

HABERSHAM COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS WORK SESSION
5:00 P.M., MONDAY, JULY 21, 2025
HABERSHAM COUNTY COURTHOUSE
JURY ASSEMBLY ROOM
295 LLEWELLYN ST, CLARKESVILLE, GA 30523

The Habersham County Board of Commissioners held a work session on Monday, July 21, 2025 at 5:00 p.m. in the Jury Assembly Room of the Habersham County Courthouse located at 295 Llewellyn St, Clarkesville, GA 30523.

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

Chairman Tench called the meeting to order at 5:04 p.m.

Commissioner Akins led the Invocation.

Commissioner Harkness led the Pledge of Allegiance.

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

- a. ACCG Presentation of 2025 Legislative Leadership Award to Representative Victor Anderson
- b. Discussion Regarding SPLOST VIII

County Manager Tim Sims addressed the Commission. He informed them that the cities have all been collaborative and cooperative in the process of preparing for SPLOST VIII. They have been all working on a condenses timeline to get the necessary project lists, intergovernmental agreement, and resolution needed to advertise a call for an election by August 1st. The cities were all agreeable with continuing to use the same formula used for calculating the current SPLOST with updated 2020 census numbers. At tonight's meeting, the Commission will be asked to approve a project list for the County that is needed to draft the SPLOST VIII intergovernmental agreement. The Commissioners will hold a special called meeting next Monday, July 28th to vote on a final draft of the SPLOST VIII intergovernmental agreement that includes all the projects that were approved by each municipality's respective council. The Commission will also vote on a resolution to call for an election for SPLOST VIII and the issuance of a bond. Mr. Sims reviewed a list of potential projects that were requested by county department heads and elected officials versus what was being recommended for inclusion on SPLOST VIII. The County's projected share of SPLOST VIII revenue would be around \$38,595,535. This does not include \$20 million taken off the top prior to any distribution formulas for the debt service for the bonds for construction of a new jail, which is considered a Tier I project. The \$20 million will be roughly equate to six years of debt payment. These debt payments would continue into a subsequent SPLOST. The new jail will be built with plenty room for expansion, which would allow Habersham County to receive revenue from housing prisoners from other counties that could potentially help pay off the debt early. Hart County has been making debt payments on their new jail over \$1.2 million a year by doing this. The additional county projects being recommended are as follows:

\$1,000,000 for Sheriff's Department Vehicles and Equipment
\$11,000,000 for Phase II of the Central Base Fire, EMS and 911 Building
\$8,555,885 for Fire Department Equipment, Vehicles and Renovations
\$2,589,650 for EMS Equipment and Vehicles
\$12,950,000 for Roads and Bridges
\$1,500,000 for Landfill Improvements
\$500,000 for Facility Improvements
\$500,000 for Industrial Park and Airport Improvements

Commissioner Woodall expressed that he appreciated the fact that this SPLOST was focused on public safety. He asked Mr. Sims if he knew approximately what the savings to the general fund would look like from moving the ladder truck and fire engine payments from the general fund to SPLOST? Mr. Sims informed him that it would result in savings of around \$300,000 to \$400,000 per year to the general fund.

Commissioner Mealor stated that they need to remain mindful that the hospital bond payments will no longer be in SPLOST, so they need to figure out how they are going to navigate around that in the coming years. Mr. Sims informed him that they have been slowly increasing the millage rate for the hospital bonds in the past couple of years to prevent a large shock to the citizens from the full force of these payments hitting all at once.

Commissioner Akins asked if the renovations to the third floor of the courthouse could be postponed until another SPLOST cycle? Mr. Sims informed him that there is no one pushing for this, he just knows that the topic has been brought up multiple times in the past. No one from the court system had any projects they wished to request. Commissioner Harkness stated that he is sure that all the courts would like to have this done, however they must live within their budget, and he is certain they can make things work with the space they have.

Commissioner Tench asked if the Hospital Authority members are required to have 8 years of training? County Clerk Carnes informed him while there may be training requirements, it would not be eight years' worth. Ms. Carnes offered to reach out to the Hospital Authority about this for Commissioner Tench.

Commissioner Tench inquired about the plans for Station 18 on Mount Zion Road. Mr. Sims informed him that this would be a large, three-bay station to house a ladder truck, ambulance and fire engine and sleeping accommodations for 8-10 staff members. Commissioner Tench asked if this had anything to do with the five people that were killed. This was reference to a crash that occurred back on July 16, 2023. Mr. Sims informed him that County is receiving the 20-acre location for the fire station free of charge for the purpose of building a public safety facility. They needed a station in this area to service the south corridor of Highway 365. He went on to explain that the cost was estimated from a similar three-bay facility that was recently built by White County for just under \$3 million.

