

Columbia County Board of County Commissioners  
**Joint Meeting with City**  
February 25, 2009

The Board of County Commissioners met in a scheduled meeting with the Lake City Council at City Hall at 6:00 p.m.

**In Attendance for the County:**

Commissioners: Stephen Bailey, Ronald Williams, Scarlet Frisina and Jody Dupree.  
Others: County Manager Dale Williams, County Attorney Marlin Feagle, Deputy Clerk Sandy Markham, and Asst. County Manager Lisa Roberts.  
Absent: Commissioner Dewey Weaver (Prior Engagement)

**In Attendance for the City:**

Council: George Ward, Jake Hill, Melinda Moses, and Eugene Jeffers.  
Others: Mayor Stephen Witt, Interim City Manager Dave Clanton, and Asst. City Clerk Audrey Sikes.

The meeting opened with prayer. The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America followed.

The City and the County are both faced with having to address issues that are, or will be coming, due to difficult economic times. The entities will need to keep an open dialogue and make every effort to assist the other when and where they are able. It was agreed that the worst case scenario would be if one or the other found themselves in a crisis in the midst of a budget year.

County Manager Williams gave an overview of Columbia County's 2008-2009 fiscal year budget. He discussed new and proposed legislation concerns relating to Medicaid and the Springs Bill. The City and County will report to the other if they learn of any legislation that could cause an impact to the budgets. The County Manager said that the State adopted its budget in July. Since the adoption, the state has announced three major revenue reductions. The County's current budget has \$6,000,000 dollars less in revenue than it did two years ago. The County anticipates another \$2,000,000 - \$3,000,000 decline of revenue in the 2009-2010 budget year. Further declines in the economy and low interest rate revenue is of great concern to the county.

The County Manager explained that the County has already begun to take some actions to address the financial concerns. An energy review has been conducted, a study to possibly combine EMS and fire, and a letter has been mailed to third party recipients putting them on

notice that they may not be receiving financial support from the county in the upcoming year. Additionally, there are plans to meet with the constitutional officers regarding the possibility of combining departments. The county is also interested in looking at possible interlocal agreements with the City.

The City advised that due to the economic downturn, they find themselves in a very similar situation as the County. They have already placed a freeze on jobs and have cut spending unless it is absolutely necessary. Each of the City's departments have been asked to submit a budget reflecting a ten percent cut. The City has a seminar for strategic planning scheduled for March 11<sup>th</sup>. The City will begin addressing the issues further after the seminar. Councilman Ward is concerned with the financial impact the City will face next year, and the upcoming year, with pension plans. The Councilman said he was extremely concerned as the stock market continues to do poorly.

Interim City Manager Dave Clanton gave an update on the Wastewater Expansion Project. They are still in the preliminary design stage and are moving forward with the public access extension. This will be done in phases as the City does not anticipate receiving any stimulus money.

The Board discussed tentative meeting dates for: May 26<sup>th</sup>, August 25<sup>th</sup> and November 24<sup>th</sup>.

There was a consensus that the City Manager and the County Manager should begin dialogue regarding interlocal agreements as soon as possible.

Commissioner Williams said that the IDA Director is negotiating with four businesses that may be interested in locating in Columbia County. Commissioner Williams expressed that if negotiations are successful, hopefully the city and county will work together to put together an enticing package for those companies. According to Commissioner Williams, former City Manager Scott Reynolds informed him that the City was facing up to a \$1,700,000 shortfall in the budget. Commissioner Williams asked if this is true and if so, how the City is addressing the shortfall. City's Finance Director Dorothy Tire replied that she believed that Mr. Reynolds was discussing tap and impact fees and special projects. She said that the bulk of that would be in tap and impact fees. She said that obviously if the city does not collect "that" money, it would not be able to do those projects. She clarified that there are some impact fees in the budget, but if they aren't collected that participating in the projects mentioned would not be possible. Mayor Witt said that the city would like to help, but it will have to be looked at on an individual basis as it arises. At this point it would be difficult for the City to commit to anything. The City said they may be able to contribute something toward an incentive package, but it is very unlikely that it would be a monetary contribution.

Commissioner Dupree said that it is likely that the state will eventually change the statute as it relates to "when a man goes to prison versus doing county [jail] time." This will impact the county since the Sheriff does not have the facility or the staff to accommodate that type of a change in the statutes. Commissioner Dupree said that it is important that projects be prioritized according to need. The Commissioner asked the city where they were at in this year's budget

and what they reasonably anticipated in next year's budget. Ms. Dorothy Tire responded that the City is pretty much in the same situation as the county in that they cannot be certain at this point and time. The Commissioner Dupree asked what it appears their shortfall may be. Ms. Tyre replied that she has not "looked at that." Mayor Witt reiterated that they would wait until the March 11<sup>th</sup> seminar on strategic planning to look at those numbers and possible scenarios.

