

EXTREMELY ROUGH DRAFT
HABERSHAM COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
CALLED MEETING MINUTES
6:00 P.M., MONDAY, JUNE 26, 2023
HABERSHAM COUNTY COURTHOUSE
JURY ASSEMBLY ROOM
295 LLEWELLYN STREET
CLARKESVILLE, GA 30523

The Habersham County Board of Commissioners held a called meeting on June 26, 2023, 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 Ty Akins, Vice Chairman Bruce Harkness, Commissioner Bruce Palmer, Commissioner Dustin Mealor, Commissioner Jimmy Tench, County Attorney Donnie Hunt, County Manager Alicia Vaughn, County Clerk Brandalin Carnes, staff, members of the media and the public.

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

Chairman Akins lead the invocation.

Commissioner Palmer lead the pledge.

ADOPTION OF AGENDA

Motion by Commissioner Palmer, seconded by Commissioner Mealor and voted unanimously 5-0 to approve the agenda as presented.

PUBLIC HEARINGS:

a. Second Reading of the Proposed FY 2024 Budget

Finance Director Tim Sims gave a power point presentation on the proposed FY 2024 Budget. Mr. Sims informed the Commission of the increases to the property and casualty insurance (22%), health insurance (6%) and dental insurance (3%). He went on to say that the overall cost of goods and services has increased due to inflation. Mr. Sims pulled information from the U.S. Census Bureau that showed the U.S. inflation rate as 4% between May of 2022 to May 2023. The inflation for this year alone between January 2023 to May 2023 has been 5.26%. The inflation over the past three years is 17.5%. Examples were given of areas where inflation has caused significant increases in cost to the county, such as tractor fluid (77%), hydraulic fluid (60%), concrete (12%), patrol vehicles (34%), bush hogs (20%), replacement AC units (11%) and road resurfacing (31%).

Mr. Sims next directed the Commission's attention to the general fund budget, which is the fund that is supported by property taxes. The total budget requests for the FY 2024 general fund budget was \$42,674,969. Out of these requests, \$5,489,304 in cuts were made. The FY 2024 CIP Projects that are proposed to be funded out of the general fund this year total \$1,656,860 with \$1,400,000 coming from the fund balance leftover from FY2023. These CIP projects include \$158K in courtroom security upgrades, \$172K in Parks & Rec improvements, \$393K in facilities improvements/repairs, and \$394K in technology equipment replacements, \$174K in public safety requests. Out of 44 new position requests, only twelve (12) are being proposed for FY 2023 and include six (6) firefighters/EMS, one (1) lead animal control technician, one (1) senior election assistant, one (1) fleet department mechanic I, one (1) athletics coordinator, and one (1) asset manager for the road department. It is also being requested one (1) part time program assistant position at the extension office be converted into a full-time position.

Mr. Sims reviewed the SPLOST fund budget, which is funded by the counties 1% sales tax. The FY2024 SPLOST funded projects total \$16.69 million and include the E-911 radio system upgrade/replacement, the emergency operations center and headquarters (fire/ems headquarters & 911), the animal control building, road improvements & resurfacing. This is the 3rd year of collections for SPLOST VII. Collections began April 1, 2021 and are currently running 9% over projections.

Mr. Sims discussed the breakdown in projected revenue for FY 2024.. There was \$33.2 million in revenue collected in FY 2023 from all sources. It is projected that total revenue for FY 2024 will be around \$37.1 million, which is an increase of 11.89%. Habersham County is highly residential and property tax revenue is the largest source of revenue for the county, accounting for 57% of the revenue. Mr. Sims voiced that there is a need to grow the counties commercial and industrial base. The next highest source of revenue at 19% are other taxes such as the title ad valorem tax (TAVT) from motor vehicle purchases, timber harvesting taxes, etc. The FY 2023 fund balance and the sale of surplus county property constitutes 8% of projected revenue.

Mr. Sims next reviewed the proposed expenditures for FY 2024. These were broken down by the different categories of government. The FY 2023 expenditures were \$33.2 million and the proposed expenditures for FY 2024 total \$37.1 million for an increase of 11.89%. Mr. Sims pointed out that the total proposed expenditures were equal to the total projected revenue, meaning that the budget being proposed is balanced. He went on to say that these numbers are all based on the preliminary tax digest and could increase or decrease based on the final digest that is provided. The Board of Assessors met this morning, and he was told by the Tax Assessors office that the final digest should be ready over the next few days.

- General government expenditures are up 9.19%. Some of the overall increase in this category is due to inflation. The 41.69% increase in expenditures for the Elections & Voter Registration Department is due to the upcoming fiscal year being an election year. The expenses for this department fluctuate up and down with the election cycle due to the need for poll workers and the material costs associated with printing ballots. In addition, this increase includes the request for one (1) senior election assistant. Facilities Maintenance expenditures have increased by 15.78% due to the cost of the materials and parts needed to repair and maintain county facilities having increased from inflation. The 23.52% increase to the expenditures for the HR Department reflects the full-time receptionist position for the Administrative Building being moved out of the Commission budget and into the HR Budget. This is not a newly proposed position, just a reallocation as it was felt that it was better for this position was better classified as an HR position.
- Judicial expenditures are up 15.03%. This is mostly due to the costs associated with the state having named a third superior court judge for the district. This is the first full year of having the third judge. Another factor in the increase is the resulting increase to the public defender's budget for additional attorneys to serve as public defenders due to the addition of the third superior court judge.
- Public safety expenditures increased by 6.42%. There was a 34.94% increase for fire services due in part to the six (6) new fire fighter positions requested in the proposed budget. There was a 26.90% increase in Animal Controls budget which due in part to their request for one (1) new lead animal care technician position. The SRO expenditures were separated out from those of the Sheriff office so they could be tract separately. This separation and attrition in the patrol portion of the Sheriff Office resulted in a decrease in expenses for the Sheriff's Office.

