

**CAMDEN COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
PUBLIC HEARING/MILLAGE RATE FOR TAX YEAR 2002
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2002, 10:00 A.M.
WOODBINE, GEORGIA**

An announced Public Hearing for comments on the Millage Rate for Tax Year 2002 was held on Tuesday, October 29, 2002, at 10:00 a.m. in the Commissioners Meeting Room at the Courthouse in Woodbine, Georgia.

Present: County Administrator Barrett T. King, Assistant County Administrator Bill Shanahan, and Finance Director Michael Fender.

Mr. King called the meeting to order at 10:03 a.m.

1. Millage Rate for Tax Year 2002:

Mr. King opened the hearing and said this was the second of three public hearings for citizens to comment on the advertised millage and five (5) year history of levy. He said that there would be a third public hearing on November 7, 2002, at the Special Commission Meeting at 6 p.m. Mr. King then opened the floor for citizen comments.

Mr. Frank Mesec, 802 Bristol Hammock Circle, Kingsland opened the floor by asking the following questions:

- With all the building projects going on in the county, which means more revenue, why are our county taxes still rising?
- I have had a 25% increase in the cost of trash collection and the billing has changed, is it possible for the county citizens to identify and hire their own trash collectors and pay directly to them and cut out the “middle man?”
- Why are we still subsidizing the Recreation Department?
- Why can the County not adjust its budget to match hard times, rather than just upping local taxes?
- What is the County doing about back taxes?
- Why would anyone want to retire in Camden County? During the last 10 years, taxes have increased each year, through either the millage or property reevaluations.

Mr. Don Mounsey, 428 S East St, Kingsland asked the following questions and/or made the following statements:

- How high does the County feel they can raise the millage rate, before they have 43,000 people knocking on their door asking why?
- The County needs to quit spending and here are some examples of where cuts can be made:
 - Around 18 months ago, the County purchased property on Harrietts Bluff and Highway 17 for \$250,000, which is still sitting empty.
 - Woodbine has a firehouse for which it wants \$2,000 a month rent. At the 10/15/02 Commissioners’ meeting the following options were made:
 - Purchase a building and property for \$150,000;
 - Fill in land, for \$250,000, on property already owned by the County.

Mr. King let him know that the Woodbine alternatives could be part of SPLOST Projects. Mr. Mounsey said he felt that if we paid the \$2,000 a month, it would help the City of Woodbine and take 6¼ years to equal \$150,000, rather than pay a lump sum of \$150,000.

- Mr. Mounsey said he understood Camden County had the third highest millage rate in the state and wanted to know if we were trying to be number one.

Mr. King advised Mr. Mounsey that Camden County was in the upper 1/3 within the state and not number three (3) from the top.

- Mr. Mounsey said he felt the millage rate decision was already made and the hearings are just an exercise in futility or being held because the law forces the Board to hold them.

Mr. King let him know that until the 11/07/02 Commissioners' meeting vote, there was no new millage rate.

Mr. Roland Chartrand, 95 Ocean View St., Kingsland said if the County raises the millage rate, there are a lot of people who cannot afford it and wanted to know what they are supposed to do.

Mr. Roger Smallridge, P.O. Box 1417, Kingsland asked the following questions:

- How could the Board vote to raise the millage rate, when the County has lost thousands of Navy personnel and the Durango, Georgia plant is closing?
- Can Mr. King identify the budget reductions already made?

Mr. King advised Mr. Smallridge that the Commission had not yet voted on the millage rate and read a list of the proposed departmental cuts for 2003 totaling more than \$1.1 million.

- Have these reductions been published in the newspaper?

Mr. King let him know this had been done.

- What capital expenditures had been cut? (i.e. buildings)

Mr. King advised him that the building projects were actually SPLOST projects and did not affect the General Fund.

- Can the budget be reduced further to avoid a tax increase?
- How will the millage rate increase affect the people who lost their jobs?
- Is the \$8,000 credit, coming from the state, a one time good thing?

Mr. King advised him this is a state Homestead credit and not up to the county. He said it could continue if the state so desires.

Ms. Linda Duncan, 1343 Rivercove, St. Marys asked the following questions and/or made the following statements:

- She had moved from Atlanta to Camden County and it was a shock to her that her taxes were higher in Camden County, with a smaller house, than in Atlanta.
- She was shocked by the lack of citizen interest in the local government.
- She felt that the County needs to work within a budget.
- She was concerned by the lack of corporate taxes and the low priority for economic development (until recently) in the County.
- She felt that the County should be more involved in economic development.
- She felt that there was no real reason to stay in the County when her husband retires next year.
- She felt that the County did not entice new residents or return visits from tourists.
- What does the County intend to do about the negligence of both the Board of Assessors and the Chief Tax Assessor?

- Ms. Duncan said she has been in Camden County for two years and had received the original bill, and one or two other bills, for trash collection. She said she had called the office and tried to pay for trash collection and had not been allowed to. She wanted to pay this bill before she received one large bill for non-payment.

Mr. King advised her that we would take care of this after the meeting.

- She felt that we need to ensure that those owing back taxes be forced to pay them.
- She said that if consolidation of services caused the reduction of personnel, while we do not like it, so be it as it is just part of doing business.
- Please identify which departments/officers whose budgets are not controlled by the County.

Mr. King distributed a copy of the Proposed Cuts for FY 2003 and explained it to them. He also read the list of departments and officials that are funded but not controlled by the Commission.