Commissioner Dupree asked if he understood correctly, the city still needs to determine where they will be, financially speaking, as it relates to next year's budget. Ms. Tyre replied that his understanding was correct. The commissioner asked if the city anticipates having to make any changes with its core services. Ms. Tyre replied that the city has not gotten that far in their budget planning. Councilwoman Moses and Ms. Tyre said that the departments have been asked to submit budgets reflecting a 10% cut and that the city is beginning to "kick around" some thoughts as it relates to the budget issues, but the issues have not gone to a workshop to date.

A 911 update was given. Prospective directors have been interviewed. The Board of County Commissioner believes there are changes that need to be made to the proposed agreement, especially as it relates to the pensions. It was agreed that there would be more talks and meetings and that this matter would be resolved as soon as possible. Mayor Witt said they would review the proposed changes right away.

There was a brief conversation regarding the Ellisville Exit. Councilman Ward asked if there would be **CDBG** money available. The County Manager said that it is his understanding that there continues to be grant money available. It appears the County will be able to offer a business anything it has in the past except for money. The County has reason to believe that it may be able to receive at least \$1.6 million dollars in grant money to use for water at Ellisville. The sewer side has a different component and the County cannot apply for grant funds to address the sewer needs. The County would like to see the Greater Lake City Regional Utility take a look at the possibility of applying for grant money to address the sewer needs.

Commissioner Bailey asked if it would be possible for the Task Force to locate at the old Golden Age Project off of South Marion Street. The City responded that there are problems with the building, but using a section of City Hall may be a possibility.

The County told the City that downtown parking is an issue that has to be addressed. It will be very difficult for the County to remain downtown with insufficient parking. Commissioner Williams said that he believes that he has had more complaints regarding the parking issue than any other. Several in attendance mentioned that moving the Farmer's Market would be a big help as it relates to parking.

MOTION by Councilman Ward to authorize interim Chief of Police Gary Laxton to fill the position for an officer to enforce parking regulations. Second by Councilwoman Moses. The motion carried unanimously.

Commissioner Williams said there seems to be some conflicting statements as to whether the school system will altogether trim middle school sports from their budgets. Commissioner Williams said that he understands that coaching positions are going to become volunteer

positions. Councilwoman Moses said that she understands that the teams' will no longer be budgeted for transportation. There was a consensus that the City and County should obtain the Columbia County School System intentions, regarding middle school sports, in writing. Neither entity is prepared to take an influx of children into their recreational programs who are middle school ages.

Commissioner Williams said that the County isn't going to be in a position of being able to assist the City with recreation as they have in the past years. He said that in the past 16 months that the County has invested \$1.5 million dollars in recreation. All agreed that while there needs to be some cutbacks, they also cannot afford to let the children drop through the cracks. Commissioner Williams said that it is very likely that adult sports will no longer be subsidized.

Commissioner Williams said that at some point the City and the County need to put to rest the differences they have as it relates to the cost of providing EMS. Commissioner Williams said that he continues to have county residents ask him why they have to subsidize city residents by paying for their EMS. His position continues to be that it is reverse double taxation for county residents.

Commissioner Frisina asked for clarification on future meeting dates. The group decided that the upcoming meetings between the City and the County should be held: May 19, August 18 and November 17.

### **PUBLIC INPUT:**

Citizen Stewart Lilker offered for the record that he is not on the City's payroll. He asked how the City's new scanning system was working. Ms. Sikes responded, "Very efficiently."

Mr. Lilker said that he has never had anyone mention to him that there is a problem with the County providing the City with EMS.

Mr. Lilker asked if the City's offer to give the County the old City Hall building is still on the table. The City responded the offer is still on the table. Mr. Lilker said that it seems to him that the County is the only one who doesn't think this is a great offer. Commissioner Williams commented that if the City would provide a parking lot to go along with the building, the County could locate there.

Mr. Lilker said that the Ellisville Exit Project has been a fiasco from the start. The County Manager answered questions asked by Mr. Lilker by saying there are no cost overruns at this phase as it relates to the wells. The final cost to put water at the exit has not been determined. The wastewater cost was originally estimated to cost between \$5,000,000 and \$6,000,000. The City has always had the first right of refusal to manage and operate utilities in the Ellisville area.

Mr. Lilker said it has already been discussed that it will cost the taxpayers of Columbia County \$450,000 per year to subsidize the Ellisville utilities. He told the City and the County that incentives for businesses are nice, but many of the every day working people within the county are struggling to survive and that they do not need the extra burden of having to subsidize \$450,000.

Citizen James Montgomery thanked the City and County for setting up microphones at the meeting. He said the meeting seemed productive and that he would encourage them to continue with these type meetings. He encouraged them to tackle one issue at a time. He supports their investigating interlocal agreements, and concluded by reiterating that he believes consolidation would solve many of the financial problems both entities are faced with.

Sheriff Hunter reported that his transition into office has been good and that he appreciates the good working relationships. He said that he is looking forward to the 911 consolidation.

There was no further business. The meeting adjourned at 7:50 p.m.

ATTEST:  
P. DeWitt Cason

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Board of County Commissioners

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Clerk of Circuit Court