- Public Works expenditures increased by 21.84%. This is due in part to the request for one (1) new mechanic I position for Fleet Maintenance and one (1) new asset manager position for Roads and Bridges. Also, the Board of Commissioners has expressed several times over the course of the past year that there concern of having road maintenance cost come out of SPLOST rather than the general fund, where it is more appropriate. Some of the increase to the proposed expenditures for Public Works is from where Finance intends to incrementally shift the road maintenance expenses out of SPLOST and back into the general fund.
- Culture and Recreation expenditures increased by 23.23%. This includes a full year of expenses associated with the four (4) new positions that were approved for the Parks and Recreation Department during the middle of this past fiscal year as well as one (1) newly requested athletics coordinator position. The library also asked for a small increase of \$16,869. Gymnastics expenses have been separated out from under Parks and Recreation to keep track of their profit and expenses more easily as they are considered a profit center.
- Health, Welfare and Agencies expenditures increased by 4.16%. Very little changed overall in this category. The Senior Center's nutritional service provider Legacy Link asked for an increase of only \$1,600, however their budget is so small to begin with that it shows as a 12.85% increase. The extension office is shown as having a 31.65% increase as a result of their request to change a part-time program assistant to a full-time program assistant.
- Housing and Development expenditures increased by 8.17%. A small portion of this increase is due to the state increasing the per diem rates paid to the Planning Commission members. The main increase is due to an increase in the amount of alcohol tax that is paid to the Board of Education. Mr. Sims went on to clarify that the county collects alcohol taxes on behalf of the Board of Education, for which the county keeps a 5% administrative fee. The funds pass through the county. As the number of businesses that engage in alcohol sales in the county has increased, so too have the resulting revenue from these sales and the amount that is paid to the Board of Education as a result.
- Debt Service expenditures had a negligible decrease of .09%. This is the debt service for the Administrative Building.
- Capital Improvement Project Transfers are money that is transferred from the general fund to the capital improvement fund. As previously stated, this is expected to be \$1.6 million dollars.
- Contingencies expenditures increased by 209.69%. The county now has a grant coordinator to apply for much needed grant funding for the county. Many of these grants require a local match of funds. Previously, there were not funds set aside in the budget for the purpose of applying for and receive these grants. This budget proposes that \$200,000 be set aside for the upcoming year to assist with any local matches that are required by grants the county is approved to receive. In addition, this budget proposes an increase from \$250,000 to \$574,227 of the general contingency. This requested increase is because the Board of Assessors has recommended a reorganization to the Tax Assessors' Office that includes some potential new positions as well as a contract for reassessment services.

Mr. Sim showed a pie chart breaking down the expenditure categories of the \$37.2 million proposed FY 2024 general fund budget, showing that the largest three categories of expenses are public safety (42%), judicial (12%) and general government (21%).

Mr. Sims moved on to an overview of changes to the Special Revenue Funds. By law, counties are required to approve the budget for each special revenue fund they have. With exception for emergency medical services, these are funds that provide their own revenue and are not taxpayer funded. Emergency Medical Services is partially taxpayer funded and partially revenue generating from ambulance fees and other charges. Funds in this category include the jail/inmate fund, ARPA fund, law library, emergency medical services, E-911, Senior Center, Hotel/Motel, Accountability Courts, Fitness Center and Juvenile Offender Services. ARPA Funds, which is money that was received from the federal government to mitigate the effects of the COVID outbreak, increased by 184.5% . This money is being used to fund the grants coordinator position as well as provide for an Assistant DA and Public Defenders to offset the backed-up caseloads in the judicial system. Emergency Medical Services increased by 14.2% due in part to the effects of the pay study as well as the increase in the costs of goods and services. Many of the supplies the supplies used by EMS are petroleum-based plastics, and the costs of both these and pharmaceuticals have increased. Mr. Sims informed the Commission that the opioid settlement is included in the budget for the Accountability Courts. The total increase overall for special revenue funds was 11.1%.

Mr. Sims went over the proposed FY 2024 amounts for capital funds. The Capital Funds category consists of the CIP Fund, the State Roads Fund, and the SPLOST VII Fund. The CIP fund is where money from the general fund is transferred for the purpose of capital projects. The State Roads Fund is the LMIG money that is received from the state to assist with road paving projects. The SPLOST VII Fund is money from the voter approved 1% tax on sales that occur within Habersham County for voter approved projects. The FY 2024 budget proposes \$1.6 million for the CIP Fund, \$1.6 million for SPLOST VII and \$745,000 for the State Road Fund. These are all revenue supporting funds as well.

Mr. Sims informed the Commission that the Hospital Debt fund, which is the payment the county makes each year to the hospital bonds, increased by 8.4%.

Mr. Sims informed the Commission that the Development Authority Fund decreased by 89.1% due to a property purchase that was planned for the past fiscal year having not occurred.

Mr. Sims went over the Enterprise Funds (Landfill, Transit & Airport) with the Commission. These are funds that operated like a business. The landfill fund is increasing by 17.4% due mostly to the effects of inflation on goods and services. Both the airport and transit funds are decreasing by 28.5%. Mr. Sims brought up that the airport fund has a new CIP component of \$1,370,913.. These are funds that were from SPLOST VI that for funding airport capital projects. These funds were floating as they would be spent on projects and then the county would be reimbursed 90-95% from the FAA and GDOT. Those funds are no longer able to be shown as SPLOST, they must be shown in the Airport Fund which is why they have been placed in their own category under that fund. He emphasized that the money spent from the Airport CIP fund is reimbursed at 90-95%.

