

Jasper County Board of Commissioners
July 1, 2024
Regular Meeting Minutes
6:00 P.M.

Chairman Bruce Henry called the meeting to order at 6 p.m.

Commissioners Present: Bruce Henry, Chairman; Steven Ledford, Vice Chair; Don Jernigan; Sheila Pounds and Asher Gray

Staff: Mike Benton, County Manager, Sheila Jefferson, Clerk- Administrative Services Director, Larissa Ruark, Chief Accounting Officer, Doug Attaway- Planning and Zoning Director,

Pledge of Allegiance:

Invocation: Commissioner Gray District 4

Agenda Approval: Commissioner Ledford motioned to approve. Commissioner Gray seconded, motion passed unanimously.

Consent Agenda: Commissioner Ledford motioned to approve the following minutes

- Budget Work Session Minutes- April 19, 2024
- Budget Work Session Minutes- May 31, 2024
- Regular Meeting Minutes- June 3, 2024
- Called Meeting Minutes- June 14, 2024

Commissioner Pounds seconded, motion passed unanimously.

Commissioner Gray motioned to approve **Check #'s 71313 - 71531**

Commissioner Ledford seconded, motion passed unanimously.

Public Hearings: Proposed FY 2025 Fire Rescue Supplemental Budget and Proposed 2024 Countywide Special District Fire Rescue Millage Rate. Commissioner Pounds motioned to begin a public hearing at 6:15 p.m. Commissioner Ledford seconded, motion passed unanimously. Chairman Henry explained what would be discussed in the Public hearing. The county passed the hospital millage rate of .571. Chairman Henry said they are considering a flat rate fee for the third ambulance instead of a millage rate. He said a flat rate fee would spread the cost evenly per parcel. Chairman Henry said they are also considering a flat rate fee for the hospital instead of a special millage rate.

Mary Patrick spoke in favor of a flat fee unless the commissioners can review the budget again to find funds for a third ambulance. She said the expected expenses jumped up

\$480000.00 from May to June. She asked the Commissioners if they could look at that and cut something else to fund the third ambulance.

Jason Bunn said he is not in favor of any increase in taxes. He said the flat rate fee would be the best choice if an increase were necessary. He said the commissioners should look for other ways to fund a third ambulance. Mr. Bunn said the hospital collects fees for services provided and the county is investing in the hospital. He said that at some point an investment should have a return. He stated the commissioners constantly increase the millage rate and give the hospital money and that they should be looking at ways to get a return on their investment.

Chairman Henry responded to Mr. Bunn saying the County has not increased the millage rate. He said the county keeps taking the rollback and the return in his opinion is having a hospital in Jasper County.

Chris Florence spoke for himself and others who could not attend the meeting. He said the commissioners need to consider the less fortunate in our community. He said the animal shelter is running at half capacity and they are killing animals every day. He said that Animal Control was damaged by a storm in May 2024 and still has not been repaired. Mr. Florence said he read in the paper that since 2019 taxes have increased 40 percent. He said he knows regular hard-working people paying \$500-\$600 a month just in taxes to live in Jasper County. Mr. Florence said he is not in favor of new taxes and doesn't remember the commissioners mentioning they were for tax increases when they ran for County Commissioner. He said citizens feel they pay enough in taxes and the commissioners need to do the hard job of looking into the budget again instead of taking the easy way out and adding a new tax. He said small increases over time become huge tax burdens for citizens.

Stephanie Puckett asked what the flat rate tax would cover. She said they already budgeted for a new ambulance and wanted to know why they are now trying to add a new tax to cover the cost. She asked if this tax would cover a pay increase for all paramedics current and future. Mrs. Puckett asked if the flat rate would be for all parcels or if someone could be exempt. She wanted to know why they were discussing adding a new tax for the hospital when there is already a hospital tax.

Chairman Henry and County Manager Mike Benton responded that the new tax is for staffing and operation only. It will not increase paramedic pay across the county. Chairman Henry said that if the tax is approved it would be per parcel with no exemptions. Chairman Henry said they are not adding a new hospital tax, they are simply looking at changing the hospital tax from a millage rate to a flat rate fee.

Jim Belcher spoke against the flat rate fee saying it would be an additional burden on the lower-income residents who are already struggling. He said citizens who own one acre should not pay the same as citizens who own 5,000 acres. Chairman Henry said he thought it was a

unique idea. Mr. Belcher said he doesn't think it is unique but sad to add to the struggle of lower-income citizens.

