

# **JASPER COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

## **Work Session**

**Monday, October 21, 2024**

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

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

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

County Manager Mike Benton presented an option for the Employee Benefit plan. Mr. Benton said the retirement committee comprised Greg Williams, Lynn Bentley, Leann Airington, Larissa Ruark, Sheila Jefferson, and himself. He said they asked ACCG to do a cost study with the requested improvements. Mr. Benton said with the current plan employees put in 3% and the county puts in 6%. He said the committee recommended increasing the employee contribution by 5% to increase the benefit. He said the requested increase in employee contribution is because they are requesting an increase in benefits. He said they also recommended changing when employees are vested for new employees. He said that currently you are vested after four years of service but the committee has recommended increasing that to seven years of service. The committee has also requested an unreduced early retirement plan. Commissioner Ledford asked if the current retirement is mandatory. Mr. Benton said it is mandatory starting in January after the employee's second anniversary. He said the first two years do count towards service years but there is no contribution from the employee or the county during that time. Mr. Benton said they did not change the time frame for when the employee contribution starts. Commissioner Gray said he doesn't like the two-year time frame because in two years people forget and suddenly they are missing five percent of their paycheck. He said he thinks they should contribute from day one. Mr. Benton said a new cost study needs to be done because that would be a significant change. Commissioner Gray asked if there was a clause in the new option plan for revesting for it to be retroactive. He said we need to make sure we have the money when employees retire without it whipping out all available funds.

Commissioner Gray said they need to look into how that would work because they do not want to have several employees suddenly decide to retire and not have the money in the plan to pay them. Mr. Benton said they have to carefully request changes to ensure it does not violate the Safe Harbor Laws. Mr. Benton said they have made a recommendation to start new employees with a 401A plan instead of a pension plan. He said it would be a mandatory five percent contribution with a five percent county match. He said the 401A plan would offer up to a ten percent match. Chairman Henry said that is a better option and they need to see about offering that to all employees if a current employee wants to opt out of the pension plan and enter the 401A. Commissioner Ledford said he understands that sometimes people especially young people need help and guidance with planning for the future but he disagrees with forcing employees to contribute. He said it should be their choice because maybe they would prefer to invest their money elsewhere. He said just because they do not participate in the county plan does not mean they aren't saving for retirement. Mr. Benton said the pension program is not optional unless you are 65 or older. He said that the recommended five percent would help share the financial burden between the county and the employee.

Sheriff Donnie Pope said Butts County offers a zero percent employee contribution. Chairman Henry said that Jasper County cannot compete with some of the other counties. He asked about their health

insurance. Sheriff Pope said theirs and probably better than ours. Chairman Henry asked if he thought their employees paid less than \$15 per paycheck. Sheriff Pope said that is for the employee only the cost is much greater if they are adding a spouse or children. He said they have to compare apples to apples and look at all of it. He said what the county currently has is terrible. Chairman Henry said that is one thing they have to look at when comparing other counties not just retirement. Sheriff Pope told Chairman Henry not to be negative because it should be a positive matter. He said they need to move forward on this because what the county currently has is terrible. Chairman Henry said he was not being negative, he understands it needs some work. He said Sheriff Pope is throwing out what other counties do and the boards are trying to work off of the spreadsheets presented to them. Sheriff Pope said he is throwing out what other counties are doing because Jasper County is competing with the counties for employees. He said they have to keep what other counties are offering in mind to be able to maintain county employment. Chairman Henry said for the time being they have to work with what was presented and if they need to discuss other counties after the meeting they could. Mr. Benton said he has some information for some other counties to present at the appropriate time. Mr. Benton presented several options and gave a breakdown of each plan. He said he is hoping the Commissioners will rule out option 2A. He said that option is a little increase to the employee but a higher on their contribution. Commissioner Gray asked why they recommended a pre-taxed plan and not a ROTH option. Mrs. Bentley said that county governments are limited on options instead of a 401K our option would be 401A. She said ROTH has limited options for the government as well. Mr. Williams said that the biggest reason for the pre-taxed option was it would be a smaller paycheck deduction pre-payday and they are hoping to encourage program participation. Mrs. Bentley said this option is less beneficial when you retire. She said there are limited options for government-sponsored retirement. She said counties cannot offer 401K only 401A or 401B. Mr. Benton presented information from surrounding counties that responded to his request for information. He said that he needs more details and most of the counties around us have larger budgets. Mr. Benton said that he would like to have Greg Geist from ACCG come and present options to the board. He said David Bell is good, but he is new, and Greg would have more answers. Commissioner Gray said he would like to know what the Retirement committee recommended because they are county employees. Mr. Benton said it was split but the majority are in favor of improving the pension plan. He said they chose 1A as the best affordable option but 1B would be the preferred plan. Commissioner Gray said the price difference isn't that much and he feels it is best to compensate the employees who have put in their time. Mr. Benton said that would be wonderful. He said the additional cost' to the county is \$186,000. Mr. Benton said it's not a lot of money, but the county still must have the funds to cover the cost. He said the county has had an average revenue increase of roughly \$800,000 for the last three years. He said you do want to have new recurring revenue to cover the increase. Commissioner Gray said he is just thinking about employees who are getting ready to retire and he feels option 1A is a slap in the face to those employees. Mr. Williams said that if the board is looking to put the retirement issue to bed for good then 1A is the best option in his opinion. Commissioner Ledford said that he agrees with Mr. Williams if they decide to go with a pension plan, but he feels ROTH or 401A would benefit employees more. He said then employees can contribute more and get a better match. He said that we cannot compare to the countries around who have huge budgets. Sheriff Pope said they must look at employee contribution. He said our employees are already putting in three percent and with the recommendations made by the committee employees will essentially be asked to take a two percent pay cut. He said our hourly employee pay scale already doesn't compare to surrounding counties and now they will lose an additional two percent of that. Mr. Williams said the risk involved with each plan needs to be considered. He said with defined benefits the county takes all the risk but with defined contribution, the employee takes all the risk. Mr. Williams said the risk is greater with a defined contribution. Sheriff Pope said that as employers they should want to retain staff because that is beneficial to the county. He said that employees invested in the community are worth a lot and changing from 1.5 to 2 percent after twenty years gives an employee who has been with the county