Mr. Sims summarized that the total proposed budget for FY 2024 is \$73,723,664. This is a 9.3% increase from the FY 2023 budget of \$67,437,964. Of this, the proposed FY 2024 general fund budget is \$37,185,665. The remaining \$36,537,979 is composed of special revenue funds, capital funds, hospital debt, enterprise funds and the development authority fund. He asked the Commission if they have any questions regarding the budget?

Commissioner Tench asked if any of the SPLOST that is collected in Habersham County goes to Atlanta? Mr. Sims informed Commissioner Tench that the only money that he knows of would be a 1% administrative fee that the Department of Revenue keeps. Commissioner Palmer spoke up, stating that with a regional T-SPLOST some money does go to the state, but Habersham County is not part of a regional T-SPLOST. Mrs. Vaughn stated that there may be vendors from the Atlanta areas that are paid through SPLOST but the county is required to follow a bidding process.

Chairman Akins turned the meeting over to County Attorney Donnie Hunt. Attorney Hunt opened the floor to public comment regarding the proposed FY 2024 budget. There were no members of the public who wished to speak either for or against the proposed FY 2024 budget. Attorney Hunt turned the meeting back over to Chairman Akins.

PUBLIC COMMENTS:

- a. Kathy Carter- Ms. Carter addressed the commission with concerns regarding drugs and vaping in the school system. She feels that these items are becoming increasingly available, and many children are first introduced to them while at school. With children spending 11 years in the school system, there is the potential for years of drug usage before they even graduate. She would like to see funding for metal detectors and drug dogs for all schools. This would provide the benefit of also deterring weapons from entering the school as well. Commissioner Tench agreed that the drug issue in Georgia has only gotten worse over the decades. Commissioner Akin asked Ms. Carter if she had spoken with the Board of Education? She stated that she had spoken with the Chief of Police for the Board of Education and that he suggested she talk to the Board of Commissioners. The Board of Education is her next stop. Commissioner Harkness wanted to clarify with Ms. Carter that information that she had handed them stated that there were only five (5) school resource officers (SRO's) for the schools, but the Board of Commissioners is actually funding fifteen (15) SRO's. She stated that she was looking primarily at the middle school and high school.
- b. Stephen Veale- Voiced his opposition to the location of the E-911 tower that is proposed for placement on county property inside of the Orchard subdivision. He is a resident of this subdivision and feels that the tower would have an adverse impact on the subdivision, which is the source of a lot of tax revenue and tourism for Habersham County. He is asking that the planned location of this tower be moved to a nearby fire department 2.5 miles away.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS: NONE

NEW BUSINESS:

- a. Consider/Approve Resolution 2023-06-008 Adopting FY 2024 Budget

Finance Director Tim Sims addressed the Commission, stating that resolution 2023-06-008 is for the adoption of the budget broken down as follows:

- Total Funds \$74,723,644
 - General Fund \$37,185,665
 - Other Funds \$36, 537,979
 - Special Revenue Funds \$8,983,325
 - Capital Funds \$19,093,292
 - Hospital Debt Funds \$3,023,066
 - Development Authority Fund \$57,685
 - Enterprise Funds \$5,380,611

Mr. Sims informed the Commission that the budget as proposed is a balanced budget and would not require a millage rate increase.

Chairman Akins opened the floor for discussion regarding the proposed FY 2024 budget.

Commissioner Mealor asked inquired about funding for the health department. He thought that they had discussed cutting this funding due to the health departments large surplus in their fund balance? Mr. Sims

informed Commissioner Meador that while the county is able to cut some funding, that they are required to pay a match to the funding that is provided by the state. This county match is around \$65,000. Mr. Sims had inquired about the Health Department's large fund balance, and they had informed him it is due in part to leftover COVID funds and in part to several open positions that they have not been able to fill. They do have a patient navigator position that they intend to hire in August that they will be using part of the fund balance towards. He is deferring to the Commission as to whether they wish to reduce this funding. Chairman Akins stated that he feels that, taking into consideration their large fund balance, he feels it is reasonable to make cuts to the health department funding to only the \$65,000 that is required by the state.

Commissioner Meador stated that the only other item that he feels that he would like to see changes to would be to remove the Athletics Coordinator position from the budget, as they have already been several positions approved for the Recreation Department already since Christmas. He feels that they can make it another year without this position.

Commissioner Palmer had the following thoughts and concerns to add:

- The county could do the parking lot striping for the Aquatic Center in-house and have the crack sealing done by an outside contractor.
- That it would be better to delay putting the new flooring and dispatch consoles into the current E-911 center and use the funds toward putting these items in the new emergency operations center instead. He understands that there is a morale problem and that they will improve the environment as much as they can, but the county must also be conscientious with funds.
- That with four new ambulances, he feels the proposed ambulance remount can wait another year.
- That a lot of money was put into repairing two of the road department's dump trucks recently, so he doesn't see the need to replace them right now.
- That the road department already has a spreader truck that he feels is not getting used very much, so he doesn't see the need to a second one that will sit unused as well.
- He asked if the mini excavator had been taken off and Mr. Sims informed him it had.
- He wants to know if it is necessary for the landfill to have both the wheel loader and the compact tractor loader. He realizes that this comes out of the enterprise fund but feels that the money could be better used towards recycling centers and expanding recycling programs.
- He feels that the Board of Education should fund 100% of the salaries and benefits for the SRO's rather than the proposed 80%, especially given that the Board of Commissioners is responsible for the vehicles, supplies, and liability insurance.
- He agrees with Commissioner Meador about holding off on the athletics coordinator another year.
- He feels that, rather than fund an additional mechanic, perhaps fleet maintenance can farm out some work during the times they get behind in the shop.
- That all 21 of the requested firefighter positions be funded, not just the six that made it through budget cuts. He stated that the reason for the request of 21 firefighter positions was to allow for two firefighters for each engine and staff the ladder truck. If this is not possible then he feels that the Commission should start shutting down fire stations as it is a safety issue for both personnel and citizens. He feels that cuts should be made elsewhere in the budget if needed to fund all 21 positions.
- He asked if staffing was added back into the budget for extending recycling center hours? Mr. Sims confirmed this was already included in the budget.

