

A Public "Town Hall" Meeting was held by the Oconee County Board of Commissioners on Tuesday, February 16, 2010, at 7:00 p.m. at the Oconee County Civic Center.

Members Present: Chairman Melvin Davis
Commissioner Jim Luke
Commissioner John Daniell
Commissioner Margaret Hale
Commissioner Chuck Horton

Staff Present: Administrative Officer Alan Theriault
County Clerk Gina M. Lindsey
County Attorney Daniel Haygood

Media Present: Blake Giles, The Oconee Enterprise

Chairman Davis called the meeting to order and welcomed the public. Administrative Officer Alan Theriault served as moderator of the meeting and explained the procedures for asking questions of the Board of Commissioners.

Russ Page asked if the Board members feel it is important to save the area surrounding the Elder Mill and the Elder Covered Bridge. Chairman Davis said the Elder Mill is historic property and he would like to see it secured, but explained county funds are currently not available. He said he would support a citizens' attempt to preserve the area. Commissioner Horton said he is supportive, but the property owners are not willing to sell at this time. Commissioner Luke recalled a written letter that expressed the Board's support of a citizens' group. Commissioner Daniell and Commissioner Hale also expressed support for preserving the area, but noted funds are not available from the county at this time.

Andrew Malcom remarked on a newspaper article in which Larry Benson was quoted as saying real estate values are down 30% to 50% and asked if the Board agreed. Commissioner Hale said the Board is looking at ways to diversify the county's tax base. Commissioners Daniell, Luke and Horton acknowledged these are stressful economic times, but explained property values are actually down 3% - 5%. Chairman Davis said property values cannot be predicted until we are closer to the end of the fiscal year.

Jeff Hood asked if Commissioners Hale and Daniell will seek re-election this year. Both responded that they plan to run again for their Commission Posts.

Kenneth Mann asked if there is an opportunity to use alternative funding for Economic Development efforts, i.e. SPLOST, Bonds, Partnerships, General Funds, etc. He stated the Chamber of Commerce supports diversifying the tax base and asked that the Chamber continue to be involved in Economic Development discussions. Commissioner Daniell stated he could not support allocating funds when there is no clear vision or direction. Commissioner Hale said she would support leaving \$175,000 in the budget for infrastructure at Gateway Business Park. Commissioner Luke stated he would support the right initiative for economic development and encouraged the Development Authority to start on a new plan. Commissioner Horton explained he was sympathetic, but the funding is not there. He advocated spending more time with existing businesses. Chairman Davis expressed his support for the Development Authority's plan to move forward with Gateway. He noted SPLOST funds were not dedicated to economic development, but suggested public-private funding and/or special tax districts could be used for financial needs.

Lee Becker asked where Board members would prefer locating compensatory mitigation required by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for developments impacting wetlands and streams in Oconee County. Commissioner Hale said she would prefer these sites be located in Oconee County if there was a mitigation site to go to. If one is not available, she would prefer an adjoining county. Commissioner Daniell said he foresees a problem with the proposed Wetland Mitigation Resolution in that it could set the County up for battles. He would rather provide incentives to help the developers. Commissioner Luke said he would prefer compensatory mitigation sites be located in Barrow or Athens-Clarke Counties because those waters are upstream. Commissioner Horton questioned what would happen if no land owners made their property available or if the property is cost prohibitive. Chairman Davis expressed concern for unintended consequences due adopting the proposed resolution.

Bill Mayberry acknowledged 72% of property taxes are allocated to the School Board and asked if there was communication between the two Boards. Chairman Davis stated there is frequent dialog with the School Board and noted the Board of Commissioners has done an outstanding job in reducing the county's millage rate over the prior years. Commissioner Horton said he is sympathetic to the funding needs of the School Board and remarked that the County has combined efforts with the School Board on many projects. Commissioner Luke said it is not the duty of the Board of Commissioners to influence how the School Board spends its money. Commissioner Daniell said there is always room for better cooperation and dialog. Commissioner Hale noted communication has greatly improved between the two Boards.

Tim Price encouraged the Board to support the proposed Wetland Mitigation Resolution.

Kate McDaniel asked if the Board was aware of the Governor's move toward conservation of water and how it would impact Oconee County's water. Commissioner Hale gave assurance the Board will fight to keep the resources needed for Oconee County's future. Commissioner Daniell said he couldn't comment on what may happen, but he would keep an eye on what the legislature does during its current session. Commissioner Luke said he will be concerned if the metro counties are restricted in what they can use from Lake Lanier. Commissioner Horton stated water demand in the metro counties is tremendous and another "Lake Lanier" is needed immediately. Chairman Davis reported talks have been held regarding the utilization of Hard Labor Creek's water until it is needed by Oconee County.

