

Lamar County Commissioners Special Called Meeting  
August 17, 2010  
6:30 P.M.

The Lamar County Board of Commissioners in and for the County of Lamar, State of Georgia, held a Special Called Meeting on Tuesday, August 17, 2010 at 6:30 P.M. Present for the meeting were Chairman Jay Matthews, Vice-Chairman Bennie Horton, Commissioner George R. Brown, Commissioner Nancy M. Thrash and Commissioner Jimmy Hearn.

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Jay Matthews.

The pledge of allegiance was said by everyone.

The invocation was given by Commissioner Nancy M. Thrash. The agenda was approved as printed.

Chairman Matthews stated this is the third public hearing to hear the public's input on the millage rate proposal. Mr. Chairman stated the Commissioners have been working diligently on a solution to the shortage of revenue needed to operate the county efficiently. The Commissioners have been looking at revenue and expenditure cuts across the board. He further stated that the county cannot continue to operate efficiently under its current revenue. Mr. Chairman said all departments have cut their budgets to the bare minimum.

The general consensus among the Commissioners is to hear the people again. The Commissioners will then take the input back to discuss amongst themselves as well as one on one. Chairman Matthews told the citizens a workshop will be held Monday morning, August 23, 2010 @ 10:00 a.m. A Special Called Meeting will then be held Tuesday, August 24<sup>th</sup> @ 7:00 P.M. to make the final decision. Mr. Chairman said the Commissioners wanted to give the public one more chance to be heard. The Commissioners will then take all the public's feedback into consideration in order to make an informed decision.

Chairman Matthews tabled Resolutions No's: 2010-14, 2010-15 and 2010-16 until next Tuesday night, August 24<sup>th</sup> @7:00 P.M.

Commissioner Bennie Horton made a motion to approve the minutes of the Budget Workshop Meetings dated June 29, 2010, June 30, 2010 and July 1, 2010. Commissioner Jimmy Hearn seconded the motion. The motion passed by a unanimous decision.

Prior to opening the floor to public comments, Chairman Matthews stated the Commissioners spent the last several days looking at different ways to fund the budget and different ways to make cuts to the budget. One of the topics discussed was an across the board tax with all citizens paying their fair share. Some citizens have asked why we can't raise sales tax. He agreed that increasing revenue through sales tax would hit everyone but that our hands are tied as to how we can and can't tax the people. Chairman Matthews stated we already have a sales tax in place but those numbers are down as well.

Mr. Chairman stated one idea the Commissioners have kicked around amongst themselves is a fire fund fee and an ambulance fund fee to fund the fire department and the ambulance service. These fees alone would generate over \$600,000 for the county. These two fees combined would cost each household approximately \$50.00 annually. The Commissioners feel this would be better than another mill increase when looked at across the board. Chairman Matthews said the Commissioners will be working on the numbers between now and the workshop meeting next Monday, August 23, 2010 @ 10:00 a.m. The Commissioners will then make a decision at the Board meeting next Tuesday, August 24, 2010 @ 7:00 P.M.

### ***Public Comments***

Ms. Vicky Stewart stated she has been a resident of Lamar County for 12 years. She commented we cannot spend our way out of debt. We have to accept financial responsibilities. She asked for more budget cuts within the county offices especially in the Sheriff's Dept. Utilize inmate labor and discontinue some of the inmate's benefits such as cable T.V. She asked that the Commissioners don't raise taxes, the citizens of Lamar County can't afford higher taxes.

Ms. Donna Johnson began by asking Jay if the number of taxpayers in Lamar County was correct at 30%. Chairman Matthews answered by stating there are 9,300 parcels in Lamar County being taxed. This includes raw land, houses, apartments, and commercial properties. She asked that cuts be made within the school system. (Audience applause) Chairman Matthews replied the Commissioners have 0% control over the school system. She said additional cuts should not be made within the Sheriff's Dept., Police Dept. or the Fire Dept. Ms. Johnson said it is required by law there be three public meetings prior to raising taxes but that she has heard it is already a done deal. If so, why is the public here at this meeting? Chairman Matthews answered by saying the Commissioners could make a decision tonight. Instead they chose to listen to what the citizens have to say concerning the proposed millage rate increase and that they will take their input into consideration in order to make an informed decision. He further stated they could cut all the services the public wants cut such as 4-H, public health, DFACS, public transportation, etc. but they would still have to go up 1 ½ mills. There are certain things we have to fund whether we like it or not. Ms. Johnson said she has to live on a budget, why doesn't the county have a budget. Mr. Chairman answered by stating the county does have a budget but that when the bills come in the county still has to pay them. One example he used was when inmates come in through the court doors they will be prosecuted and the county will receive the bill for their defense. And the county will have to pay the bill whether there is money in the county's checking account or not. Ms. Johnson also questioned how the county can go up on taxes when everyone knows the economy is down and property values are down but they want to go up on taxes. She asked the people attending to look at who is sitting on the Board and if they don't do something come voting time remember.