Chairman Akins addressed Commissioner Palmer's concerns, stating that it was his understanding that one of the dump trucks is completely out of service. Commissioner Palmer stated that the Road Department has three dump trucks now. If the one is unusable, they need to get rid of it, not repair it. Otherwise, they are getting back into the same cycle they are trying to get out of. Road Department Director Jerry Baggett stated that two of the dump trucks are 2006's and two are 2008's. He has requested money in the budget to acquire new dump trucks so they don't keep having to make costly repairs. In regard to the \$44,000 spent in repairs

to a truck that fell over on its side, there was no initial damage to the engine found but anytime a dump truck turns over it is uncertain what problems can be caused down the road. They also spent \$35,000 repairing the other truck. They are trying to find replacements for these dump trucks prior to their requiring another costly repair or totally breaking down altogether.

Chairman Akins stated that it could be a while before the E911 headquarters is finished to move into, and that it is his understanding that both the proposed new dispatch consoles and new flooring are designed so they can be moved into the new building once it is finished. This means that they wouldn't have to make the purchase twice. Commissioner Palmer stated that if we are going to be using the old location as a backup E911 center, that flooring and consoles would have to be put back into the old location so there would have to be another purchase for these coming back before the board.

Chairman Akins stated that he had spoke with Chief Adams regarding the firefighter position request. Chief Adams stated that it would take some time to hire and train the six firefighter that had been approved, and that he is comfortable with moving forward with the six approved firefighters but not comfortable with closing down fire stations. Chairman Akins stated that he feels that decisions such as these should be left up to the Department Heads as they are the most qualified to make those decisions.

Commissioner Harkness stated that he is like Ronald Reagan in that he is opposed to big government. He is not for taxing and spending; he is looking for ways to cut costs. He stated that he sent an email to everyone with numerous concerns that he is afraid will not be resolved tonight. One of his concerns is that when the departmental budget meetings were held a few months ago, he was told that all that was needed for a balanced budget was a 5% increase. When the tax digest came in, property values went up by 12% and this budget spends every nickel. He feels that it is a runaway government from here to Washington and the issues that our children and grandchildren are going to have with paying a \$31 trillion deficit start right here at the county level. He feels that most politician are only concerned about reelection and not what is best for the country. He feels that there is a lot of money in the budget for carpet, tile, lineoleum, etc. Most of the big box stores like Walmart and Sam's Club have taken up all of the flooring and have concrete only. He can't justify the \$40,000 in the budget for a new sign when the one he has for his business only cost \$1250. He can't go along with approving another position at the Recreation Department when the Commission has already approved so many new positions for them already, and that they can try shuffle those already approved positions around to provide needed coverage. Commissioner Harkness said he can't approve the asset manager position for the Road Department as after they spend six months assessing and inventorying the county roads, then what are they going to do with him? They are on the payroll, and has anyone ever heard of anyone working for the government getting fired? They are going to set at the Road Department, kick their feet back and watch TV. He knows a lot of work has went into the budget, but there are a lot of things that he just can't go along with, he could go on and on but he will stop here as he doesn't believe that they will resolve his issues or concerns tonight.

Chairman Akins informed Commissioner Harkness that the electronic sign that is being requested is for in front of the fairgrounds as the one that is currently their no longer works.

Chairman Akins stated that the intent with the asset manager position is to not only inventory the county road, culverts, bridges, etc but to also be able to rate their conditions to help schedule work to occur were it is needed most first. This position is required for some grant funding. Public Works Director Jerry Baggett spoke up and stated that being able to qualify for one of these grants would more than make up for the cost of the position. He also stated that this would be an internal promotion so it the cost difference would not be that of an additional full salary, but of a salary increase for a promotion. Commissioner Harkness inquired as to how many roads are in the county and Mr. Baggett informed him that there are over 400 paved miles and over 100 miles of dirt road. They estimate that they have 10,000 culverts but they do not know their location as they are not GIS marked and they do not know their condition. He does know that some culverts are either full or deteriorated, and being able to inventory and assess these will assist in getting grants to repair

them. The same goes for the bridges and roads. With the roads, being able to rank their need for repair numerically on a grading system is the most fair to all citizens in making sure the roads with the worse conditions get repaired first. Commissioner Harkness stated that he believed that this was a job that the current road employees could do on rainy days. Mr. Baggett stated that the Road Department use to have 30 employees and now it is down to 18. Commissioner Harkness stated that they have a problem. Tim Sims informed Commissioner Harkness that grant coordinator Lauren Long has been trying to apply for some of the several million dollars of infrastructure grants that are part of the ARPA funds that were released to the state. If we do not have this asset manager program in place then Habersham County will not even be allowed to apply for them. He stated that in addition to the initial inventorying position will be responsible for rating the roads every year. Mrs. Vaughn stated that with limited resources budgeted for paving roads, having an inventory system helps to determine where to allocate the funds. The LMIG bid just came back at around \$210,000 to pave a mile of road. While there are a lot of opportunities to apply for grants these require the asset manager position to be able to qualify. She does fill the position will pay for itself.

stated that with all due respect that Lauren is trying to apply for infrastructure grants and that if we don't have an asset manager program in place that we can't get any of those funds and it is several million dollars. This person has to rerate roads every single years. Vaughn stated that we have limited funds for being able to upkeep roads and a rating system helps us determine where to direct those funds.

