

**HABERSHAM COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
SPECIAL CALLED MEETING MINUTES
6:00 P.M., MONDAY, JUNE 29, 2026
HABERSHAM COUNTY COURTHOUSE
JURY ASSEMBLY ROOM
295 LLEWELLYN STREET, CLARKESVILLE, GA 30523**

The Habersham County Board of Commissioners held a special called meeting on Monday, June 29, 2026 at 6:00 p.m. in the Jury Assembly Room of the Habersham County Courthouse located at 295 Llewellyn St., Clarkesville, GA 30523.

Present was Chairman Bruce Harkness, Vice Chairman Dustin Mealor, Commissioner Ty Akins, Commissioner Kelly Woodall, Commissioner Danny McClellon, County Manager Tim Sims, County Clerk Brandalin Carnes, staff, members of the media, and members of the public.

County Attorney Angie Davis was absent at the beginning of the meeting but joined the proceeding prior to the executive session being called.

Chairman Harkness called the meeting to order at 6:01 p.m.

Commissioner Woodall led the Invocation.

Commissioner Akins led the Pledge of Allegiance.

ADOPTION OF AGENDA

Motion by Commissioner Akins, seconded by Commissioner Mealor, and voted unanimously (5-0) to adopt the agenda as presented.

PUBLIC HEARINGS:

FY 2027 Budget- Second and Final Public Hearing and Consideration of Resolution No. 2026-06-003
Adopting FY 2027 Budget

Chairman Harkness opened the second and final public hearing for the FY 2027 Budget and Resolution No. 2026-06-003.

Finance Director Kiani Holden addressed the Commission to deliver the final presentation on the proposed FY 2027 fiscal budget, reviewing the primary financial objectives ticking off the development timeline, and emphasizing the administrative formatting and utilization of Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) Request forms, Budget Document Position Request forms, and Expenditure Justification forms that department heads used to build their requests.

Ms. Holden reported that while the initial departmental requests for FY 2027 totaled \$47.126 million (representing a 12.76% year-over-year increase from the FY 2026 amended budget of \$41.154 million), the budget committee successfully scaled those requests down by approximately \$3.1 million. This restraint contained the net operational growth cost of running the county government to under 2%, arriving at a final recommended countywide expenditure total of \$78,465,929 across all funds.

Ms. Holden provided the definitive breakdown of total anticipated expenditures across all primary operating, capital, and special funds:

- **Gross General Fund:** Balanced at \$43,988,343 to cover core county operations.
- **Special Revenue Funds:** Earmarked at \$6,375,349.
- **Enterprise Funds:** Allocated at \$2,246,393.

- **Capital Project Funds:** Set at \$917,488.

She explained that within the General Fund framework, \$917,488 is dedicated directly to capital projects under the CIP. To achieve a balanced budget without generating a structural deficit, the revenue structure relies on a combination of property taxes (\$22,233,122), Local Option Sales Tax (LOST) projections (\$6,575,000), and internal allocations—which includes drawing \$604,554 directly from the General Fund balance.

Regarding personnel, Ms. Holden highlighted that the budget funds 6 new full-time EMT/Basic Firefighters, a critical committee recommendation designed to reopen the unstaffed New Liberty and Fairview fire stations. Reopening these stations directly protects the county's ISO rating from rising, avoiding a sharp inflation of homeowner insurance premiums. Ms. Holden further noted that the base budget had been impacted by a \$1.3 million baseline increase prior to departmental requests due to mandatory and pre-existing obligations:

- A 1.5% countywide base salary increase (\$310,000) to fulfill the remaining half of the 3% salary adjustment initiated in FY 2026.
- A \$232,000 escalation in employee health insurance costs, half of which was absorbed into employee contributions.
- A \$100,000 increase in retirement obligations resulting from the expiration of prior-year credits.
- An additional \$127,800 in utility costs.
- A \$719,640 increase in the 911 emergency transfer fund, driven by declining landline fee collections and the fact that the dispatch department is fully staffed for the first time in several years.

These pressures were successfully offset by healthy revenue growth indicators, including an 8% increase in property tax new growth, a 7% spike in fire premium tax revenues, and expanded intergovernmental grant funding, including City of Demorest contributions to cover the salaries of firefighters at stations absorbed by the county.

Chairman Harkness then invited public comment.

Dale Green addressed the Commission. Mr. Green questioned the extent of services the county provides that are not explicitly mandated by law. He noted that he is 72 years old and did not remember the county having a Parks and Recreation department back then. Chairman Harkness responded by outlining the historical evolution and scope of county services provided over time.

