

MINUTES OF THE PUBLIC HEARING MEETING
OF THE BEN HILL COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
HELD ON DECEMBER 19, 2012 AT 6:00 PM IN THE
BEN HILL COUNTY COURTHOUSE ANNEX

Those present for the meeting were as follow:

Philip Jay III	Chairman
OD Netter	Vice-Chairman
Scott Downing	Commissioner
Bennie Calloway	Commissioner
Frank Feild	County Manager
Donna Lampkin	County Clerk

Commissioner Kathy Davis was absent.

Chairman Philip Jay III called the meeting to order.

Commissioner Bennie Calloway gave the invocation.

Everyone gave the Pledge of Allegiance.

Chairman Philip Jay gave an introduction explaining the purpose for the Public Hearing and instructions as to how the Public Hearing would proceed. He also stated the County Manager's job is to prepare and present a balanced budget to the Commission for their review and approval. They must insure the public has an opportunity to review and comment on the budget.

Tax Video

A video provided by Association County Commission Government was shown to the public explaining the Tax Assessor responsibility in calculating property taxes and how the calculations are done. The video also specified the responsibility of the Tax Commissioner as far as collecting the taxes and the County Commission.

Budget

Public Comments

Sheriff Bobby McLemore addressed the budget cuts for the Sheriff Department, Jail, and E911. He said he spent a lot of time and effort cutting the eight positions that he should not have cut to save this County money because he got penalized for the cuts. His budget was cut the same percentage as everyone else after he cut the eight positions and that is totally unacceptable. The positions are a Lieutenant Colonel, two Deputies, three Detention Officers, and two Communication Officers. The Sheriff read a letter that he had written and given a copy to each Commissioner. He ask the Commissioners to reinstate the \$318,555.00 that was cut from his budget or vote to amend his budget in September 2013 so that he would not run out of money to operate the Sheriff, Jail, and E911. He stated he cannot carry out his duties as Sheriff with this level of funding.

He also stated he is putting the Commissioners on notice that he would be back before the board requesting an amendment to his budgets in September 2013 and if the two parties could not work this out among themselves, he has no option but legal litigation in which he will pursue. He mentioned he has a team of attorneys on standby waiting for a call. He said he doesn't want to that and it would waste tax payers' money. He said he put over \$600,000.00 back into the General Fund up through November of this year and purchase all his equipment through his special accounts. He said he has already cut \$116,000.00 out of his budget; but he is still cut the same percentage as every other department.

Allen Conger addressed the Ben Hill Volunteer Fire Department budget cut. He mentioned the Volunteer Fire Department budget has been at \$49,000.00 since the year 2000 and they have worked with the County Manager every year to maintain that budget and gradually following behind in it. He stated they spent \$64,355.79 last year. The Fire Department raised \$8,355.79 through fundraising and collected \$7,000.00 in donations. He said this do not include the Christmas Dinner they are having tonight. He said if they added the \$2,500.00 for the Christmas Dinner and the \$5.00 for every fire they run to, they would have spent \$66,855.79. He is asking for the Commission to increase the Volunteer Fire Department budget to \$59,000.00. He stated there is no way they can continue to run the Volunteer Fire Department with proposed budget of \$43,636.00. He stated that would at least include closing one fire station. He mentioned \$43,636.00; they must at least be realistic. Setting some numbers that they know can't be met is foolish. He stated this budget is set for them to fail and for the Commissioners to fail too. He said he wanted to let them know if they keep the Volunteer Fire Department budget at \$49,000.00; they would have to decertify one station, if they choose to hold them to \$43,636.00; they would have to decertify two or three stations. He said if he has to decertify stations, he is obligated to let ISO and insurance know, they will contact the tax payers and their insurance will go up real high.

Volunteer Fire Department Fire Chief Sheldon Conger stated the cuts they are proposing are not feasible and they can't operate like that. He stated they are like the Sheriff; it is certain laws they have to abide by. He said he will not jeopardize his firemen's lives to save money.

