

**HABERSHAM COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
SPECIAL CALLED MEETING
6:00 P.M., THURSDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2022
HABERSHAM COUNTY COURTHOUSE
JURY ASSEMBLY ROOM
295 LLEWEYLLN ST, CLARKESVILLE, GA 30523**

AGENDA

A called meeting of the Habersham County Board of Commissioners was held on Thursday, December 1, 2022 at 6:00 p.m. in the Jury Assembly Room of the Habersham County Courthouse located at 295 Llewellyn Street, Clarkesville, GA 30523.

Present: Chairman Bruce Palmer; Commissioner Dustin Mealor; Commissioner Ty Akins; County Manager Alicia Vaughn; County Attorney Ralph Taylor; County Clerk Brandalin Carnes; Individuals from the Media and Public.

Absent: Vice Chairman Bruce Harkness and Commissioner Jimmy Tench

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

Commissioner Akins lead the invocation.

Commissioner Mealor lead the pledge of allegiance.

ADOPTION OF AGENDA

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Akins and voted unanimously 3-0 to adopt the agenda as presented.

Motion by Commissioner Palmer, seconded by Commissioner Akins and voted unanimously 3-0 to suspend the rules the allow for public comment by county employees. Commissioner Palmer allowed 10 minutes for county employees to add their names to the Public Comment list after those who have already signed up were finished speaking.

PUBLIC COMMENTS:

- a. Doug McDonald: County Economics and Other Related Issues- Mr. McDonald voiced his delight at seeing so many people present to view and participate in the meeting. He wanted to let everyone know that Commissioner Tench was unable to attend the meeting due to a possible case of pneumonia. He feels that Commission was lied to at the last meeting when they were told that the Airport Commission had approved the bids for the construction of the hangars at the airport. In addition, he feels that the county has more important matters to attend to prior to the construction of more airport hangars, such as the current state of the hospital, the need for a new jail and the need for the new E911/Emergency Service headquarters. He proceeded to read a letter from Airport Commissioner D. Higgins in which Mr. Higgins stated that the Airport Commission had not reviewed the bid information that was presented to the Commissioners for the two 10-unit T-hangars and two 60'x120' box hangars at the November 21, 2022 meeting.
- b. Sheriff Joey Terrell: Pay Study- Sheriff Terrell wanted to commend the Commissioners for being leaders, stating that the last pay study that was done in 2015 was insufficient. He feels that many important projects in the county such as the jail, the landfill, the hospital have been "kicked down the road". He wanted to remind everyone that, while the current Commission has taken a lot of heat for stepping up to the plate to try to address these issues, they don't get fixed overnight. There were

several years that the county did not have COLAs and the pay scale was thoroughly compressed as a result. He expressed that county employees in every department are important to keeping operations running and that this pay study is the first step in making sure that everyone is getting fairly compensated for the work they do, and the changes to the pay scales allow employees the opportunity to move up with the county. He says the next step would be for the county to work on a better retirement plan for all employees.

- c. Larry Shedd: Pay Study and Aquatic Center Position Requests- Mr. Shedd states that that he is a working man, and he feels that people should be fairly compensated for the work they do. He is not saying that the county employees do not deserve a pay raise, however he believes the county has gone about the wrong way of doing it, voting to allow the raises prior to determining how they would pay for them. He doesn't understand where the money is supposed to come from for the position requests that were made by the Recreation Department, as their budget was already set. He feels that these positions should have been requested in the next budget and should have been added incrementally. He stated that T-SPLOST failed due to the tax increases that were the result of the county having significantly increased its budget and that the public doesn't trust the Commission. He states that citizens have made recommendations in all of the Commission meetings since June, and he doesn't feel like they are being heard. He believes that the county needs to shift the burden of property taxes off the residential property owners and onto the commercial property owners.
- d. Jimmy Dean: Pay Study- Mr. Dean states that he feels that, despite all of the negative media attention of late, County Manager Alicia Vaughn has put together one of the finest management teams in the state. She is trying to address many issues that were problems long before she accepted the position as County Manager. She is trying to figure out how to handle the decreased lifespan of the landfill, getting someone to invest in the old courthouse, having the board of assessors reviewed, getting the airport to be self-sufficient, expanding rec department program at the request of parents, and much more. None of these problems will be fixed overnight and quite frankly or without first taking care of county employees. He states that Mrs. Vaughn and her management team is willing to work with other municipalities in the county to improve relationships that have been neglected in the past with an "us versus them" mentality. Mr. Dean is optimistic about the future and the strides that have been made.
- e. Bob Guthrie: Pay Study and Aquatic Center Position Requests- Mr. Guthrie is requesting that the pay study be tabled until the normal December 19th Commission meeting to allow more time for the Commission to review the information that was presented to them. Mr. Guthrie stated that he has reviewed information that he has received through open record requests as well as info from the DCA and that he is researching if the salary study is fair to employees in the lower income brackets vs the higher ones. He feels that the salary study should have taken into account other benefits that are received by employees such as the 15% retirement that some employees get that others don't. He feels that the 3% that was voted on back in July should have been given to county employees back when it was approved. He doesn't believe that the \$800,000 that was approved in the budget is going to cover the actual costs associated with the study.
- f. Wade Rhodes: Pay Study, Aquatic Center Position Requests and Current County Affairs- Mr. Rhodes stated that he lives in Rabun County but owns property in Habersham County. He stated that he sat down with five of the county's major companies on Wednesday and they discussed the issues they face. The top problem they have is wages. Those companies represented 400 years of combined business and they stated they have never seen the competition that is going on currently with wages before. He wants to know why people continue to have a mindset that those who work in public service somehow deserve to be paid less money than those who do the same job in the private sector? Public employees have the same bills and families and private employees. The counties pay scales should be competitive with private companies. He encourages the Commission to pass the pay

