



# *Board of Commissioners*

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## **THE STATE OF BEN HILL COUNTY IN 2016**

By Philip C. Jay, III, Chairman

The State of Ben Hill County in 2016 is sound; sound though not without difficulties. 2015 was a year that tested us in many ways. Yet a look at County Manager Frank Field's review in last week's Herald reveals significant progress and reasons to be confident that we will rise to challenges confronting Ben Hill County as well as county governments throughout Georgia during the most difficult economic times since the depression.

For readers interested in more detail, I will explore some of the significant struggles and subsequent triumphs of 2015. I will note several exciting developments that have occurred below the radar to date but expected to bear fruit this year. I will also serve notice on what must occur if we are to avoid a serious budgetary setback in 2016.

First I'd like to acknowledge the employees on whom the burden of a successful year weighs most heavily. They live and work during a time when governmental institutions at every level are subject to attack, justified and unjustified, by critics at both ends of the political spectrum. Irrespective of the way these political winds blow, the fact remains that without these often salary challenged public servants doing their jobs effectively, the quality of life we are all privileged to enjoy would be severely compromised.

Regardless of the capacity in which county employees serve: environmental management, economic development, public works, recreation, health and human services, fire protection, animal control, transportation, crisis management, maintenance of roads and bridges, elections, tax assessment, tax collection, court services, emergency services, E-911, jail administration and law enforcement, each employee serves and protects the public interest. On any given day their ongoing dedication and commitment deserves the commission's recognition and respect as well as the recognition and respect of those who depend on and benefit from their service.

With regard to the major accomplishments in 2015, The Greater Ben Hill County 2031 Comprehensive Plan is at the top of my list. The comprehensive plan presented a timely opportunity for local governments to embrace public concerns and resolve confusion concerning the variety of roles each one plays in the lives of citizens.

Together we accomplished those objectives. Documented evidence of our success is available on the county's website. (<http://benhillcounty.com/fyi.htm>) This completed document serves as a comprehensive source of information about anything of significance to local governments. It is a manual by which future administrations can be guided for the next 15 years as well as a reference for citizens interested in participating in government affairs.

Credit for this monumental outcome goes to County Manager Frank Feild and Deputy City Administrator Cam Jordan. The expertise they brought to the table in producing such a mammoth but still user friendly tome is matched only by the time and energy they dedicated to this accomplishment. Their partnership is conclusive evidence of the county and city working well together on common goals.

The area of the plan that received the most attention appropriately reflected the public's frequently expressed concerns about our prospects in the economic development arena. Scores of meetings and numerous hearings eventually resulted in a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities for the numerous boards and authorities committed to the creation and retention of employers in Ben Hill County.

To this end, the plan specified that a position be established as Economic Development Coordinator for Ben Hill County. This position was tasked with fostering communication, collaboration, and leveraging of resources among all economic development entities to include: The Fitzgerald Ben Hill Development Authority (FBHDA), the Ben Hill Development Authority (BHCDA), the Ben Hill Irwin Development Authority, the Downtown Development Authority, the Tourism Department, the Fitzgerald Ben Hill Arts Council and other relevant activities conducted by the city and county.

This position has been created and its duties assigned to the new Executive Director of the FBHDA, Jason Dunn. As the point of Fitzgerald's and Ben Hill County's economic spear, he has hit the ground running to establish working relationships with all the above named economic development engines as well as businesses and industries.

As an accomplished son of Ben Hill County who has been welcomed home by friends from all corners of the county, Jason's social network precluded having to get to know our community. His engaging personality and enthusiasm for meeting the challenges before us is a major factor in my optimism in believing our economic future is bright.

While the plan provides answers clearing up the aforementioned confusion locally as well as up to and including state bureaucracies, its terms have to be translated into reality on the ground to be effective. "Plans are worthless", Winston Churchill once remarked, but planning is essential."

Jason is a professional who, I believe, will work tirelessly to insure that our comprehensive plan does not lie dormant on a shelf. Like Churchill, he understands that the word "plan" is not only a noun but also a verb; a word that demands action oriented attention to ever changing circumstances.

I've taken great personal comfort in recent months in feeling the same boundless enthusiasm and determination with Jason that I remember with the triad of economic developers on whose shoulders we all stand: Gerald Thompson, David Sims and the man I knew as Papa Jay. Leaving decisions up to political was never their style but, in the case of Jason Dunn, I can hear Papa Jay saying "Son, not to worry, that Dunn fellow's going to work out just fine".