Commissioner Jernigan said he finds Mr. Belcher's point valid. He said the latest census shows that 12.9% of Jasper County lives in poverty. He said citizens who own more property can afford a higher fee than those already struggling. Chairman Henry said Commissioner Jernigan assumes they can afford a higher portion. Commissioner Jernigan replied well they bought the land, houses, cars, and boats. Commissioner Gray said so did the poor people. Commissioner Jernigan said not the ones living in poverty. Jason Bunn approached the podium and asked how many citizens who live in poverty own land. Chairman Henry stopped the discussion saying it was not an open conversation. Commissioner Gray said nobody wants a tax increase, but he thinks the flat rate fee is best because it ensures everyone pays a fair share. He said most citizens don't realize that people who own several parcels still pay a larger portion because it is per parcel.

Citizen Comments:

Mark Logan Thanked the County Commissioners for approving the third ambulance. He said the commissioners need to improve their budget process. The hospital should prove funding from the county is only used for the hospital. The hospital should break away from Primary Care and The Retreat if they receive money from the county. Mr. Logan said just a year ago the Commissioners kept bringing up ways to offer affordable housing in Jasper County but now the taxes are so high no house is affordable. He said the essential services should come first when budget planning. He said the third ambulance was necessary and should have taken priority over the hospital, Senior Center, or Recreation Department.

David Thompson said that he has heard the County Commissioners comment that the City of Monticello is not paying their fair share. He said they also commented the county should not fund projects for the city. Mr. Thompson said as a city resident he pays not only city taxes but also the same county rate as every other county resident. He said city residents help fund the County Sheriff Department, the County Fire/EMS, 911, the County Hospital, the County Landfill, the County Recreation Department, the Senior Center, county roads, and all other county services equally. He said the only parks in Jasper County are in the city limits but are open to all county residents. He said the city does not patrol the parks refusing to allow non-city residents to use them. He said the county commissioners need to be mindful not to exclude residents in the city. He said the City and the County are separate entities with issues that must be worked out, but the citizens should all be inclusive for county decisions.

Mary Patrick spoke about the 911 Authority Board. She said the county commissioners need to stop dragging their feet, they need a board that will make changes quickly. Mrs. Patrick stated that the current 911 Director is no different from the directors hired in the past. She said the

director does not work forty hours a week and comes and goes as she pleases. She said the director has caused stress and dissatisfaction among staff, yet the board has done nothing despite knowing the issues. Mrs. Patrick said the constant change in scheduling is confusing and hiring her friends and paying them several dollars more than other dispatchers, even ones who have been there for years, is wrong. She said the SOPs have changed and deputies are writing letters of concern for their safety due to rules being implemented. She said if EMS personnel have issues with the 911 director, you have a problem. Mrs. Patrick said it has even been questioned if the director is even EMA certified. Mrs. Patrick said three board members have resigned and the commissioners need to find new members who will make necessary changes to prevent more issues. She told the commissioners to speak with 911 employees affected by the situation but do so privately to protect their jobs. She said to speak with EMS and Deputies if they can speak freely about issues they are having. Mrs. Patrick ended by saying the commissioners need to be bold and take action.

Pat Will spoke to the commissioners about the JDA. He said that due to the current situation with a Newton County JDA member, now is the time for Commissioners from all counties to start requesting, or demanding, more information. He said they should compare the budget they approved with the year-end report. Mr. Will stated the Commissioners for each county should be looking at the budget, year-end report, actual expenses, and income received and know where the money is. He said he doesn't believe that what happened in Newton County could have been discovered by reviewing the reports but there are many questions surrounding the JDA. He said the Commissioner should be aware of everything going on with the JDA.

Stephanie Puckett spoke to the Commissioners about getting an address for her barn on Post Rd. She said she was told the only way to get an address was to have a home on the property. She said the lady in the County Commissioner's office told her that, and when she asked what to do if she had an emergency while working at their barn, she was told to give her map and parcel number. She said that if she is paying all the same taxes and fees for her property she wants an address for her barn. Mrs. Puckett also told Commissioner Gray that if he has a problem with the \$30000 given for Sands Dr. Park, he needs to take that up with Commissioner Pounds because the City of Monticello did not request the funds and most of the city residents did not want funds used for the parks. She said she pays through the nose for taxes as a city resident. Mrs. Puckett ended by saying she is for the flat rate fee for the ambulance she is not in favor of the funds going to the hospital.

Chris Florence signed up to speak but was no longer present when he was called.

Jason Bunn spoke about the budget and commissioners' spending. Mr. Bunn said the commissioners have got to get a handle on their spending. He said if they cannot afford to purchase items without increasing taxes they need to cut funds somewhere else or wait until funds are available. He said the federal government is out of control with spending and he doesn't want our county commissioners to follow the same bad habits. He said if there is a need

to purchase equipment, vehicles, or whatever, they should look at cutting costs with unnecessary spending to cover the cost of necessary items. He said in response to the comment made by a county commissioner “Well they bought the boat and the house”, the residents worked hard and bought those items before the county commissioners raised taxes so high that people could no longer afford those items. Mr. Bunn said the commissioners should pay attention to where the funds are going and what they are being used for. Mr. Bunn also said the county should not be giving funds to the hospital.