study. He stated that the community is changing, with the population is growing and requiring more services such as, ambulances, police cars, etc. These things are paid for by taxes. The TSPLOST that didn't pass was a sales tax, which is the fairest type of tax. For the Commission to ever say they are not going to have a tax increase is a disservice to the public. People don't like taxes until they need a firetruck or ambulance. On a separate note, he state that investing in the Rec Department is akin to investing in a child. It is a lot easier to invest in a child than to fix a broken man. Programs provided by the Rec Department and the Boys and Girls Club, of which he is a member, are a step in the right direction. He states that if we keep kids out of trouble, we may not need a bigger jail.

- g. Darrin Johnston: Pay Study, Aquatic Center Position Requests and Current County Affairs- Stated his appreciation to the County Commission and the county employees for the work they do. He believes that the county stands at a crossroads and is in a position to make a decision of whether to move forward or languish in what it is currently doing. He stated that the theme of everything that is being stated tonight revolves around the fact that the tax base in the community is not growing in terms of the economic development that is happening. There are few options regarding revenue. The tax base in Habersham County is extremely low compared to the rest of the state. He feels that there is a contingent that comes to the meetings each month and challenges every single decision. Voting no on everything is not a strategy or way to move forward. The key topic he wished to discuss was the pay study. He has been in the corporate world for 30 years and has been on the private side of things in many cases. He commends this pay study because there hasn't been consistency previously and this is the fairest most accurate way to lay out a pay scale. While a few things may need to be adjusted or reassessed, the study itself has been greatly needed for a long time. He echoed Mr. Wade Rhodes asking why those who work in public service should do so for less pay than those in the private sector? He also wished to encourage the Commission to invest in the Rec Department stating that investments in children are cheaper than investments in a jail. He went on to commend County Manager Alicia Vaughn for the work she has done so far for the county.
- h. ~~Alice Venter: Pay Study and County Leadership:~~ Absent
- i. ~~Carole Lonergan: Pay Study and Aquatic Center Position Request:~~ Absent
- j. Carol Meams- Expressed her appreciation of the EMS, Fire and Sheriff Departments and thanked them for the work they do. She attended the meeting on November 21st and doesn't understand why a special called meeting is being held about the pay study and aquatic center positions rather than allow the citizens the time until the regularly scheduled December Commission meeting to review the information. She states that she is not against the pay study but feels that the money should be shifted from other areas of the budget rather than being paid for by property tax increases. She expressed her concern regarding the salaries of upper management and whether or not they match other counties in Georgia. She believes that Recreation Department is also important but the timing is bad to ask for seven new salaried positions during an economic down turn and in light of paying for the current salary study. She asked if these positions were brought before the Recreation Board?
- k. Peggy Fortson- Ms. Fortson stated that choose to work for the community in which they live shouldn't have to settle for a lower salary. She has looked at the results of the salary study and supports the employees getting the pay they need. She also supports the investment in the Aquatic Center positions. She has been highly involved in sports which has caused her to travel to many other counties and it is amazing what a first impression their recreational facilities make. She is embarrassed by the states of our recreational facilities. She feels that, while we don't need to be like a big city, better staffing could improve the recreation facilities as well as program offerings.