Commissioner Tench did not request any further discussion, stating that he had already relayed his concerns to Finance Director Tim Sims.

Chairman Akins asked confirmed of consensus amount the Commission regarding the removing of the athletics coordinator position and cutting back the funding for the health department? There was no disgrace voiced.

Further discussion was among the Commission regarding the fairgrounds sign. Chairman Akins stated that the sign was helpful with traffic flow during large events. Commissioner Mealor stated that the sign makes people aware of what events are taking place at the fairgrounds, and it is an asset that assists with bringing these large events to the county. One of the first things that someone from outside the county sees when they pull up on the fairgrounds is the sign, and having one that functions makes Habersham County appear to have everything together. Commissioner Mealor says that he is okay with including the fairground sign in the budget because it is coming from SPLOST dollars and being used to drive economic development and tourism. Commissioner Harkness stated that he does agree something needs to be done about the sign but he just felt \$40,000 was a bit excessive.

Commissioner Mealor wished to inquire about the necessity of the spreader truck for the upcoming year? Road Department Employee Greg McCallister informed him that the only time the spreader truck is not operating is when it is raining. Road Department Director Jerry Baggett stated that they currently have two crews that work on opposite ends of the county to grade and gravel roads. They only have one spreader truck to pickup and transport the gravel, so it must go between both crews. Having an additional spreader truck will allow each crew to have one, which will reduce the time the graders on each crew are having to wait on gravel. They could use dump trucks, but it would not spread the gravel evenly on the road in the same manner as a spreader truck. A spreader truck is also dual purpose in that it can be used for spreading salt in the winter. The Road Department has been able to make it with just one spreader truck, but they are using more gas and putting more wear and tear on an already over 20-year-old piece of equipment. This purchase is looking ahead to a future need. Commissioner Mealor asked what miles are being put on the current spreader truck in a day and Mr. Baggett estimated about 30-40 miles going between the two separate work sites and the gravel plant. Commissioner Palmer stated that the plant is in the middle of the county between both work sites. Chairman Akins stated that one of the most common things he gets called about is roads needing graveled. Finance Director Tim Sims stated that it was important to note that the spreader truck is coming out of SPLOST funds, not the general fund, so the purchase of this equipment would have to be bid out and

brought back before the Commission. They could go ahead and approve the inclusion of the purchase in the budget but have further discussion before the actual purchase takes place and, if so inclined, they can deny the purchase at that time. Commissioner Palmer stated that part of his problem with rubber stamping SPLOST expenditures is that they already have major projects for which there is not enough money allotted to start with. He feels that a lot of times that SPLOST funds don't receive the same diligence as general funds. While he empathizes with the Road Department regarding a 20-year-old spreader truck, most of the counties fire trucks are over 20 years old as well. Commissioner Palmer stated that it comes down to a matter of priorities, and he feels that emergency services is the bigger priority. Mr. Baggett stated that the funds for the purchase of a spreader truck are already designated in SPLOST VII. There were also funds in SPLOST VII for the purchase of the two new bushhogs and two new mowers that were approved last year. Since the purchase of those items there have been no breakdowns which means no money spent on repairs and now down time for the crews.

Chairman Akins asked if we received quotes for the fairground sign and County Manager Vaughn informed him that the \$40,000 was just an estimate. Chairman Akins asked if this amount could be cut back and Mrs. Vaughn said that that would not be a problem, but the real question is whether or not the Commission wants a digital sign? Digital signs are more expensive. The last time she was involved in the purchase of one was around four or five years ago and it was about \$35,000 but likelihood is that it will be over the \$40,000 the way inflation has been. They are happy to bring back quotes to the Commission for a variety of different types of signage, but she suggests that they agree upon an amount as a placeholder in the budget for this item.

Commissioner Meador asked Emergency Services Director Jeff Adams about the F-250 replacement, to which Mr. Adams informed that they have the F-250's for the Captain and Battalion Chief but the one requested in the budget is for replacing Community Paramedicine teams current vehicle. Chairman Akins asked Mr. Adams to inform the Commission about the activities of the Community Paramedicine team. Mr. Adams stated that they see over 30 patients a week to provide care inside the patients' home. This helps keep this vulnerable population out of the hospital, provide education and improve their quality of life. Habersham County's Community Paramedicine program won the County *****Excellence Award this year.

Commissioner Tench asked Public Works Director Jerry Baggett how he schedules work for both the grading crews on the north and south end of the county, so they don't have down time while waiting on the spreader truck to bring gravel? Mr. Baggett stated that there is some down time that occurs because of the wait, and this is why they are asking for the additional spreader truck. Commissioner Tench stated that during the down time that the grader crews are waiting that he feels that they could be doing work like pulling ditches and finding the clogged and damaged culverts that were previously mentioned.

Chairman Akins asked if anyone would like to make a motion? Commissioner Meador asked Attorney Hunt if he thought it would be best for the Commission to come to a consensus regarding changes so they don't get into a vicious cycle of voting down the budget repeatedly? Attorney Hunt stated that it would be best to vote on each issue as an amendment to the budget, then vote on the budget in its entirety with the approved amendments.

Chairman Akins stated that so far he feels that they had come to a consensus on the removal of the Athletics Coordinator position for Rec Department and the reduction of the amount given to the Health Department.