Consequently, I asked Jason to share his experiences since arriving and his assessment of the economic State of Ben Hill County in 2016:

*"Upon assuming the role of Director for the Fitzgerald Ben Hill Development Authority in September 2015, I was quickly encouraged by the seriousness in which the residents of this community were showing towards Fitzgerald and Ben Hill County's economic future."*

*"Just as encouraging has been the welcome that my family and I have received from the community. You can go home again, and yes, it does feel good."*

*"Like other communities in South Georgia that have "resized" and suffered from the effects of The Great Recession, our community has begun showing signs of economic recovery.*

*Expansion of local industry is becoming common place. Local industry leaders such as GBW Railcar Services, Southern Veneer, and Covered Wagon each had major expansions this past year that has led to newer facilities and increased employment. As 2016, moves forward, the promise of additional successes and growth are in place."*

*"Let me also say that the fact that we as a community are working together as a single unit to achieve goals of common interest has been quite the experience. It too holds a lot of promise. Granted, the process will take time, hard work, and contribution from all, yet the task has the promise of reward or revitalizing the community as a stronghold in our region."*

Quality of life issues and opportunities are referenced throughout the Comprehensive Plan and viewed as a critical factor in attracting economic opportunities. Regardless of the naysayers' constant refrain of "nothing is happening here", the fact remains Ben Hill County is brimming with quality of life opportunities envied by other counties."

The Arts Council immediately comes to mind. It has played a pivotal role historically in creating and sustaining reasons through which tourists can see Fitzgerald and Ben Hill County as a desirable destination and an opening for those currently living here to appreciate their hometown. Anyone who visits their website at <http://www.fitzgeraldbenhillartscouncil.org/> or participates in a local event and disagrees with my assessment is in denial!

The Arts, a key to economic prosperity? Listen to Brandy Elrod: "A community that is culturally enriched is much more appealing to anyone looking at our community for a number of reasons. Capturing the interest of young professionals requires a community that is vibrant and rich in culture. Art studios are places conducive to thinking creatively. They generate groups of people that come up with creative solutions; incubators for fostering imagination and further growth."

Brandy's thoughts are backed up by hard facts. According to The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), the arts and culture sector represented 4.32 % or \$698.7 billion of the gross domestic product (GDP). Transportation was 2.7% and construction 3.4%. Nationally 702,771 businesses are involved in the creation or distribution of the arts, employing 2.9 million people.

Of particular interest to me is an article in the June 2015 edition of Georgia's Cities. It documents over 300 cities that have created cultural districts to foster the economic viability of their downtown. The data justifies cultural districts as well recognized, mixed-use areas of a city in which a concentration of cultural facilities serves as the anchor of attraction and robust economic activity.

We have an opportune opportunity to create a cultural district displayed in Clarke Stencil's *Fitzgerald Civic Corridor*. Clarke is a UGA School of Landscaping student who volunteered to demonstrate how areas throughout the city could be transformed from stereotypical small town rural locations to engaging artistic settings that welcome visitors and locals alike. The work done

by Clarke is for me conclusive proof in favor of an affirmative answer in favor of a cultural district. The low cost landscaping he designed for us really has to be seen to be believed. (<http://benhillcounty.com/fyi.htm>)

For purposes of this address, I'll focus on the block that includes the Carnegie, the Federal Building, and the Masonic Hall. The Carnegie is already a center of art activities worthy of the cultural district concept. In fact, the Art Council's need for more exhibit space, classrooms, studio space, and storage grows further beyond The Carnegie's capacity each year.

The Federal Building is being remodeled with these needs in mind. It is a unique structure with a centralized location and a history of public service. As a multipurpose community facility it also has the potential to feature the Rochfort Collection of Historic Clothing, the African Arts Collection and items from the set of the time travel segment of the cooking show currently under development on East Pine Street as well as other future endeavors by local artistic entrepreneurs.

Another possibility for the Arts Council to grow into is the Masonic Hall. It is being offered for sale by the Masons. Given that SPLOST dollars are already in place for an elevator in the Carnegie, a crosswalk could be built connecting the upper floors of the Carnegie and the Masonic Hall effectively doubling the accessible floor space in both buildings. Funding to make a credible offer on the Masonic Hall is currently available through SPLOST dollars recently declared surplus by the Fitzgerald Ben Hill Development Authority. Delays in making this purchase leaves the door open to this historically significant asset being purchased by commercial interests that could easily conflict with the idea of a cultural district.