Commissioner Palmer gave a 10 minute break to allow for county employees to sign up for public comment should they wish, with each employee having 3 minutes per person.

Mack Palmer- Mr. Palmer stated that he is a lifelong resident of Habersham County and that he works for Emergency Services. He expressed the need to support the Recreation Department, as the children are our future. He states that a lot of money has already been invested by the county in the aquatic center and fields and that more money needs to be put into maintaining them. He wants to applaud Mrs. Vaughn for all she has done since she has been here.

Jeff Adams- Spoke on behalf of Emergency Services. He states that his team is his family and that he wants to express his gratitude to the Commission for allowing them to speak as well as to Mrs. Vaughn for the work that she has done. He has lived in Habersham County since 1998. His team deserves to be paid fairly. He feels like the can has been kicked down the road for both salaries and equipment for far too long. He states that we can either look back on the way we have done things in the past or look to the future. It is not possible to stop growth, so it is necessary to plan for the future. The pay study is an investment in the staff. The positions for the Rec Department are an investment in the future of the county. He wanted to state his appreciation for his staff for their continued support.

Bruce Palmer stated that he looks at all county employees as one big family.

Will Regan- Mr. Regan is the Airport Manager and a resident of Habersham County. He states that while he has only lived here for a few short months, he has noticed that there is a small group of vocal people who want to appear to be the majority when they are not. He states that some of the voices that are in opposition are trying to give the illusion that the Commission is making decisions that they haven't given full consideration to. He states that there is an extreme morale issue in the county and that these pay raises are needed. Many employees are making less than fast food and gas station workers even after many years of service with the county.

Hannah Long- Spoke on behalf of the Finance Department. She has worked for the county for the past three years. Prior to that, she worked for a corporation. Many people don't understand that the way the government runs is very different from a corporation. Government salaries are on pay tables that can get maxed out if they are not being adjusted. Corporations can give raises when they please. She states that employees have been waiting on raises for two years being told "we know everyone is underpaid but just wait, just wait". They knew that these pay adjustments would not happen overnight. The citizens elected the Commissioners to represent them, look at all of the details and make the right decision. She trusts that the Commission will make the best decision possible. She appreciated what they do, as she wouldn't want the responsibility on her shoulders.

Madi Nix- Spoke on behalf of Animal Control- She has been employed with the county since 2009 and was a volunteer prior to that. She wanted to thank the Commission for giving employees an opportunity to voice their positions on the pay study. She states that she has staff members who are not okay financially, with one having to work three jobs to support their family. She has one that has to take time off from their employment with the county so they can work a part time job with amazon that pays more. She feels like her people often get overlooked. A lot of their job is undesirable, what with having to euthanize animals, cut their heads off for rabies testing, having to come in on the weekends and holidays to clean up feces and urine. People may have issues with the funding, but the staff are the backbone of the county. They get berated a lot by members of the public, some of whom throw their animal out after hours. She states the staff are the backbone of the county.

Jerry Baggett- Spoke on behalf of the Road Department, Landfill and Fleet. He stated that the pay in all of his departments is a huge issue that he has noticed since he started. He believes that the \$30,000 the county spent on the pay study is the best investment on the staff that the county could have made. It is much better than calling around and getting opinionated answers or partial information that may be biased. They hired a professional company that does pay studies for a living to research every employee in the county to come up

with fair pay for the position, location, and tax base. He expressed concerns with the fact that he has skilled people that are on call during storm that make less than some fast-food employees.

Lynn Smith- E911- Spoke on behalf of E-911 (Dispatch). She stated that her Department deals with almost every other department on a daily basis. Many of the events that end up in the paper come through them first. This is a bad time of the year when suicide calls go through the roof. Long before the pay study she looked at other counties around the area and did a pay study herself because her staff was so underpaid. They handled over 400,000 emergency calls last year with short staffing and only three people at some times. A lot of overtime ended up having to be paid by the county. She has been told at one point that all that was needed to fill one of her positions was a warm body, but she wants everyone to know that is not the case. Dispatch requires very specific training and knowledge. Until recently, her dispatchers were the lowest paid in all of the surrounding counties. She wants to thank the Commission for taking the time to conduct the pay study.