Mr. Floyd Moyer addressed the members of the Board and commended each of them for being a public servant but that they appear to be dead set to institute a most substantial property tax increase. An increase of 20% or more. You, ladies and gentlemen, are biting the hands that feed the county. (Audience applause) I cannot imagine a business that is struggling to make ends meet, increasing their prices by 20 to 25% before they first determine where they can cut expenses. Mr. Moyer stated he believes the county can cut its expenses a whole lot more than

they have cut them thus far. He doesn't believe the Board is paying attention to what is going on in our country economically. So many of our citizens are unable to find jobs and many have lost hope of becoming employed. And the Board knows we have a big unemployment growth in Lamar County. He asked "Have you seen the tea party demonstrations"? All are caused by a country demanding less government. Our federal government is much too big, our state government is much too big and yes our county government has grown enormously like a California wildfire. He said in the forty years he has been back in Lamar County, that he can't believe we have grown probably 50% in the forty years he has been back here. He has watched the erosion of individual property rights and freedom confiscated by our county government in the name of planning and zoning result in tripling and quadrupling of his property taxes seriously hampering his financial ability to improve and maintain his development. He said he loves Lamar County, especially the Redbone Community. He sure does not care for the unnecessary big government and we have much that is unnecessary. He asked if the Board has really explored any other option? Does the county have any land, like across from the jail, that the county can afford to sell? Do we really need to build such an elaborate fire station? Let's face it, all these little fire stations we have in the country, you would have a hard time justifying them. I think that is money foolishly spent. The County was and is largely a waste of resources, he's speaking of these buildings. Because most if not all of the various county departments could operate with a 10% cut. Have you given anybody a furlough? Have you cut the personnel at all? I don't think so. I hope you will give it serious consideration. Thank you for your time.

Mr. John Willis, better known as Jack Willis. Mr. Willis said prior to retiring he was a financial processing manager for a major milling corporation in Barnesville. Mr. Willis stated he appreciated the opportunity to speak in opposition to any tax increase and to challenge the Commissioners to seek some other resolution other than a tax increase. It is significantly obvious to him that the property owners are adamantly against any increase. No, he is not saying that 70% of the people don't pay taxes. These people pay indirectly. They pay through increased rent, they pay through increased prices at our convenience stores, they pay taxes ultimately. What he is clearly hearing is that the county needs to challenge costs through reduced services, increased productivity, and reduction of overhead. Special services or needs must support themselves or be eliminated. If he looks at one area he sees a sports program that requires a registration but then he looks at another area and he sees the use of a county facility with no user's fee. We have an organization making money on the county's back, using it for their own purpose. Mr. Willis said he will leave it to the public to find out who it is because he doesn't want to go there. He said there should be a user's fee for any use of county services. He used the example, if he had a business and he had a room and you wanted to use it, you would rent it. He said he has personally been told by the county that they don't have funds to produce the basic services. He stated he does not know how true it is and challenged to check the deposits, check road repairs. As a financial manager who has written multi-million dollar budgets for major corporations from Texas to North Carolina, Mr. Willis said he knows that you fund the merchandise to do repairs, and you've got to have people to do it. If you can't buy the asphalt, how many people are at home that normally would do that job? He doesn't advocate to people losing their jobs, but the economic times are these people are losing their homes one way or the other. He said there are many and varied rumors about salary levels and benefits for county employees that may or may not be true. Some he does not believe, some he questions. But if just 10% of these rumors are real, the Board is failing in their