Discussion was had regarding the striping and crack sealing for the parking lot at the fairgrounds. Finance Director Tim Sims informed the Commission that this item was on the CIP list because it wasn't completed in FY 2023, but it was already funded in FY 2023. It is not included as part of the FY 2024 budget.

Chairman Akins asked for a consensus on the new positions being requested with the removal of the Athletics Coordinator position for the Recreation Department? Commissioner Tench, Meador and Akins approved. Commissioner Palmer and Commissioner Harkness dissented. Commissioner Palmer stated that

he feels it is unacceptable that only six (6) firefighters were being approved in the budget. Even if these positions couldn't be filled for several months, he feels that they should still be included in the budget to provide for two individuals per fire engine. This is a matter of safety. In addition, the ladder truck would improve the counties ISO rating, making insurance rates come down for everyone. Commissioner Palmer stated that he feels fifteen (15) firefighter positions need to be approved. Commissioner Meador asked Finance Director Tim Sims how much it would cost to fund all fifteen (15) positions, to which Mr. Sims replied it would cost \$848,606. Chairman Akins asked Emergency Services Director Jeff Adams how he felt about the request given the current application for the SAFER Grant? Mr. Adams stated that he is concerned because they have to be fully staffed in order to receive the safer grant. Chairman Akins stated that perhaps the Commission should go ahead and approve the six (6) fire fighter positions for now and then come November, December or January look into adding additional positions. Mrs. Vaughn asked Mr. Adams when we would know if we would receive the SAFER Grant to which he replied October. Mrs. Vaughn suggested that this could perhaps be reevaluated in October? The county has applied for the SAFER Grant to pay for eighteen (18) firefighter positions, which it would cover for a three-year period if approved. Commissioner Palmer stated that this was to add staff to the Batesville, Fairview and Macedonia fire stations.

Chairman Akins asked if there was an issues with the lease-purchase of a pumper truck for the fire department? None of the Commission voiced an issue with this item.

Chairman Akins asked for consensus regarding the replacing the flooring and dispatch consoles for the current E-911 building. Commissioner Palmer felt that this was going to just add additional costs given the fact that E-911 will be moving into a new building at some point. Commissioner Meador asked if not purchasing new consoles now that work with the new radio system would cause problems down the road when it is time to switch locations? Commissioner Palmer stated that would be a good question for E-911/EMA Director Lynn Smith. Melanie Ballinger *****, attended the meeting in Ms. Smith's stead. Ms. Ballinger stated that the consoles that they currently have do not work with the new radio system, and that half don't work at all. These consoles were donated to them by another county. Commissioner Meador doesn't understand why they wouldn't approve the consoles and flooring now, given his understanding that both can be moved to the new building? Commissioner Palmer stated that the plan for the old E-911 building was for it to be a backup and that if dispose of the old flooring and consoles for new flooring and consoles that plan to be eventually moved out, they will have to end up purchasing additional flooring and consoles for that building to replace what is moved out. Commissioner Palmer stated that he is willing to approve the new consoles, but he feels that they should not approve the new flooring. All five Commissioners agreed with leaving the new consoles in the budget but removing the new flooring for E-911.

Chairman Akins asked Commissioner Tench if he had any problems he would like addressed with the budget? Commissioner Tench said he possibly does.

Chairman Akins asked if anyone had issues with the requested ambulance remount? None of the Commission had issues.

Chairman Akins asked if anyone had issues with a Chevy Tahoe or Ford Expedition for the Community Paramedicine Program? This was originally requested as an F-250. Commissioner Palmer asked if it would not make it easier for them to haul things if they received a pickup truck with a cover instead? Mr. Sims informed him that Tahoe's and Expeditions are currently cheaper on state contract. Commissioner Palmer agreed that it was fine to leave this item in the budget. None of the other Commissioners voiced any opposition to it as well.

Commissioner Akin turned attention to the requested Skidsteer Trailer for the Road Department. Commissioner Palmer asked doesn't the Road Department have a new trailer? Mr. Baggett stated that they are currently transporting the skid steer with a flatbed truck and the mini excavator with the low boy. They need a smaller trailer for the mini excavator that was purchased. Chairman Akins directed the conversation to the

dump truck and spreader truck proposed in the budget for the Road Department. Chairman Akins stated that he feels Commissioner Palmer had made a previous good point about the repairs made to these dump trucks late in their life, but it appears this one is sitting in the shop in disrepair currently because parts can't be found and they will need to decide what to do. Fleet **** Patty Lee confirmed this stating that the part in question is obsolete. This is an issue that they will keep running into. Commissioner Harkness asked if this was the dump truck that rolled over, to which Mr. Baggett replied no, it was skipping. They had just spent \$34,000 on an engine repair for one of the other dump trucks they had. The hope was to purchase a new dump truck and then transfer one of the others over to the landfill. Chairman Akins asked for a decision from Commissioner Palmer, and he stated that he couldn't justify spending anymore money right now on dump trucks. Mr. Baggett stated that it will cost around \$50,000 every time an engine needs to be repaired. Commissioner Palmer replied that he would have been more supportive of the purchase of a new dump truck prior to all of the money that was spent on repairing the current ones. Commissioner Tench wanted to know at what shop the dump truck is sitting at to which Ms. Lee replied Hulsey's in Cornelia. Chairman Akins asked what the will of the other Commissioners was in regard to the dump truck, to which Commissioner Mealor replied that as a supply chain manager, that he feels that more time needs to be spent looking into getting the part or seeing if the part can be made to repair the dump truck prior to replacing it. He fully supports revising the purchase of a dump truck at a later time if it is not fixable. Chairman Akins asked what the will of the Commission was in regards to the spreader truck, to which all of the other Commissioners seemed agreeable with keeping in the budget except for Commissioner Palmer, who stated that he feels that the Road Department can continue to operate with the one spreader truck they already have. Commissioner Mealor asked Commissioner Palmer if he could give meet in the middle with them on cutting the \$140,000 for the dump truck but keeping the \$160,000 for the spreader truck? Commissioner Palmer stated that he drives by the Road Department a lot and the majority of the time the spreader truck is sitting under the shed. Road Department employees in the audience were disagreeing with this, to which Commissioner Palmer remarked that he will start marking it down on a calendar. Commissioner Mealor asked Road Department Director Jerry Baggett if he had to choose, which piece of equipment would he pick? Mr. Baggett stated he would pick the spreader truck as it can be used for gravel as well as salt.