Cathy Benson asked why the county is supporting any non-profit. She said the county should only be using tax money for county needs not funding non-profit organizations.

Jim Belcher spoke about the Commissioners decision to add a flat rate fee for the ambulance. He said they are adding to the already heavy burden of those struggling. He said they just slipped in the flat rate fee for the hospital without adding it to the agenda. Chairman Henry responded it was not on the agenda but was open for discussion before the public hearing began and no rules had been broken. Mr. Belcher believes the commissioners are making it more expensive to live in Jasper County because they want to prevent a certain class of citizens from living here. He said the Commissioners need to be more diverse and compassionate.

Presentation/Delegations: None

County Commissioner Items & Updates:

Commissioner Pounds: Commissioner Pounds asked what is happening with the Rec board. She said other commissioners have said the county should do away with it. She asked why they should do away with the Rec board if they are not going to do the same with other boards. Commissioner Ledford said County Policy is members who miss three consecutive meetings should be removed from the board. Some members have too much on their plates Commissioner Pounds said. County Manager Mike Benton said he would get an update, so they could figure out if they need to restructure the board again.

Chairman Henry: Chairman Henry said he would like to remind everyone July 4th is Independence Day and we should be celebrating our independence.

Commissioner Jernigan: None

Commissioner Gray: None

Commissioner Ledford: Said he wanted to wish everyone a good Independence Day.

Business Items:

Business Item 1: Proposed FY 2025 Fire Rescue Supplemental Budget and Proposed 2024 Countywide Special District Fire Rescue Millage Rate

Chairman Henry called for a motion. Commissioner Ledford motioned to approve the flat rate fee of \$51.14 per tax bill. Commissioner Gray seconded for discussion. He said he doesn't like that the operational cost wasn't added to the Fire/EMS budget. Commissioner Gray said nobody likes additional taxes but when an average of 120 calls a month are being held something must be done. He said he realizes that some people will not understand until they are affected and at that point, they will be angry that the commissioners didn't add the third ambulance. Chairman Henry said they are trying to add the cost as a flat rate fee and adding it to the budget would mean changing it to a millage rate. Commissioner Gray said that they can't just start doing a flat rate fee and line item for every county agency and it just makes sense to add it to the Fire/ EMS budget. He said he would like it added to their budget next year. He stated line items also make it seem like you're being charged more. Chairman Henry called for a vote on the motion to approve the flat rate fee of \$51.14. Motion passed four to one Commissioner Jernigan opposed.

Chairman Henry discussed the hospital millage rate and converting it to a flat rate fee. He asked County manager Mike Benton if he had the number breakdown. Mr. Benton said the amount to be collected for the hospital based on the approved millage rate is \$460,000. He said if that amount is divided per parcel it would be \$43.94. Commissioner Ledford motioned to dissolve the millage rate and adopt a flat rate fee of \$43.94 per parcel to be collected for the hospital. Commissioner Gray seconded, motion passed unanimously.

- 2. Senior Center Parking Lot Grading and Paving Proposal:** The grading and paving bid submitted was \$104,000. Chairman Henry said they had hoped to get it approved before the work at the Sheriff's office was complete and maybe save some money. He said since that did not happen this is a new project and not additional work, so the cost is higher. Commissioner Gray asked if the work was necessary. Chairman Henry said the stormwater drainage must be fixed because water is running into the building. Commissioner Jernigan motioned to table until they put it out for bid with the bids being separate for the grading and the parking lot. Commissioner Ledford seconded, Motion passed unanimously.

- 3. Adopt Special District Fire Protection Fee for 2024 Tax Billing:** County Manager Mike Benton said this is a per-parcel fee to cover the cost of fire hydrants. Chairman Henry said as more people move into the area the county is collecting more than what is needed to cover that cost. Commissioner Ledford motioned to lower the fee from \$28.68 to \$20.50 per parcel. Commissioner Gray seconded, motion passed unanimously.

- 4. County Employees FY 2025 3% COLA Calculation Method:** County Manager Mike Benton gave a breakdown of the options for the 2025 3% COLA. He said one option is to provide all employees with a 3% increase the second option is to take the total approved payroll increase and divide it equally among every employee. He said a lot of math was involved, but Mr. Benton, the finance director, and the HR Director worked together to provide all the numbers for each option. Mr. Benton said that the flat rate would be an increase of \$1480 a year per employee, giving lower-paid employees a higher percentage. Commissioner Gray motioned to approve the flat rate increase of \$1480 a year per employee. Commissioner Ledford seconded, motion passed unanimously.