Another area that bodes well for the cultural future of our community is the "East Pine Street Studios" Project. It is a prime example of the ability of public/private partnerships to effect redevelopment, economic opportunity, community branding, tourism, marketing and a host of other positive outcomes for our community.

This partnership between Bill and Sue Rochfort, the Downtown Development Authority, the Fitzgerald Civic Corporation, the Convention & Visitors Bureau, as well as the City and County resulting in the renovation of at least nine previously impoverished downtown buildings, new public space, at least fifteen new full time jobs, and a major tourism attraction – featuring a restaurant, beer garden, coffee bar, retail store, thirteen different time period TV sets, and live broadcast of a national TV show available to 13.5 million households with a confirmed customer base of nearly 25,000.

Ads have been running twice daily on the MARKET Channel – DISH 221 – for several months prominently featuring our community and touting the show's move to Fitzgerald. The Rochfort's organization will further partner with the CVB and Fitzgerald Tourism in developing the master tourism plan called for in the Comprehensive Plan. Peripheral projects are already growing from this relationship portending future jobs in other arenas.

Yet another reason for visitors to see our community as a destination that's been relentlessly debated by various boards and governments since I became chairman has been resolved. The way was recently paved for the construction of a new competitive swimming pool along with new offices for the Department of Leisure Services (DLS) and renovation of the Jessamine Street gym. Anyone familiar with swim meets and athletic tournament activities is aware of the large number of the visitors they attract. Ditto, the dollars they spend while here. Locating these attractions as well as badly needed new offices for DLS in a centralized, accessible location is an added bonus.

In the beginning of this address I mentioned difficulties needing to be surmounted. Avoiding a tax increase without depleting the county's fund balance is that to which I was referring.

As chairman, I'm confident that the budgets under the county manager's control as well as those of the constitutional officers who work with him can be managed in a way that avoids this tax increase. Sheriff McLemore, unfortunately does not fall into either category.

Over the last 10 years, disregarding the commission's recommendations, the Sheriff's budget (40% of the entire General Fund) has increased by \$637,499; a 25% increase during years referred to as the Great Recession. The Sheriff employs around 60 people, almost half the county government's entire workforce. This increase corresponds to roughly 2 mills of revenue that have been absorbed in previous years by other county departments to accommodate the Sheriff's demands and avoid a substantial increase in taxes for property owners.

Over the same 10-year period, working with Frank Feild, other Constitutional Officers have held the line on their budgets despite ever increasing expenses: Clerk of the Court \$7,057, a 2% increase; Tax Commissioner \$8,684, 4%; Probate Judge \$6,675, 5%. These officers have worked diligently to contain all but essential costs. As with employees managed by the county, their employees have also not received a cost of living raise (COLA) in eight years. The Commission is grateful to each of these Constitutional Officers for their responsible stewardship of taxpayer's dollars.

Under the capable administration of Mark Shealy, Emergency Medical Services (EMS) has the 2nd largest budget (\$1,390,039) below the Sheriff. Generated revenues amounting to \$1,119,841 however reduce the expense of doing business to \$270,198 for emergency services which used to cost taxpayers a million dollars a year.

Being open 24/7/365 with five thousand calls a year speaks to the intensity of Mark and his staff's workload providing Advanced Life Support (ALS) in mobile emergency rooms within minutes from anywhere in Ben Hill County. Anyone with a personal experience of EMS's life saving skills while racing to a critical care center 60 miles away will understand \$270,198 is a bargain.

The Road Department has the next largest budget at \$1,118,487 or 12% of the General Fund. By working with the commission, Tim Kegebein's increase over the same 10-year period was kept at \$79,749 or 8%. Keeping his expenses down to 1998 levels, Tim runs one of the tightest, most productive road shops in Georgia and deserves commendation by every taxpayer in Ben Hill County.

The percentages of the Sheriff's budget increases over the last decade are, at a minimum, three times more than any other budget. Attempts to work with the Sheriff to reduce his budget have been met with little more than contempt and continuing threats to sue the commission. His bottom line has continued to grow in a manner that's grossly disproportionate to other county budgets, a fact which brings into question the effectiveness of his frequent claims of cuts, staff reductions, layoffs, furloughs, etc.