role of maintaining a viable and equitable employment process in light of our failing economy. He stated he has personally experienced deductible, co-pay and premium increases. When he retired, he had a fully funded retirement. His wife's insurance coverage has increased from \$40.00 five years ago to \$500.00. He said he heard employees of the county don't pay this. He said if this is true, it needs to be traveled. He said it is interesting to him when he goes to the county's own website and he goes to the budget performance page and he gets a blank page. Nothing is there so he guesses the county did not spend any money or didn't have any money to spend. He believes government should be transparent with information readily accessible. He said he was thankful for one thing, that he does not get all the government that he pays for. (Audience applause) In conclusion Mr. Willis stated he knows this meeting is to gather input on the proposed tax increase. He said it was his candid opinion that the county is working against a time bomb. The county has a state deadline to make and the county is not going to make it. There is not enough time. What are you going to do next year? The same thing? He strongly suggested the Commissioners appoint a blue ribbon committee, who are not politicians or who are not looking to be re-elected, to look at the county's budget and come back to this commission and make recommendations for next year. We can't go through this again. He doesn't want to go through this again. He thinks that is an option the Commissioners have. It's a little bit longer term view of where this county is going to go. He said he recently wrote a letter to the newspaper about budget basics. You start with nothing and you build your budget. The county needs to do the same. He strongly recommended the Board look into a blue ribbon committee. Mr. Willis said the only thing that bothers him is that he could not help but feel that sometimes we have the foxes guarding the henhouse at both the courthouse and the schoolhouse. (Audience applause) He thanked the Board for their time and courtesy extended to him this evening. He challenged the Board to do a better job because if he was grading them they would receive an F for flunking.

Mr. Horace Pippin opened by saying he appreciated the opportunity to address the Board of Commissioners tonight and commended the Commissioners on all the hard work they have done. He realizes it is not an easy job and he does not envy them. He stated he had called his commissioner, George Brown, last Sunday night and interviewed him for about an hour. He told Commissioner Brown that he as well as the Redbone Community appreciated all the hard work Commissioner Brown has done in supporting the Redbone Community. But having said all that, Mr. Pippin stated he has been concerned for quite some time about the rise in taxes and especially those being assessed against property owners. He said he was not a very smart person, but this seems to be one of the most unfair and unequal taxes that could ever be imposed upon any group of people. He would almost call it taxation without representation. (Audience applause). Mr. Pippin said he once addressed the county Commissioners several years ago, and he made the suggestion to take a group of people, everybody who drives a Chevrolet car, and tax them for the next ten years. He said the Commissioners looked at him like he was not crazy. But the logic here is the same. Why do we continue to take a select group of people and tax them over and over and taxes rise time after time after time? How did it ever come about that the majority of funding to run our county government and our school system be taken from those who happen to own property. They work hard to own their own property. He said he knows and understands it takes funding and it takes funding to operate our county government and it takes funding to operate our school system. He said his hope and desire would be that we would have the best school system in the state of Georgia and that

we would have the best roads to ride on. But also in having said that, his thought is why can't we all pay something for the services that we so much enjoy and the burden not be placed just on those who own property. Property values have declined over the past few years while assessments have gone up. He said he for one cannot understand that. We speak loud and hard for the federal and state government to have a balanced budget without raising taxes. If this is ever to occur, and I tell you here tonight that it must, it must begin at home. Mr. Pippin further stated that he is not involved enough with the day to day operations to stand up here tonight and tell the Commissioners where cuts need to be made. Having said that, he also believes that certainly if we tighten our belts that cuts can be made across the board in every aspect. He stated he does know one thing for sure, local and federal government cannot continue to be all things for all people. Sooner or later it just will not work. People will eventually be taxed so heavy that the incentive to work and accumulate anything will be taken away from them. (Audience applause) We all have to balance our family budget. He doesn't know many people this past year who have received a 21% raise, taking that number from the newspaper. He said we could acquire all kinds of funding, but simply he does not see how we can continue to balance our budget on the backs of property owners. He said he has asked quite a few times over the last several years if the Commissioners could find another way to collect funding to run the county government and the school system other than on the backs of property owners. He has never received an answer. He encouraged the Commissioners to find a more fair way to run our local government and school system. The backs of property owners are hurting. Thank you for your consideration.

Chairman Matthews thanked Mr. Pippin for his comments and stated he agreed with a lot of the comments. He agreed we need to petition the general assembly and ask for more latitude on how we can tax other than just on the backs of property owners. That's why he's proposing the Commissioners look into a fire fund fee and ambulance service fee across the board. It's equitable and everybody pays the same amount. Mr. Chairman agreed we need to look at alternative ways to generate revenue but our hands are tied.

Mr. Adrian White spoke on behalf of concerned citizens and the elderly about the proposed millage rate increase. He asked if Gordon College could be tapped into as a resource for funding. He stated if the local city and county governments could work with Gordon on an educational level, maybe they could come up with some incentives to keep the students here spending their money. Mr. White stated we are in a bad economy with 30+million people on unemployment. He said he sees the recession the city and the county are in. He mentioned several ways he thought the county and the city could bring in revenue. One of his suggestions was taxing property owners who do not keep their property neat and clean.