Commissioner Harkness stated that he had heard vicious rumors about the Commission trying to impose an additional 1% sales tax. He asked County Manager Sims to explain the timeframes for the current SPLOST VII and the new SPLOST VIII, wanting to provide clarity to the public regarding SPLOST VIII not being a new tax. Mr. Sims informed everyone that the current SPLOST VII does not end until March of 2027. The SPLOST VIII would be a continuation of SPLOST VII only, not a new tax. SPLOST VIII would not start until April 2027 after SPLOST VII ends. Mr. Sims explained that the Cities and the County collectively decided to put SPLOST VIII on the ballot a year to ensure that there wouldn't be a lapse in collections. Commissioner Harkness stated that he had just found out that Rabun County has an 8% sales tax in comparison to the 7% Habersham County receives. Mr. Sims informed him that is because Rabun County has an additional 1% sales tax received from T-SPLOST. Commissioner Mealor stated that there is a potential for being able to pursue an additional 1% from a future FLOST, as the voters approved the creation of this new sales tax option via statewide referendum, however the Cities and County's decided that it was better to focus on getting the SPLOST they currently receive renewed before asking the voters to consider a new additional 1% sales tax from FLOST.

County Manager Sims stated that a 15-year lookback was used to get the revenue projections for the proposed SPLOST VIII. Based on these projections, over the 6-year collection period allowed by having an IGA with the cities, SPLOST VIII is estimated to collect \$75.9 million or revenue. To put this in perspective they have currently received \$47.3 million from SPLOST VII collections and are trending to receive around \$57 million overall. This projected increase is due to the new online sales taxes that are being received, new

business, and new growth in the county. Studies have shown that about 40% of the sales tax that is received is paid by people who come from outside of the County.

Commissioner Woodall expressed that he felt that the items that were being proposed for inclusion into SPLOST VIII were essential as they mostly involved public safety, the jail and the roads. He asked Mr. Sims if he knew how many miles of road resurfacing could be done with SPLOST VIII? Mr. Sims informed him that the Road Department generally can do around 12-15 miles per year, but this is dependent on the cost of materials such as asphalt. It is also dependent on the amount that is received from the state's gas tax. Currently, they are receiving around \$800,000 from this. Mr. Sims informed the Commission that the Road Department has a rating system that they use to try to make sure that work is done on the roads in the worse condition first. Commissioner Woodall stated that he felt that a consumption tax such as SPLOST which is shared among individuals who visit Habersham County helps to lessen the tax burden on residential property owners who live here. He feels that this is a full-frontal approach to helping property owners. Commissioner Harknes agreed with Commissioner Woodall's sentiments.

Mr. Sims informed the Commission that a vote on this proposed project list is on the agenda for tonight's Commission meeting. He had hoped to be able to include the IGA and the Resolution calling for the referendum included on tonight's meeting as well, however some of the cities are not able to hold their council meetings until later this week to vote on their respective project lists. It is necessary to have all the cities project lists finalized and the IGA approved prior to the Commission can vote on the IGA and the resolution calling for a referendum. This is the reason why the Commission will have to hold a special called meeting on July 28th. The election board will hold a special called meeting the following day on July 29th so that they can advertise the call for election on Friday, August 1st. Mr. Sims stated that he has already been in touch with several community and civic groups discuss scheduling educational presentations. By law, the County is unable to advertise for SPLOST, they can only educate. Any advertisement must be done by the business community. The Chamber of Commerce and Partnership Habersham have agreed to help by jointly hiring an advertising firm to assist with this.

Commissioner Harkness expressed his confusion over the \$52 million estimated cost for constructing the jail, as he had thought at one time the estimate was closer to \$35 million? Mr. Sims informed him that would have been correct for the original estimate that was done around 2018 or 2019, however the new \$52 million estimate the architects are giving him are based on their recent work on a jail of similar size in Monroe County. Commissioner Harkness inquired as to whether the jail will be similar in size to the one constructed in Hart County? Mr. Sims informed him that it was a similar size, though Habersham County's would be about half a pod larger than Hart County's. The reason the estimate for Habersham County's jail cost is coming out higher than the \$26 million cost for the Hart County jail is because Hart County was able to lock in 2021/2022 costs. Material and labor costs have gone up substantially since then, and for Hart County to build the size jail today it would cost them \$46 million. Commissioner Woodall felt that the taxpayers would be more supportive of building the jail now that the Commission is seeking to fund it through sales tax rather than property taxes. He went on to express that two consecutive Sheriff's have articulated the need for a new jail. Mr. Sims informed the Commission that none of the cities had any objections to the County's need to take the \$20 million off the top of SPLOST for construction of a new jail. He went on to state that the old jail would be repurposed for administrative offices, training offices and storage for the Sheriff's Office. Commissioner Akins stressed the importance of getting voter approval for the debt. Mr. Sims stated that the referendum is for both the continuance of the SPLOST as well as the issuance of the jail bond. This is something that is often done by school boards for large projects, as they bond their projects up front with the intent of paying them off by the end of one or more SPLOSTs. Commissioner Woodall reminded everyone that at this time, Habersham County is having to pay at least \$300,000 per year to house out inmates to other counties. Mr. Sims clarified that though they budget \$300,000 for this purpose, it usually ends up costing more and they have to pull funds from other areas to cover the difference. Commissioner Harkness expressed that in addition to using the savings from no longer having to house out inmates towards paying

back the jail bond, they could also look into taking inmates from other counties, the state and even the federal government to help pay back the jail bond as well.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

There were no additional

ADJOURN

Motion by Commissioner Woodall, seconded by Commissioner Mealor and voted unanimously (5-0) to adjourn the work session at 5:42 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

By: _____
Jimmy Tench, Commission Chairman

Attest: _____
Brandalin Carnes, County Clerk