At this time, the visitors/citizens went into a question and answer session with Mr. King. The following is an overview of this session:

- **QUESTION:** Where does the Recreation Department fall in the budget process during all of this?
- **ANSWER:** The Recreation Department is a Public Service Authority and it is funded by the county in a Tax Service District. The unincorporated part of the County residents pay a portion of the Recreation costs based on a percentage of the digest. The PSA budget will not affect the General Fund.
- **QUESTION:** Why has Administrative Support and the Joint Development Authority budgets jumped so high?
- **ANSWER:** Administrative Support is directly affected by the health and workers compensation cost increases during the last two years. Our expenses went up almost \$2,000,000 last year. In the Joint Development Authority the county combined the debt service on the industrial park with the actual appropriation to the JDA. This had been carried as General Fund debt service, which was reduced by a like amount.
- **QUESTION:** What does the Joint Development Authority do?
- **ANSWER:** Promote development and industry relocation.
- **QUESTION:** Is the Joint Development Authority responsibility for the “white elephant” on Harrietts Bluff Road that is standing idle?
- **ANSWER:** The Industrial Authority building, yes.

Mr. King, at this time, answered the questions asked during the presentation portion of this meeting. They are as follows:

- Trash collection affects only the unincorporated part of the County. It is run as an enterprise fund. We contract with Browning Ferris International (BFI). The County pays the total bill to BFI, which equates to \$12 to \$13 a month. The County bills the residents who use that service \$125 a year. This does not pay the total BFI bill, but is subsidized by some of the Insurance Premium Tax. The total cost paid to BFI is still less than any of the cities who do their own trash collection. The Insurance Premium Tax rebate can be spent only for specific unincorporated services. The county uses rebate strictly for unincorporated fire and trash.
- Trash bills are the responsibility of the property owner. We find that quarterly bills make it much easier to make past-due collections and keep up with people moving.
- The County cannot charge corporate taxes. Most revenue comes from two sources: sales tax (LOST) and Ad Valorem tax. SPLOST is not a general fund revenue source.
- The County has a hiring freeze and we have not added, from the vacancies that have existed since August 2002, any new personnel. (Other than emergency

- personnel hires.) The Sheriff has pledged to reduce his total staff by 16 to 18 employees. We are not filling vacancies, rather than laying off people.
- Collection of back taxes. According to an outside audit of Tax Years 1999, 2000, and 2001, Gilman/Durango was found to have under-reported its holdings of which the County's tax share is approximately \$650,000. This is in the courts. Collection is the Tax Commissioner's constitutional and civil function, the Commission does not have anything to do with its collection.
 - The Tax Assessors Office negligence has been in the newspaper. City representatives have met with County representatives and there is a move to do something about this problem. The Board cannot fire the Tax Assessors unless the problems are documented to such a degree that they can be removed for cause. While there is a move to try to do this, we do not know where it will go. In addition, 100 freeholders can sign a petition and have a Superior Court Judge take action. The State Law was changed to allow the Commissioners to ask the Department of Revenue to conduct a full audit. If asked, the Department of Revenue will send a representative of the Department of Revenue and two (2) tax assessors from other counties who will evaluate our process and, based on that, it is possible to remove individuals or the entire board. The Board of Tax Assessors is responsible for hiring and firing the Chief Appraiser. The only thing the Commission can really do is take the digest, which is probably the biggest problem in the County, and identify it as being incorrect.
 - We have no control over the Board of Education's Millage Rate. (We approve what they send. However, they do have public hearings.)
 - The City of Woodbine will be paying approximately \$12,000 for their fire services. Last Year, they paid around \$70,000. This is a saving of \$58,000. But now they want us to pay them \$24,000 (in rent for one year). The question is whether it is better to purchase a building and own it forever, in six years, or pay \$2,000 a month forever. The City of Woodbine is the county seat, the County is the biggest business in the county seat, and we have a moral obligation to ensure that the county seat remains reasonably thriving.
 - You should stay here because County finances will improve, it is a nice place, beautiful coast, beautiful county, good people, so do not let the temporal problems we have run you off, because things are getting better.

Ms. Katherine Nisi Zell, City of Woodbine, informed Mr. King that while she was not here to campaign for District 2, as whoever wins the election on November 5th, 2002, will be here on November 7th, 2002, to vote on the budget; therefore, she was here to learn as much as possible about the concerns of the people. She informed Mr. King that she agreed with everything he had said during this meeting. She also stated that since her return to the county, in 1993, she has been hit from every angle there is as far as County taxes are concerned. She then stated that she had fought many battles about this and had been to a number of meetings and noticed citizen apathy from the public and did not understand it. She stated that she had discussed this with Mr. Tracy P. Mizelle II, St. Marys, candidate for District 4, and they both agree that there needs to be more people involved in the budget process. In addition, she wanted them to know that Tracy and she were both sensitive to all the issues brought forward by those at this meeting and whether they are elected or not, they care about the citizens of the county that they both love. She finished by saying that she felt that this county was hemorrhaging and she was hoping to do something creative and constructive to help the County, as she truly loves Camden County.

Mr. King urged all participants to ensure that they vote on November 5th, 2002.

At this time, a discussion about the location and times of the regular Commission meeting ensued with Mr. King explaining how they came into existence. He reminded everyone that it was now legal to change locations of these meetings and that the Commission had conducted official business in the Kingsland Annex.

Mr. King was asked to and explained how consolidation of the Animal Control Department with both the City of St. Marys and the City of Woodbine had effected the County.

Mr. King was asked about and explained where the County and the Municipalities are at in the area of consolidation of services.

Mr. King closed the meeting at 11:40 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Barrett T. King
County Administrator

Attest:

William P. Shanahan Jr.
Assistant County Administrator