Renee Watts- Wanted to speak on behalf of Departments who were not represented tonight. She states that the Tax Commissioners Office is attacked daily by members of the public and often told that they don't deserve to be paid. The County Code Enforcement Officer has had to be called numerous times to come to their office to settle things down. She went on to express the challenges faced by many other departments such as Animal Control, Emergency Services, the Sheriff Department, etc. She states that many people have negative comments regarding these Departments and their employees when they could be volunteering to help.

Laurie Church- Spoke on behalf of the Landfill staff. Wanted to thank the Commission. She states she has worked for the county for 24 years and has never seen a Commission that cares more from the employees than this one. She appreciates the three of them for showing up to vote. She informed them that there have been times where her department (Solid Waste) has had dig office supplies out of the trash because previous commissions wouldn't give them the supplies they need. She believes the staff deserve the pay they have and the pay they are getting and people should do their research before speaking to avoid telling half truths and lies.

Patti McLarty- She wants to comment on things that have been shared in the media and at previous meetings regarding County Manager Alicia Vaughn and the Commissioners. She is the Administrative Assistant for Mrs. Vaughn as well as the Deputy Clerk. In regard to the comment about Mrs. Vaughn getting three day weekends, Ms. McLarty states that Mrs. Vaughn doesn't even get to enjoy a two day weekend as she spends most of her time on the computer or the phone. Some days she doesn't even have an opportunity to eat between meetings because she is running from one place to another. Ms. McLarty feels that Mrs. Vaughn fully deserves the salary that she is paid. She also wanted to state that the Commissioners, while they do not always agree, all care deeply about the county. When her husband passed away, she chose to move back to Habersham County rather than work someplace else that could potentially make her more money because she feels that the other county employees are her family, and that is something money can't buy.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

- a. Consider/Approve Implementation of Pay Study:

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Akins and voted unanimously 3-0 to approve.

- b. Consider/Approve Aquatic Center Position Requests and Organizational Change Implementations

Motion by Commissioner Akins, seconded by Commissioner Mealor and voted unanimously 3-0 to approve.

NEW BUSINESS: None

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

County Manager Alicia Vaughn Spoke, stating that she wanted to thank both citizens and staff who attended the meeting. She appreciated what everyone has to say, regardless of if it is positive or negative as sometime a negative viewpoint provides a different perspective. She feels that it is a blessing to be the County Manager for Habersham County and that seeing her staff give of themselves so selflessly every day is why she enjoys working for the county. She stated that public service is a thankless job, but if people do it well it provides an opportunity to make a difference in people's lives. She thanked the Commissioners for their bravery and support even through criticism.

Renee Watts- The local classic car club has been looking for a venue to host them and can't find one. She believes that having a special events coordinator will be an avenue for bringing in clubs and events like these that will bring visitors and revenue into the county.

Commissioner Akins- Expressed his disappointment with all the misinformation and outright falsehoods he has seen lately by some media outlets. He stated he has run a business with 175 employees and he would not volunteer to do County Manager Alicia Vaughn's job. She didn't put the hospital into the state it is in, but if the county manages to get through the issues involving the hospital it will be because Ms. Vaughn cared enough to help. He informed everyone that Mrs. Vaughn could leave right now and go work for places that average around \$175,000 and up for a County Manager position. She could work for even more in the private sector. He went on to state that the Commission does not stumble into the Commission meetings without having been given the information to look at. They spend countless meetings reviewing the topics to be presented. He went on to express that the county needs to start investing in its buildings and staff and treating staff with the respect they deserve.

Commissioner Meador- None

Commissioner Palmer- Expressed his appreciation for all of the county employees and that, having worked in the fire service for 30+ years, he views them as his family. He guarantees that, at least until 2024, they are going to continue to take care of the employees. He referenced the old saying about the windshield being larger than the rearview mirror because what is in front of you is more important than what is behind you. He stated that the county is getting to be in a real good place, and he doesn't want employees to let naysayers get them down. The pay study has taken time to come into fruition and he appreciates the employees who have been patient and stayed.

Tim Sims- Finance Director Tim Sims wanted to speak regarding the topic of transparency. As the county does not have a Public Information Officer at the moment, he hasn't had the opportunity to make public the fact that there are now two buttons on the front page of the county website where citizens can access the Quarterly Budget Status and the SPLOST VII Current Status.

ADJOURN

Motion by Commissioner Meador, seconded by Commissioner Akins and voted unanimously 3-0 to adjourn the meeting at 8:11 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

By: _____
Commission Chairman Bruce Palmer

Attest: _____
County Clerk Brandalin Carnes

DRAFT