Chairman Akins brought up the request for a wheel loader at the landfill. The current wheel loader is at the end of its life. The Commission asked for more information and Interm Landfill Supervisor Johnnie Vickers stated that the request is actually for a skidsteer to replace the current wheel loader. They are required by EPD to maintain their ponds. It is difficult for bushogs to get into that area and it is starting to grow up on the backside. They can also use this machine for mulching operations. The current wheel loader is leaking and it is difficult to find parts for as it is a 2007 model. Commissioner Palmer asked if they could do the same thing with a track loader that they can do with a wheel loader? Mr. Vickers stated that those are two very different machines in regard to size.

Chairman Akins asked Commissioner Palmer if he is in favor of keeping the sign for the fairgrounds in the budget and he said that he was, as he feels that it will draw events to the fairgrounds and utilize it more.

Commissioner Mealor read of the list of proposed amendments based on previous discussions:

- Cutting the athletics coordinator position for a savings of \$62,673.00.
- Reducing the funding to the health department from \$198,788 to \$65,000 for a savings of \$133,788.
- Cutting the replacement flooring for the current E-911 building for a savings of \$35,000.
- Cutting the requested dump truck for the Road Department for a savings of \$140,000.

Commissioner Mealor stated that the above cuts equal a reduction of \$371,461 to the budget.

Commissioner Mealor consulted Attorney Hunt regarding how he should motion to adopt the budget with these changes. It was suggested that Finance Director Tim Sims recalculate the totals with the reductions included and to use this in the motion. Mr. Sims stated that the budget would be reduced to \$73,352,183.

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Chairman Akins, to approve the budget with the aforementioned cuts totaling \$371,461 for a resulting FY 2024 budget of \$73,352,183.

Chairman Akins asked if anyone wanted further discussion. Commissioner Palmer stated that he feels that someone in the fire department is going to eventually get hurt due to understaffing. He feels that not approving more firefighter positions does not support the firefighters and does not support the citizens. Chairman Akins pointed out that the other Commissioners agree with approving six (6) new firefighter positions, which is more than what was had in the previous year. Commissioner Palmer disagrees with the notion of not budgeting for those positions because they can't hire the people to fill them, as if they get the SAFER Grant they will have to fill them. Chairman Akins voiced that this is not his reason for not approving more fire fighter positions. Commissioner Mealor stated that between his personal experience and discussions with Director Adams that he does feel like it will be difficult enough to fill the six (6) positions they are approving. Commissioner Palmer expressed that he feels the reason why Habersham County is having difficulties with hiring fire fighters is because they don't want the danger of manning a truck by themselves. Commissioner Mealor stated that he feels that it is unfair to say that the Commission does not support firefighters or public safety when the current Commission has done more increase their pay and allocate new positions than any other Commission he has been a part of and that they are at least moving forward.

Motion fails 2-3 with Commission Harkness, Commissioner Palmer and Commissioner Tench dissenting.

Commissioner Akin asked Attorney Donnie Hunt if a motion was needed to call for a recess. Mr. Hunt informed him that none was needed. Commissioner Akin declared that the Board of Commissioners would take a brief recess at 8:08 p.m.

RECESS

Chairman Akins asked Attorney Hunt what was required to come back from recess, to which Attorney Hunt informed him that he can just declare that the meeting is back in session.

Commissioner Akin declared the recess over and the meeting of the Board of Commissioners to be back in session at 8:23 p.m.

Commissioner Mealor consulted Attorney Hunt over what needs to be done to attempt to vote on the budget again. Attorney Hunt informed him that procedurally, one of the three who voted against the budget must make a motion to bring it back before the Commission for reconsideration.

Motion was made by Commissioner Palmer, seconded by Commissioner Mealor, to reconsider the FY 2024 budget. Motion carried 3-2 with Commissioner Harkness and Commissioner Tench dissenting.

Commissioner Palmer inquired how many firefighter positions could be funded out of savings to the general fund that were previously discussed? Finance Director Tim Sims informed him that the previous cuts resulted in savings of \$196,461 to the general fund (the other \$175,000 was SPLOST savings). This amount could fund three (3) additional fire fighter positions for a total of nine (9) positions to be included in the budget. Commissioner Palmer stated that this was still six (6) short of what he would like, but with that modification he would be willing to make a motion.

Motion was made by Commissioner Palmer, seconded by Commissioner Mealor to approve the FY 2024 with the following amendments, resulting in a total budget of \$73,548,644:

- Cutting the athletics coordinator position for a savings of \$62,673.00.
- Reducing the funding to the health department from \$198,788 to \$65,000 for a savings of \$133,788.

- Cutting the replacement flooring for the current E-911 building for a savings of \$35,000.
- Cutting the requested dump truck for the Road Department for a savings of \$140,000.
- Using the savings from the previous cuts to fund an additional three (3) fire fighter positions, resulting in nine (9) total firefighter positions.