Mr. Gene Hardwick opened by saying he was not at this meeting to fuss at anyone but to discuss things, not with anyone in particular but with all the Commissioners. He believes there are some things coming online next year that the Commissioners have not thought about. He's hoping that all the businesses who are paying parcel taxes will go up 10% next year. Gene suggested the Commissioners look at reducing the proposed new fire station to its original blueprint. The cost savings would be about 50%. He stated that money could be transferred to the General Fund. That would save about a ½ mill in taxes. Another suggestion Gene made was that maybe now is the time for the county to consider selling its ½ interest in property

owned on Roberta Drive. Chairman Matthews interrupted by saying the county has no interest in the property, the city owns it 100%. Chairman Matthews further stated the County has an agreement with the City that upon sale of the property, the sale price will be split 50 – 50. But the City of Barnesville has total control. Gene stated his point was maybe the City would like to buy the County out. Chairman Matthews stated he would ask. Mr. Hardwick said if the City did choose to buy the County out, the sale would electively bring in a million bucks. Gene said there are options to be considered prior to raising taxes. He has been to all the hearings and budget meetings held and has an understanding of where the county is. But he would like to have assurance that all of these things would be considered before taxes are raised. If all things are considered Gene does not believe taxes will have to be raised 2 mills.

Ms. Betty Crawford opened by challenging Chairman Matthews to repeat what he has said and heard at the other meetings previously held. Chairman Matthews replied by saying a meeting was held on July 25<sup>th</sup> with a tax crowd attending talking about the services they want, pleading the Commissioners not cut out all the different things being proposed to be cut. At the two meetings last week they heard the people saying don't raise our taxes. Chairman Matthews continued by saying the meeting being held tonight is to allow the people to tell the commissioners what they want cut. He further stated he personally does not want to pay higher taxes but some things are out of our control. He explained that bills continue to come in and we continue to have to pay them. For example, indigent defense. We have no other choice but to pay. He stated we had \$20,000 budgeted for indigent defense. We are already \$4,000 over. He stated the suggestions of feeding the inmates peanut butter and jelly and water and turning off the air conditioners and television are not reality. Reality is, criminals are coming into the jails, they get hurt and we get the medical bill, they come into the courtroom to be prosecuted and we have to pay for it. Those things we have no control over. He further stated the things being proposed to be cut will total about \$281,000. That is a ½ mill. We will still need to go up 1 ½ mills. Chairman Matthews responded to Ms. Crawford's question of what services the county does provide other than fire and ambulance: recreation facilities, 4-H, conservation, public health department, department of family services, public transportation, senior citizens center, road department, the county pays traverse and grand jury fees, poll workers, elections board, and assessors. Ms. Crawford said she had served on several boards in her past being chairman of some and most without pay. She served as a caring citizen. She said she heard the Commissioners had given themselves a raise shortly before talk of budget cuts. Chairman Matthews assured Ms. Crawford that no one has received a salary increase. She asked if any of the Commissioners had volunteered to serve without pay. She also suggested we stop paying people to serve on jury duty. Make them serve as a civil duty. She urged the Commissioners to look at services that can be cut.

Mr. Kent Kingsley said one of the things that has impressed him is the growth of outstanding comments in opposition of a tax increase. He quoted the Commissioners as saying that 55% of the parcels are \$100,000 or less, which by extension their rate increase will be less than \$80. He stated we are being taxed enough already. He said we are being taxed to death already, that it is almost the principle as much as it is the money. (Audience applause) It is enough. The people don't want any more taxes. He said the commissioners are now looking at a fire tax. This is still a tax. It is still taking more money out of the people's pocket. Mr. Kingsley stated he still has not heard the commissioners say a single thing they can reduce. This is what

the people are looking for. He said the commissioners keep asking the people what they want cut. With all due respect, Mr. Kingsley said that is what the commissioners are elected for. That is the job they are being paid for. (Audience applause) He asked if we have a 2 mill increase, without further reductions, it's projected to raise enough revenue to balance the 2011 budget and have approximately \$100,000 above it. How are we paying our debt? Chairman Matthews answered by saying we had a Line of Credit last year, we have a Line of Credit this year and we will have a Line of Credit next year and the year after that. Mr. Chairman said what we've got to do is start doing it in reserve. Mr. Kingsley interrupted by saying what we've got to do is pay the debt. Chairman Matthews replied by saying the debt will be paid off from the tax revenues. Mr. Kingsley said with the current proposed plan, the county will still be \$750,000 in debt.

Dr. Kessler stated he has been a taxpayer of Lamar County for a long time. He stated what the commissioners are doing sounds like a disease. He said he has supported the commissioners for a long time. He said the people elect commissioners because they expect them to manage the business. Dr. Kessler stated the commissioners are not managing right. He said the commissioners are in charge to have foresight to see what's going on. How the economic crisis is developing. He continued by re-emphasizing what previous speakers have said.