A case was recently made that the Sheriff's budget is also excessive when compared to other counties of comparable size and population. For example, in 2014, using the latest audit figures, Ben Hill County spent \$143,888 more on law enforcement than the average spent in 3 similar counties; \$167,396 more on the jail, while generating \$44,222 less in fines and forfeitures. These expenditures together amount to \$311,284 or almost half of the \$637,499 increase noted above.

Having run out of other options, I am turning to taxpayers with this address for help in avoiding a budget crisis. If the sheriff can be persuaded by voters to reduce his budget to what it took comparable counties to operate in 2014, Frank Field will keep the General Fund in the black in 2016.

A long term solution to this conundrum is one of my reasons for promoting a study by UGA's Carl Vinson Institute of Government (CVIG) of consolidation of city and county governments. As a rare county with only one city, this study need not be prohibitively expensive; plus, it would provide answers to public questions in definitive terms about increased efficiency and cost savings.

The Comprehensive Plan suggests that functional consolidation also needs to be explored. This would be accomplished in the suggested study. Historically the success of current joint services (Airport, Library, Recreation (DLS), Humane Society, Grand Conference Center, Grand Theater and Economic Development (FBHDA) suggests we continue in this direction. During 2015 the city and county consolidated Code Enforcement and Animal Control with dramatic improvements in efficiency and anticipated fiscal savings.

A CVIG assisted study of consolidation of the city's and county's law enforcement as well as the administration of the jail is, in my opinion, clearly justified. This would lead to increases the efficiency of services and, in the long term, lower their costs. An example of excess and potential savings? Does it make sense for taxpayers to be paying insurance on 48 vehicles for the Sheriff? When combined with the city's vehicles, would law enforcement actually require 73 vehicles to effectively serve and protect all of the citizens within the county's borders?

I began this address by recognizing the value of Ben Hill County's employees. I'll begin to conclude by singling out the two for whom the commission is responsible in hiring: County Manager Frank Field and County Clerk Donna Prather. Frank brings a level of expertise and experience to the county's table that is unequalled in counties throughout Georgia. Together with Donna's able assistance concerns with the ever increasing complexity of county government are managed in ways that multiple problems are avoided and progressive opportunities rarely missed. As a team they were responsible for bringing Ben Hill County's budget back from the brink several years ago. I have every confidence they will play a definitive role in resolving the difficulties anticipated above in 2016.

Lastly, I'd like to pay tribute to my fellow commissioners. As a commission and as commissioners, we are also occasionally subject to harsh criticism, even vicious attacks, in public and privately. The internet is often aflame with vitriolic remarks that seem designed to inflate a writer's ego rather than serve a common good. While far less hyperbolic and serving a higher purpose, reaching for the newspaper each week still requires more nerve than good sense if one wishes a quiet evening alone with one's own thoughts.

The commission is a vivacious group of individuals with very different backgrounds and histories; each zealously committed to representing the interests of their constituents. As chairman I can always count on each commissioner to vigorously represent their views. Yes, commission meetings at times may challenge one's (and one's constituents') faith in government. But in the end, however, I've learned I can also count on compromise eventually prevailing in favor of actively deliberated actions that serve the best interests of Ben Hill County. For me, this is democracy in action; meetings absent passionate debate and willingness to compromise, not so much.

I'll end this address by recognizing a retiring commissioner who deserves special mention: O.D.

Netter, Jr.; a man of color who entered the political fray at a time when this required both courage and patience. For 23 years he has served meritoriously as Commissioner and Vice Chairman of the Ben Hill County Commission. His accomplishments over this record setting tenure was summarized in last week's paper so I'll just acknowledge the honor he brought to Ben Hill County in every state and national position he held. His progressive mark on our state and community will not soon be forgotten.

The fact that my relationship with him was often contentious is no secret. O.D.'s talent for parliamentary chicanery made meetings difficult for every chairman he served under but his intellect, experience with and knowledge of county government trumped by far any discomfort we had to endure. Beyond continuing to appreciate our hard won and frequently tested friendship, I will remember him in the light of Teddy Roosevelt's words: *"As a man who knew it is far better to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even when checkered by failure... than to rank with those poor souls who neither enjoy nor suffer much, because they live in a grey twilight that knows not victory nor defeat."*