Jeanette Byrom addressed the Commission. Ms. Byrom spoke in favor of allocating dedicated funding for spay and neuter services at the animal shelter. She highlighted her extensive volunteer and fostering history, noting that she has personally funded animal care and frequently donated food, supplies, and personal time. Ms. Byrom emphasized that it is far more effective to curb overpopulation before animals enter the shelter system. She noted that when citizens face costs upward of \$500 for veterinary procedures, they often forego them, resulting in an influx of multiple animals to the facility. Proactive funding would maximize the impact of donations from residents on fixed incomes and discourage the public view of animals as disposable.

In response to Ms. Byrom's concerns, County Manager Tim Sims provided an update to the Board and public, announcing that the county is in the process of contracting with a service provider to deliver low-cost spaying, neutering, euthanasia, and emergency surgical services internally. This initiative will eliminate the logistical need to transport shelter animals out of the county for medical care. He noted that staff is currently looking to house this operation temporarily in a facility across from the aquatic center, with plans to permanently transition the provider into the new animal shelter when it opens in the fall. Additionally, these low-cost services will be made available to the general public based on income thresholds, and staff is finalizing the specific operational details.

Beth Sutton addressed the Commission. Ms. Sutton wished to echo and emphasize the points raised by Ms. Byrom. Ms. Sutton noted that she resides in a mixed-income neighborhood and has a low-income neighbor who cannot afford standard spay and neuter costs. Consequently, Ms. Sutton has been feeding the neighborhood animals and bringing them into the shelter to ensure they are altered, entirely at her own personal expense.

No additional individuals came forward to speak, and the public comment portion of the hearing was closed.

Board discussion ensued regarding the final budget proposal.

Commissioner Akins expressed his gratitude to the entire Finance Department, Kiani Holden, and County Manager Tim Sims for their transparency, responsiveness, and dedication. He commended them for delivering a budget that successfully rolls back the millage rate while remaining highly productive. Commissioner Akins further noted that incoming grants are expanding the county's budget capacity, highlighting an incoming \$2 million grant designated for the county fire station.

Commissioner Mealor stated that everyone involved did an exceptional job throughout the intensive budget cycle.

Commissioner Woodall commended the administration for containing the operational growth costs of running the county government. Drawing from his perspective as a business owner, he acknowledged that general expenses naturally rise annually, yet staff managed to hold this year's growth under 2%. He praised the department heads for their fiscal restraint and noted that since personnel is the lifeblood of the organization, the targeted increases to properly take care of county employees represented a completely valid and necessary expense.

Commissioner McClellon noted that Finance Director Kiani Holden had comprehensively answered all of his inquiries, stating that because he has not been seated on the Board very long, he would "save his fight for next year."

Chairman Harkness expressed strong philosophical reservations regarding high property taxation, stating his belief that it should be illegal to tax citizens out of their land and homes. He observed that many local farmers he knows have been forced to sell off tracts of their family property simply to keep up with escalating tax bills. He pointed out that he has voted against the county budget for the past four or five consecutive years due to tax increases. However, he stated he would support this budget because it does not represent a tax increase. Chairman Harkness clarified that while tax bills have climbed alongside skyrocketing property values, the Board of Commissioners has zero administrative control over valuations, as they have no authority over the Board of Tax Assessors or the Board of Education's independent tax levies. He concluded by noting that this year, almost every county resident with a valid homestead exemption will see a net decrease in their property tax bills.

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Woodall, to approve the FY 2027 Habersham County Budget and Budget Resolution (Resolution No. 2026-06-003) for the General Fund of \$43,988,343, totaling \$78,465,929 across all county funds, and authorizing the Chairman to sign and execute the budget resolution and all necessary associated documentation. Motion carried 4-1, with Commissioner McClellon voting in opposition.

- a. 2026 Property Tax Millage Rate- Public Hearing and Consideration of Resolution No. 2026-06-004 Adopting the 2026 Tax Levy and Authorizing Execution of PT-35 Forms and Other Required Documents

Chairman Harkness opened the public hearing to consider the 2026 Tax Levy and Resolution No. 2026-06-004.

Finance Director Kiani Holden presented the statistical and operational framework behind the 2026 Net Millage Rates, calculating that the county's net digest value stands at \$2,016,426,990. Factoring in a historical 97.00% tax collection rate, she advised the Board that each individual mill is calculated to generate \$1,955,934 in localized revenue.

Because of the strong 8% digest growth from new property developments, Ms. Holden presented a rate configuration that rolls back the county's tax burden. She detailed the specific adjustments across all taxing jurisdictions to show how the levy would impact residents:

- **General Fund Maintenance & Operations (M&O):** Proposing a decrease from 11.272 mills to 11.241 mills. This net millage rate is achieved by applying a 1.370 mill rollback to a gross millage of 12.611 mills.
- **Hospital Debt Fund-Bonds:** Proposing a decrease from 1.129 mills to 1.114 mills to cover ongoing medical center debt service.
- **Emergency Medical Services (EMS):** Proposing an increase from 1.275 mills to 1.388 mills to accommodate expanded emergency response infrastructure and the fire station reopenings.
- **Board of Education Levy:** Proposing a decrease from 9.122 mills to 9.048 mills.