Mr. David Dodd spoke about the amount of property in conservation. These land owners are not paying fair market value on his land. This causes a shortage in revenues. He said he understands operating on a line of credit but his concern is even if things go better next year we are already in the hole.

Mr. Greg Martin briefly commented the county needs to increase revenue. He stated he is in favor of the fire fund. Don't cut anymore.

Ms. Betty Eskridge stated she did not know you had to do an open records request to get information from the Board of Commissioners. She said a copy of the budget should be posted at the library, E.P. Roberts Center and other public places. Then once she got to reading the package she realized she did not understand most of what she was looking at. She believes the budget could be made simpler. After reviewing the budget she has a better understanding of how the county operates. She stated we all need to work together to make it better.

Ms. Joyce Farmer asked what happened to Bill Brown's salary. Was it distributed amongst a certain few employees? Did it go back in the budget? She does not want her taxes increased. The county is just taking the easy way out by raising taxes. She is not in favor of cutting public works. Why do we have to have an open records request to get a copy of the county's budget? Other counties have theirs on the internet. She said she does not want her taxes raised.

Ms. Julia Thomas stated she is a senior citizen on a limited income. Her son had to pay her taxes last year. She does not want to have to ask him to pay her taxes this year. She said she has to live on a budget. Why doesn't the county live within its budget? She asked the commissioners to consider the elderly when making their decision and not raise taxes.

Mr. Frank Maffett stated the only way to stop a tax increase on the property owners is by a SPLOST tax. This will hit everyone in the county not just the property owners. Chairman Matthews replied by saying we already have a SPLOST and LOST tax in place. Those revenues are down as well. He explained SPLOST can only be used for its designated purpose.

Ms. Penny McBroom quoted Daniel Webster as saying "Abide by the Bible". The Bible is turned to for everything.

Mr. John Sexton stated taxes have become the cocaine for government. The more you have the more you want. It's like taking money by a gun. He stated property values are going down and property taxes are going up. He said there are other ways. He hasn't heard about salary cuts across the board by 20% or closing the recreation department. He suggested shut the health department down. He said it's only there to help the ones on Medicaid. He said there's a lot of ways the budget can be cut. The Commissioners just need to find them.

Mr. Eddie Albritton said this is just a food chain. He said with the new power house coming to town we should require they employ only locals. Make it one of the requirements that new industry coming to town employ local labor.

Ms. Lenora Ginn says she is a senior citizen who pays city and county taxes. She said she was raised to live on a budget. The county should learn to operate on a budget. She said when she was on the city council she voted for the people and stood up for the people. She said raising taxes is not for the people.

Chairman Matthews thanked everyone for their input and said the Commissioners will be busy working with the numbers to come up with a solution equitable for everyone.

### ***"Round Table"***

Commissioner Bennie Horton stated he is in favor of a flat tax. He said we have to do whatever is necessary to get out of this situation. He said the Commissioners are working diligently to come up with a solution. He told the group he would not tell them he will not vote for some type of tax increase next Tuesday night, August 24<sup>th</sup>, but he will look at every option. He said he will never do anything to hurt the community.

Commissioner Nancy M. Thrash stated the Board of Commissioners has worked hard on trying to figure out where we are going to go. Revenues are down. She said they will look at cuts across the board. She suggested discontinuing public transportation. She said maybe even look into combining some departments. She said the commissioners will revisit the fire station. She explained that SPLOST funds cannot be added into the General Fund. These funds have to be used for what the people said they wanted it used for and that is a new fire station. She told the crowd she did not vote for the 2% mill increase. She feels there are more cuts that can be

made and more housekeeping to be done. She assured the people the Commissioners are listening to what the public has to say.

Commissioner George R. Brown told the citizens he will do anything he can to keep from raising taxes. He opposes the proposed fees.

Commissioner Jimmy Hearn stated the county has to have revenue coming in to operate and that they will look into all options before making their final decision.

Chairman Matthews stated there will be a meeting next Tuesday night, August 24<sup>th</sup>, at 7:00 P.M. to set the millage rate.

There being no further business to discuss Commissioner Jimmy Hearn made a motion for the meeting to adjourn at 8:57 P.M. Commissioner George R. Brown seconded the motion. The motion passed by a unanimous decision.

THE LAMAR COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

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Jay Matthews, Chairman

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Bennie Horton, Vice-Chairman

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George R. Brown, Member

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Jimmy Hearn, Member

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Nancy M. Thrash, Member

ATTEST:

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Wayne Patterson  
County Administrator

