire, there is not all new board members in the same year. These three board members are updating the Governmental Finance Corporation Board of Directors as this corporation will be retained for possible future use by the county.

The Commissioner approved the following Business Licenses which are only issued for the purpose of collecting the Hotel/Motel Tax.

Redneck Yacht Club  
215 Rippling Waters Road

38 Ghena Way Rental  
38 Ghena Way

Red Cobras, LLC  
495 Chicory Drive

Robins Nest  
113 Lakeside Drive

Creekwood Cottage  
510 Ridge Crest Drive

328 Old Beech Road Rental  
328 Old Beech Road

120 River Refuge Boulevard Rental  
120 River Refuge Boulevard

563 High Lance Road Rental  
563 High Lance Road

Creative Real Estate Strategies, LLC  
121 Red Bird Drive

The next item on the agenda was Millard Blanchard who requested to speak regarding mask mandates and mask use. Commissioner Paris asked Mr. Blanchard to come up and reminded him his time limit was three minutes.

Mr. Blanchard's initial introduction was not audible on recording. Millard Blanchard stated, "The mask mandate has been handled. I am speaking tonight about concerns I have over masks and thinking that we're to become complacent with Covid. Covid is not over it is still very active. My background, is as an EMS instructor and Chief Dyer, an instructor as well, will let you know if I am telling any lies. I would like to give you a quick course in contagious disease safety. If it is not yours, you don't want it on you. Covid is not over according to current statistics and cases are still very high. Masks and social distancing is important to people who are immune compromised, those people who get sick frequently, people who have emphysema or COPD, people who have uncontrolled diabetes, and people who are obese. Those kids of people are at risk and they need to continue with social distancing. Traditional social distancing is the leader, however if you see someone that wants to sneeze, run. So, you've got to pass out on masks. The World Health Organization, our very own center for disease control and Dr. Fauci say masks don't work. I guess you can read the pass outs. There are masks out there, they are referred to as N95 masks, and dust masks, or there's a KN95 mask that has been shown to be protective. The problem is they are coming from China and the FDA has found them to be defective. So, all I can say is try to find an American supplier, do your research. There are American suppliers, and they may have a third-party company that will make them. Continue with your good personal hygiene that we've learned in the last two years. That's my concern, we're all getting complacent. (3-minute time limit up)

William Mercer stated, "Thank you so much for your information, Mr. Blanchard. If anybody else wants to talk to Mr. Blanchard about the accuracy of masks and everything else feel free after the meeting.

Commissioner Paris thanked the Union County Road Department, Sheriff's Office and Police Department, Fire Department, E911, Ambulance Service, and the Health Department for all their assistance with the cold and stormy weather over the last two weeks. The Commissioner stated, "We all lived through it, and we all survived but it was miserable. We are lucky that it wasn't any worse than it was. I also want to thank GDOT for working on the state roads to help keep them clean. I guess tonight is a record breaker as far as temperature and then hopefully we will go another week or so before the temperature really starts to get cold again. I do not like cold weather. I used to love snow and snow skied all my life. Now I hate snow. I don't like getting up at three or four or two o'clock in the morning going out and checking roads. I feel an obligation to do so to help the public."

The Commissioner then reiterated what Pam Hawkins said earlier in the meeting. He thanked all the people who work at the Union County Recreation Department for continuing the basketball program. Last year the program had to stop about three or two weeks before the end of the season related to COVID and there were a lot of unhappy parents and unhappy kids. The new sports center has 42 basketball teams and 305 kids playing basketball. This is a great program and the Commissioner said he was very proud of the success they have had in the new gym.

The Commissioner stated that since this meeting addressed two previous requested topics, SPLOST and the Census, a speaker on the agenda, along with containing items from two County Meetings, he felt like the three additional topics for tonight. He told attendees if they had further questions notepads and pens were provided on the way out to write their questions. He went on to say attendees could call the office with their questions as well.

There being no further business the meeting was adjourned at 6:53 pm.

Respectfully submitted by:

  
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Jennifer Mahan, County Clerk

Approved this 17<sup>th</sup> day of February, 2022

  
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Lamar Paris, Commissioner