Ms. Holden confirmed that by implementing these specific adjustments, the county is successfully rolling back the millage rate. Coupled with the standard homestead exemptions, this configuration ensures that the vast majority of Habersham County property owners will experience a net decrease on their physical tax bills despite rising external property valuations.

Chairman Harkness opened the floor for public comment.

Dale Green addressed the Commission. Mr. Green stated that if citizens were granted an adequate chance to fully explain their views, the community would be better off. He expressed frustration with the strict three-minute speaking limit, asserting that it deters public attendance because citizens feel ignored or mocked. Mr. Green shared a localized grievance regarding a ditch near his neighbor's home; though county crews recently brought expensive equipment out to clear the ditch, they failed to dig it deep enough to resolve the issue. He further detailed a personal medical hardship involving a severe spinal injury from a ladder fall, which took four weeks to receive surgical intervention. He questioned whether the county would ever fully pay off the hospital debt and noted he heard Northside Hospital had previously offered to purchase the facility and absorb the liability. He concluded by recounting a recent emergency room experience where a local

radiologist failed to detect a completely broken hardware screw in his wife's back, stating that local citizens are paying high taxes for inadequate returns and should stand up regardless of external reactions.

No other citizens came forward to speak, and no additional comments were offered by the Board. The public hearing was subsequently closed.

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Akins, and voted unanimously (5-0) to approve the Habersham County General Fund millage rate at 11.241, the Habersham Countywide Hospital millage rate at 1.114, the Emergency Medical Services millage rate at 1.388, and furthermore to authorize the Chairman to sign and execute the 2026 Tax Year Levy Resolution (Resolution No. 2026-06-004), the three associated PT-35 forms, and any other documents required for formal transmittal of the digest to the Georgia Department of Revenue.

NEW BUSINESS:

- a. Consider/Approve Resolution 2026-06-005 Adopting the Habersham County Fee Schedule for FY 2027

Finance Director Kiani Holden addressed the Commission, noting that the fee schedule review is a standardized component of the annual budget cycle, with department heads auditing their respective operational fees starting in January to submit changes by March. The updated rates were already incorporated into the proposed budget, and the resolution formally adopts the final fee schedule document.

Board discussion ensued regarding specific adjustments to the Airport Hangar fees.

Chairman Harkness questioned whether the Board had received the updated fee schedule regarding the airport hangars, expressing concern that the final figures were not what he anticipated. Ms. Holden clarified that the county administration originally intended to implement a significantly larger hangar rental fee increase based on square footage. However, after receiving extensive feedback and inquiries from tenants, staff decided to delay the comprehensive overhaul for one year. Instead, a flat \$25 per month increase was added to the monthly rent. Ms. Holden explained that because the county recently initiated comprehensive physical inspections of the hangars, several critical deferred maintenance issues were discovered. The administration did not feel it was fair or appropriate to execute a dramatic rate increase before the county took steps to fix those outstanding issues.

Chairman Harkness inquired who authorized the internal group decision to postpone the full rate adjustment, noting he had been requesting in-depth hangar assessment data for months and felt the late change caught the Board off guard when tasked with voting on the schedule. County Manager Tim Sims replied that the decision was made internally by staff after assessing the physical maintenance backlogs. Furthermore, inspections revealed that charging strictly by square footage is currently inequitable because structural poles and obstructions reduce the amount of usable space in larger hangars. Mr. Sims noted that the county had to threaten to cut locks off several units simply to get keys from tenants to complete the long-delayed inspections. He added that the Airport Commission also raised strong objections to the immediate implementation of square-footage billing. Mr. Sims reminded the Board that the fee schedule is a living document that can be amended by the Commission at any time in the future and does not have to wait for a formal budget cycle. Ms. Holden further explained that a review of the existing tenant lease agreements revealed they contain fixed expiration/term dates. Consequently, the proposed aggressive rate increases could not legally take effect until January or February of 2027, preventing the county from realizing a full year of expanded revenue anyway. By keeping the immediate increase to a flat \$25 per month—marking the first rate increase in several years—tenants receive a full year's notice before the county shifts to a formalized square-footage model next year.

Chairman Harkness pointed out that tenants are storing aircraft worth \$200,000 or more, and a nominal \$25 increase felt insufficient when the Board is expected to allocate taxpayer funds to repair roofs, doors, and lots.