Sarah Bell asked what the Commissioners envision for Oconee County in the next 20 years. Chairman Davis remarked on prior studies for determining a vision for the County. His personal vision is to plan for water and sewer needs, transportation issues, maintaining the quality of homes, keeping commercial development in designated areas and providing the quality of life and services that are needed by the citizens. Commissioner Horton stated he hopes to foster an environment where the citizens play a role in determining where they want Oconee County to be in 20 years. Commissioner Luke said the Community Agenda is the county's road map. Commissioner Daniell recommended the county prepare the same type of vision/plan that was developed for the Epps Bridge Parkway area in the 1990's. Commissioner Hale expressed her support for the protection of the south end of the county, putting Oconee County on the economic development map with the State and increasing opportunities for children.

Bill Mayberry asked if mandates would be coming from the State this year. Commissioners Luke and Horton reported they had spoken with Senator Cowsert and Representative Smith on this matter and encouraged the public to contact them as well. Chairman Davis and Commissioner Hale expect unfunded mandates to come, given the budget cuts in state-provided services. They noted ACCG keeps the Board informed of issues that may affect county budgets. Commissioner Daniell said the county's budget should focus on what is absolutely needed.

Robert Wyatt expressed support for the proposed Wetland Mitigation Resolution and asked if the Board would consider "tweaking" the resolution rather than rejecting it in its entirety. Commissioner Hale noted the Board has not rejected the proposed resolution in a vote. Commissioner Daniell said land owners should first be encouraged to provide mitigation sites. Commissioner Luke stated the Hard Labor Creek Reservoir currently has three mitigation sites in Oconee County. Commissioner Horton said there are still questions regarding the proposed resolution that need to be answered.

Charles Baugh remarked if the County goes on record in support of a Wetland Mitigation Resolution, it would encourage property owners to offer mitigation sites, thereby creating a market for it. Eleanor Cotton encouraged the Board to further consider the proposed resolution.

Chuck Williams asked what the Commissioners consider the greatest challenge facing the county in the next 2-3 years. Chairman Davis answered, "budget and taxes"; Commissioner Horton answered, "funding items in the budget that are outside the basic services";

Commissioner Luke answered, “a plan for economic development”; Commissioner Daniell answered, “diversity of the tax base and economic development”; and, Commissioner Hale answered, “the budget”.

Pat Priest conveyed her support for the proposed Wetland Mitigation Resolution and asked if the Board would consider designating a place for a community garden. Chairman Davis and Commissioners Luke and Horton said they would support any group that desires a community garden.

Mary Mellein said she understood there are land owners around the Elder Covered Bridge that are willing to sell their property. Chairman Davis clarified the County does own the Bridge. Commissioner Luke noted the Board has indicated its support for a park project, but the County does not have funds available to contribute.

Stuart Cofer brought attention to a mobile home that is unsightly and in disrepair. Commissioner Luke stated it would be communicated to the Code Enforcement Department.

Madison County resident, Chip Chandler, spoke on the success of Watson Mill State Park and suggested there are alternate ways Oconee County could fund development of the Elder Mill area. Commissioners Hale, Luke and Horton commended Russ Page on his environmental efforts and explained funds have been budgeted in the past for historic and scenic preservation.

Karen Kimbaris expressed support for the proposed Wetland Mitigation Resolution and asked if bike or walking paths had been considered for the Daniells Bridge Road/Oconee Connector construction project. Commissioner Luke explained the current construction is strictly for vehicle safety, but when the roadway is brought up to state standards, paths will be required. Chairman Davis remarked that bike paths are a requirement of any roadway construction project that includes federal funding.

Leslie Hunsinger noted her appreciation for the After-School Program and said she would be willing to pay an increase in fees to cover the full cost of the program.

Mike Streetman reported the Recreational Affairs Committee is currently discussing a Greenways Master Plan Project.

Commissioner Hale wrapped up by saying she welcomes any comments, questions and concerns and gave out her cell phone number. Commissioner Daniell stated he would be talking a lot about Economic Development in the future. Commissioner Luke remarked he was again surprised space issues relating to the County did not come up and said he would like to hear from the public on the matter. Commissioner Horton said he hopes it is obvious the Board is reaching out to the public. Chairman Davis said he looks forward to future meetings and noted Board members would be available 30 minutes following the meeting for individual discussions with citizens.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.

County Clerk

Chairman

Date