- 5. 911 Authority Board Restructuring:** Chairman Henry, Sabrina Westbrook, and County Attorney Adam Fleming gave the background of when and how the 911 Authority was developed. Chairman Henry said the county, the City of Monticello, and the City of Shady Dale funded the start-up of the 911 authority. Mr. Fleming said that the county assumed 100% financial responsibility due to the SDS agreement adopted in 1999. He said that all entities must agree to any changes made. Chairman Henry said they are considering restructuring the board from eleven members to five or seven members. He said eleven members is a lot. Chairman Henry said currently the board has five members appointed by the county, three appointed by the City of Monticello, and one appointed by the City of Shady Dale. Commissioner Jernigan suggested they change it to three for the county, one for Monticello, and one for Shady Dale. Chairman Henry said they might be able to make that work but would need representation from the county and both cities to continue. He said the board is also looking at changing some of its bylaws but has asked for permission to consult the County Attorney on a few matters. The board also asked about having the County finance department handle their payroll. 911 Authority member from Shady Dale Sabrina Westbrook was asked by Chairman Henry to speak to the board about a recent meeting they had. Mrs. Westbrook said that the City of Shady Dale wants representation and does not want to give up their spot on the board. She said the board was assembled as a resolution and could not be dissolved or changed without all parties agreeing to do so. Commissioner Gray said he feels that if the cities want to continue to have an equal say in how the board operates and who is appointed they should contribute financially. He said changing the size of the board doesn't help if the county is still absorbing all the financial burden. He said the county should just take over if they are going to be allowing the board to consult with the county attorney as well as have the county handle their payroll. Commissioner Ledford said that the main reason for restructuring is to get things at the 911 authority under control. He said several issues

need to be addressed sooner rather than later. Commissioner Ledford also asked about just making 911 operators county employees. Mrs. Westbrook said the board is aware of the issues and is working to handle things quickly. She said that the biggest reason for not making the operator county employees is because the ones already vested in their pension or receiving their benefits would lose their pension plan and the payout would only be 60% of their benefits. She said the retirement they currently offer is significantly better than what the county offers. Commissioner Ledford said if the 911 Authority is asking for the county to help with the County Attorney and payroll he sees no reason for them not to be county employees. He said that would also allow them to have support from the County HR as well. He said that would stop threats of being fired from the EMA director. Commissioner Ledford asked about doing a 5-member board with the Sheriff and EMS Director acting as advisors. Mrs. Westbrook said that had been discussed but Sherriff Pope and Chief Finch would both like a vote in decisions made. She said the reason they would like to continue to have a vote is because they are working the calls and the decisions made have a direct effect on their departments. Mrs. Westbrook said her personal preference is seven members if the Sheriff and Chief Finch are going to continue to serve as members. Chairman Henry suggested a five-member board including the Sheriff and EMS Director and the county appointing all members including one from the county and both cities. He said it was not received well by the City of Monticello representative. Commissioner Ledford suggested a work session with the County, the City of Monticello, and the City of Shady Dale. Chairman Henry said they need to invite all board members from the county and both cities but if everyone can't make it they should continue with the meeting if there is representation for all.

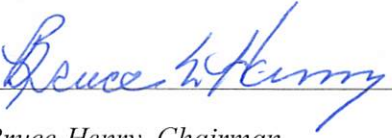
- 6. Schedule Work Sessions and Called Meetings:** Called meeting scheduled for July 12, 2024. Work Session is scheduled for July 29, 2024.

County Attorney Items: Addressed earlier in the meeting.

County Manager Update: County Manager Mike Benton gave an update on YTD and monthly building permits pulled. Mr. Benton also said he received confirmation from GDOT that they will provide 70 % of the cost for the repaving of Murder Creek Church Rd. He said the Jail project is near completion, they are working on planning for the ribbon cutting. Mr. Benton said the county had an open bid for a gravel road improvement bid that was to be funded by FEMA. He said he was very disappointed because there was not a single bid entered for the first time since he has worked for the county. Mr. Benton noted the project will be put back out for bid. The 2024 LMIG project has been delayed but will begin in July 2024. He said the GDOT also gave LRA funds for resurfacing Whip-Poor-Will Rd, Campbell Cross Rd, and County Line Rd. He said they are working on getting the bid. He spoke to the Medical Director for EMS operations Wiley Jordan and Robert Cumbie the Jasper Memorial Hospital Administrator to schedule a meeting to discuss what 911 situations the hospital can handle. Commissioner Gray asked about the progress being made in animal control. Mr. Benton said they are progressing and

almost fully recovered from the storm damage. He said he thinks they will be even better than before.

Adjourn: Commissioner Jernigan Motioned to adjourn at 8:03 p.m.
Commissioner Ledford seconded, motioned passed unanimously.


Bruce Henry, Chairman


Sheila Jefferson, Clerk