Commissioner Akins interjected, stating that some of the tenants' operational objections were legitimate. He suggested that since the larger fee structure would not immediately impact the current calendar year, the Board should approve the schedule as presented and schedule a dedicated work session over the next month or two to perform an in-depth report and evaluation of airport fees. Ms. Holden clarified that all airport repairs and capital upkeep are funded exclusively by localized airport enterprise fees, fuel sales, and rental revenues, meaning zero general fund property tax dollars are subsidized toward standard airport operations. Mr. Sims added that while the general fund has previously advanced short-term loans to the airport to cover localized matching requirements for sudden federal and state grants—having executed four major grant projects over the past few years—those funds are actively being repaid to the county by the airport enterprise fund. Commissioner Woodall agreed with the call for a dedicated work session, acknowledging that while the county has fallen short on providing the level of updating and routine maintenance it should have provided as a landlord, a comprehensive workshop is necessary to align future fees and property needs.

Motion by Commissioner Akins, seconded by Commissioner Woodall, to approve Resolution No. 2026-06-005 amending and adopting the Habersham County Fee Schedule for FY 2027. Motion carried 3-2, with Chairman Harkness and Commissioner McClellon dissenting.

b. Consider/Approve Resolution 2026-06-006 for FY 2026 Budget Amendments

Finance Director Kiani Holden addressed the Commission regarding the proposed final resolution to balance out the closing Fiscal Year 2026 budget records. She explained that standard accounting practices and state laws dictate that all departmental line items reflect actual expenditures. She presented a final sweeping budget amendment totaling an aggregate of \$183,658 across all county funds to account for late-stage operational variances, technical corrections, and shifting revenue allocations.

Ms. Holden provided the exact departmental ledger adjustments:

- **General Fund:** Adjusted upward by \$72,500 to account for unanticipated operating costs. This is entirely balanced by recognizing \$72,500 in unbudgeted General Fund revenues, creating a net-zero impact on county reserves.
- **Emergency Telephone System (911) Fund:** Increased by \$91,968, fully funded via an identical operational transfer from the General Fund balance to support communications personnel and infrastructure.
- **Senior Center Fund:** Increased by \$12,790 to cover service delivery expansions, completely offset by a matching draw from the Senior Center's existing fund balance.
- **County Jail Fund:** Increased by \$5,000 to cover rising inmate care expenditures, funded entirely by a \$5,000 draw from the Jail Fund balance.
- **Juvenile Services Fund:** Adjusted upward by \$1,000, supported by recognizing \$1,000 in additional localized program revenues.
- **Hotel/Motel Tax Fund:** Increased by \$400, covered by recognizing \$400 in unexpected tourism tax revenue collections.

Ms. Holden emphasized that because every single expenditure increase is paired with a corresponding revenue recognition or dedicated fund balance draw, these amendments are entirely self-balancing and do not create any new structural deficits for the county.

During Board discussion, Chairman Harkness inquired whether the Finance Department planned to implement a mechanism requiring department heads who exceed their authorized budgetary allocations to

appear directly before the Commission to explain the variances. Ms. Holden confirmed that the finance team could initiate formal quarterly commission update sessions where affected department heads would formally address the Board regarding over-budget line items to justify the variances publicly.

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Woodall, to approve the FY 2026 Budget Adjustment Resolution (Resolution No. 2026-06-006). Motion carried 4-1, with Chairman Harkness voting in opposition.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Commissioner Woodall extended early Independence Day wishes to the community, highlighting that this year marks the historic 250th anniversary of the United States.

Chairman Harkness shared a historical reflection, noting that when he was younger, the local high school was situated on the current courthouse site. He recalled celebrating the nation's Bicentennial on these exact grounds back in 1976. He invited the public to attend an upcoming community gathering on July 11th featuring free hot dogs and the formal setting of the historic, old courthouse bell.

EXECUTIVE SESSION: Litigation, pursuant to O.C.G.A §50-14-2 and Personnel, pursuant to O.C.G.A § 50-14-3(b)(2).

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Akins, and voted unanimously (5-0) to go into executive session for the purpose of discussing Litigation, pursuant to O.C.G.A §50-14-2 and Personnel, pursuant to O.C.G.A § 50-14-3(b)(2).

ROLL CALL VOTE:

Commissioner Woodall- aye
Commissioner Harkness- aye
Commissioner McClellon- aye
Commissioner Akins- aye
Commissioner Mealor- aye

Motion carries to enter executive session at 7:28 p.m.

Motion by Commissioner Akins seconded by Commissioner Woodall and voted unanimously (5-0) to leave executive session at 9:04 p.m.

County Attorney Angie Davis attested that the matters discussed in executive session were those allow under state law as exceptions to the open meetings act and authorizing the Chairman to sign an affidavit attesting to this.

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Akins, and voted unanimously (5-0) to authorize the Chairman to sign the executive session affidavit.

ADJOURN

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Akins, and voted unanimously (5-0) to adjourn the meeting at 9:05 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

By: Bruce Harkness
Bruce Harkness, Commission Chairman

Attest: Brandal D. Carnes
Brandalin Carnes, County Clerk