Volunteer Fire Department Board Member Melody Hannah stated she has been on the board approximately 15 or 16 years and her husband has been a volunteer fireman since 1989. She said this is not just about going to fires; but this is about protecting their community. She stated all they want is money for their department.

Commissioner Downing ask Sheriff McLemore about the eight positions he cut and the \$264,000.00 savings from the cuts. Sheriff McLemore said he used the figures Jason Miller gave him on the insurance and retirement and that increased his budget again. He stated he has more employees eligible for retirement than last year because they have been employed for three years. Commissioner Downing ask the Sheriff how much does eight positions save counting everything that the County has to pay? The Sheriff answered \$264,000.00. The Sheriff stated his concerns are after he cut the positions; his budget was cut again, the same as every other department. Commissioner Downing stated he thought the Sheriff had already covered his part.

Vice-Chairman OD Netter asked the Sheriff how many employees will be added to retirement for next year? The Sheriff stated he didn't know; he used the totals Jason gave him. He also asked about the School Resource Officers. The Sheriff stated the School reimburses 100% for the School Resource Officers. The Commissioners continued to discuss the cuts and savings for the Sheriff Department, Jail, and E911. Vice-Chairman Netter suggested with the Sheriff get his figures, Administration get their figures, and meet with the auditor Pat Ashley to put everything in its proper place.

Vice-Chairman OD Netter stated they needed to address the Volunteer Fire Department because they are under contract with Ben Hill County. He stated at this point we don't have a contract; but we need a contract and it should reflect the amount of money the Volunteer Fire Department will receive from Ben Hill County, the number of fire stations in service, the number of volunteer firemen, and what services are provided. Also, Mr. Netter stated Ben Hill County wants a list of all the equipment that is owned by their corporation and a list that is owned by the County in the contract. Mr. Netter mentioned he understands they didn't get a chance to receive some of the benefits they would normally receive such as the Christmas Dinner; but our employees suffered the same thing. We didn't give them Christmas bonuses or turkeys at Thanksgiving.

Commissioner Scott Downing stated to Mr. Conger that we asked in the first contract for an inventory of the County equipment. He asked is there a reason why we can't seem to get the inventory list. Mr. Conger stated they can get the list from Jason Miller because he is the one who gave him a list the equipment. Jason stated that was the County's fixed assets inventory list given by the auditors. Mr. Conger stated they own everything except for the fire trucks unless you are counting the \$2000.00 they received for the pagers. Commissioners Downing asked Mr. Conger if they bought the hoses and turn out equipment he answered yes. Mr. Conger said they pay all expenses and insurances. Vice-Chairman Netter stated all that is should be part of the contract and this time it should be done right. He also said the auditors complain that Mr. Conger does not allow them to see their books; but it will be part of the contract. Mr. Conger stated that the County is not liable nor do they have any control over the Volunteer Fire Department. Commissioner Downing asked what the main problem with the auditors is. Vice-Chairman Netter stated they don't get to see the books.

Commissioner Downing asked Mr. Conger what else the Volunteer Fire Department has besides the pagers and the fire trucks that were paid with government funds. Mr. Conger stated they had received some grant funds. Chairman Jay asked Mr. Conger was the County Tax ID number used to get the grants. Mr. Conger stated the County ID was used on some grants; but now they have their own. He said it was cleared by the County for him to use the Tax ID number and everything they buy taxes are paid on it. Commissioner Downing stated some of the reasons the auditors want to see their books is because they have used the County Tax ID number and we don't have an inventory of that.

After further discussion, Vice-Chairman Netter suggested the Commission meet with the Volunteer Fire Department Board to discuss the contract and Mr. Conger agreed to do so. Commissioner Scott Downing stated it is important that we determine the value of what the tax payers are receiving and what does it take to provide the services needed. That way the money that is spent can be justified.

The meeting was adjourned.

Philip C. Jay III, Chairman

Donna R. Lampkin, County Clerk