Motion carries 3-2 with Commissioner Tench and Commissioner Harkness dissenting.

b. Consider/Approve Resolution 2023-06-009 for FY 2023 Budget Amendment

Finance Director Tim Sims addressed the Commission. This resolution is essentially a housekeeping item that is done at the end of each fiscal year that allows for budget adjustments to be made through June 30th, allowing finance to move unused funds from some departments to covers shortages in others departments.

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Palmer and voted unanimously 5-0 to approve.

c. Consider/Approve Resolution 2023-06-010 Amending the Habersham County Fee Schedule for FY 2024

Finance Director Tim Sims addressed the Commission. This resolution is also done yearly to make sure that the fee schedule is updated and amended to include all necessary changes. Commissioner Harkness expressed his disappointment that the Commission has went back to charging a fee for the usage of the pool and that he would like for this to go back to being free to Habersham County residents. He would like to Commission to reconsider this at some point.

Motion by Commissioner Palmer seconded by Commissioner Mealor and voted 3-2 to approve with Commissioner Harkness and Commissioner Tench dissenting.

d. Consider/Approve Ratifying Contract with Soque Contracting Services for Renovations to South Voting Precinct and Election Office

Finance Director Tim Sims addressed the Commission. This contract is for the renovations needed to be able to have space being leased from Ingles for the new south voting precinct and elections office ready in time for upcoming elections. They have conducted an exhaustive search over the past six to eight months for a contractor who is capable of building out the space that is being leased. Soque Contracting is the most economical for the being able to get the job finished in the time required, quoting the cost as being \$263,235. Finance is requesting a performance bond that rounds out the total to \$271,132. Other quotes that were received ranged from \$700,000 to \$1.2 million. Both the Facilities Maintenance and Finance Department are recommending the ratification of the contract. Commissioner Tench inquired regarding previous approval that was given by the Commission for \$40,000 to renovate the building. Mr. Sims informed him that the \$40,000 that was approved at the February 20th meeting was for replacement of the flooring only. This contract is for additional renovations needed in association with the newly discovered damages, mold and mildew that was the result of a leak in the building. Commissioner Tench stated that he sees that the first year of the lease for that building is \$67,599.96, he wants to know who prepared the lease agreement? County Manager Vaughn informed him that Ingles, the lessor, was the one who prepared the agreement. The lease is for five years, and Ingles has allowed the County the first five months without payment. This was the most cost effective location with a size and parking lot capable of providing storage spaces for the machines, office space and a location for a south voting precinct.

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Harkness and voted unanimously 5-0 to approve.

- e. Consider/Approve MOU with Habersham County Board of Education for School Resource Officers

Sheriff Terrell addressed the Commission. He feels that the safety of the children in the school system falls under the responsibility of the Sheriff's office and that it is his opinion that the Sheriff's office should fund 100% of the cost for School Resource Officers (SRO). He stated that Habersham County has the best SRO program in the state of Georgia, and that other schools model their programs after what is being done in Habersham County. He credited Murray Kogod with designing the program Habersham County's current SRO program as well as the curriculum for the state. Sheriff Terrell brought up that the issue of drugs in the school system was mentioned during public comment, and the SRO program is part of the solution for this issue. The early intervention while kids are in school to keep them out of jail later. The Board of Education is agreeing to pay 80% of the salaries and benefits for the SRO's. Commissioner Palmer

Motion by Commissioner Tench, seconded by Commissioner Mealor and voted 4-1 to approve with Commissioner Palmer dissenting.

- f. Consider/Approve Resolution 2023-06-011 Authorizing, Approving and Ratifying the Sale of Assets of the Habersham County Hospital Authority to the Hospital Authority of Hall County and the City of Gainesville

Attorney Hunt addressed the Commission. This resolution is a housekeeping item necessary for the closing. There will be certain certifications that will have to be signed regarding who is authorized to sign closing documents as well as reaffirming that any previous motions that were taken by the Board of Commissioner remain valid. This resolution appoints the Chairman as the person authorized to sign the closing and several ancillary documents that preface the closing. Closing is scheduled for this upcoming Saturday, and everything is still on track for this to occur at that time. There will be a closing call this Friday between all the involved parties.

Motion by Chairman Akins, seconded by Commissioner Mealor and voted unanimously 5-0 to approve.

Attorney Hunt wanted to give credit to Northeast Georgia Medical Center, who have been very forward looking in agreeing to closing early to help stop the money loss and keep the hospital open and functioning. It is his understanding that the hospital made money last month, and he is pretty sure that in the twelve years that he has been the County Attorney that is the first time it has done so other than when it received COVID relief funds. Commissioner Mealor stated that he has been to larger cities whose hospitals were closed and it is an economic disaster for communities.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Commissioner Mealor wished to encourage parents to be more involved with their children and their activities, stating that this would solve a lot of the problems that our nation has. He personally has seen parents that drop kids off places at places like sporting activities and leave them with no supervision like it is babysitting. Parents need to know where their kids are and what they are doing.

Commissioner Palmer wanted to thank everyone for coming. He realizes that the budget process is long, drawn out, and a new one begins almost as soon as the previous one ends. The budget is not something that is thrown together in a couple weeks or month. A lot of thought goes into it, and for that he wishes to thank the efforts of the staff.

Commissioner Harkness wanted to assure both the taxpayers and employees that he is working for the benefit of both. He knows that he has seen a lot of unhappy faces in the crowd tonight, but he is going to

continue to work and fight for what's right for both and he hopes that they can all appreciate that and agree to disagree on items in which their opinions differ.

Chairman Akins had no additional comments.

Commissioner Tench had no additional comments.

ADJOURN

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Mealor and voted unanimously (4-0) to adjourn at 8:53 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

By: _____
Commission Chairman Ty Akins

Attest: _____
County Clerk Brandalin Carnes