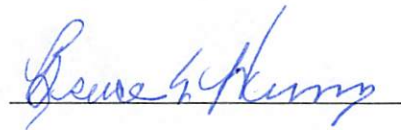
for seven years an incentive to stay. He said those employees are looking further down the road and define benefits as a reason to stay but define contributions they can take somewhere else. Commissioner Gray said it's important to look at all services tiers but five percent from both is still a better option. Mr. Benton said it is a lot to consider. Chairman Henry said they need to have more information and better numbers to compare to other counties. He said they would need salary health benefits, and retirement. He said they needed to give Mr. Benton a list of information they wanted him to research and move on to the next item of business. Commissioner Gray said counties are comparable in population and budget. Sheriff Pope said employee and employer contribution for surrounding counties. He said he was excited that the commissioners are looking at the retirement plan. He said it has taken years to get to this point. Commissioner Ledford said he would like to look at providers other than ACCG. Commissioner Gray said to ask the employees what they want. Chairman Henry said they need to move forward. Recreation director Keldrick Davis spoke to the board about improvements needed for the recreation department. Mr. Benton said this project will mean an increase in the annual budget for the recreation department. He said the Recreation Board recently had a meeting and Head High School Football Coach Ashley Henderson said he likes for the recreation department to play games at the high school. He said it is a great recruiting tool for the high school. Commissioner Ledford said they need more soccer, baseball, and softball fields. Mr. Benton said that he and Mr., Davis had a meeting and Mr. Davis said he needed a gymnasium.

Mr. Davis said he needs a gymnasium because he is one hundred percent dependent on the school facilities for basketball. Commissioner Ledford said he agrees that there is a need for the gym. he said the fields are in addition to that. Mr. Davis said the school superintendent is away willing to work with him but due to school activities, the facilities are not available until 6 or 7 p.m. Commissioner Ledford said the recreation office is old and they have needed a new one for a while. He asked what is the greatest need for the recreation department. Mr. Davis said the gymnasium. He said they need it for basketball games and practice. Commissioner Ledford asked what size court they were requesting. He said that a full-size adult court if done correctly can be split into two youth courts. Commissioner Gray said in the presented plan there are six classrooms. He asked what the intended use of those classrooms was.

Commissioner Ledford said one use would be for the 4-H students. Commissioner Jernigan said the idea was to allow clubs to use the classrooms for meetings. Chairman Henry said that it was designed to be used as a community building as well. Commissioner Ledford said that they need to be able to use it for emergencies. He said they had to be careful about how they labeled the facility because that would change the stipulations of the project. Commissioner Gray asked if the concessions in the design would be big enough. Commissioner Ledford said the design only shows concessions for the gym. He said they will continue to use the concessions currently there. Commissioner Gray asked if the conference room in the design was big enough. He said he is thinking about being able to use the facility for events. He said since they all agree to the project they need to start looking at the numbers. Mr. Benton said the numbers are just rough estimates that he believes are padded. Chairman Henry asked if they needed to add two more ball fields. He asked if they had plans to build on the other thinking of the lake. He said that he is trying to think of future growth. He suggested moving the gym to the other side of the lake and reserving the suggested location for future fields that may be needed. Mr. Benton said they are trying to reduce the cost of the project. Mr. Benton said they needed a professional to come in and answer questions and discuss options. Commissioner Ledford asked about including the cost of improving the road at the recreation department. Chairman Henry asked Mr. Benton to discuss the cost and funding. Mr. Benton went over the cost and revenue breakdown. He said the numbers in the packet are revenue projections from the Stanton Springs South project. He said they also have SPLOST funds and impact fees that can be used for this project. Mr. Benton said they are looking at twenty years of future funds from Stanton Springs. Mr. Benton explained how the

revenue bond would work to pay for this project. Mr. Benton said they are looking at ten million dollars for this project without taking away from general funds. He said they need to think about the construct type. He said he put options in the packet for them to review. He said they have to decide if they are willing to commit 85% percent of Stanton Springs South's revenue to this project for twenty years. He said that would be a 6.4million bond. He said they needed to start over with this project to get a more accurate estimate. Commissioner Gray told Mr. Davis to ask the directors from other counties to find out how many children from Jasper County are playing sports in other counties. He said he would like to see the numbers of how many people are paying to play in different countries. Chairman Henry asked for a review of planned items for the Work Session scheduled for October 28, 2024. Mr. Benton said they have two commissioner-lead items and one Planning and Zoning. Chairman Henry asked Commissioner Pounds about her request to add a discussion of Senate Bill 212 regarding the board of elections. Commissioner Pounds said she just had some questions.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:36 p.m.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Bruce Henry", written over a horizontal line.

Bruce Henry, Chairman

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Sheila Jefferson", written over a horizontal line.

Sheila Jefferson, Clerk