

Special Called Board of Supervisors Meeting (Thursday, June 1, 2023)
Northumberland County, Virginia

Members present:

James M. Long, Richard F. Haynie, Thomas H. Tomlin, James W. Brann

Absent:

Ronald L. Jett

Other Staff Present:

Mr. Luttrell Tadlock, County Administrator

Mr. Drew Basye, Assistant County Administrator

Ms. Morgan Wilson, Executive Assistant

Mr. Robert Headley, IT Administrator

Mr. Matthew Bailey, IT Assistant

1. Opening of Meeting

Information: A. Call to Order

The special called meeting was convened by Chairman Haynie and held at the Northumberland Courthouse located at 220 Judicial Place, Heathsville, VA 22473.

Chairman Haynie requested a moment of silence for Mr. Keith Lewis and Mr. Taylor Hayden.

2. Public Hearing 7:00 p.m.

County Administrator Tadlock explained that the County budget for fiscal year 2024 totals \$53,451,771 and currently reflects a 14-cent tax increase on real-estate. Mr. Tadlock notified the public that there will be no action taken on this matter tonight because the Board is required by state code to wait seven days after the public hearing before voting on the budget.

Discussion, Information: A. The public hearing is being held pursuant to Section 15.2-2506 of the Code of Virginia, 1950 as amended, allowing the public to question and comment on the proposed County budget. This proposed budget reflects a \$0.14 increase in the current real estate tax rate.

Public Hearing Open.

Mr. Maurice Johnson shared his concerns about the upcoming property assessment having the potential to increase citizens' tax bills. Mr. Johnson then listed some expenditures related to the school system that play a role in the tax increase. His recommendation to the Board is to freeze the education budget at FY22 numbers and perform/publicize a forensic examination of the School Board's books.

Mrs. Cheryl Johnson explained that an increase in real estate taxes affects homeowners, businessowners, local establishments, and the entire community. Mrs. Johnson added that the tax increase will cause high inflation as well as drive residents away from the County.

Mr. Jim Penney reminded the audience that a few weeks ago he came to the Board to explain that the Northumberland County Public School per pupil expenditure report was not available to the public by April 1, 2023, as required by state code. He explained to the Board that he contacted Dr. Wargo, who referred him to Mrs. Booth, and roughly two weeks later the report was provided to him. Based on the report, 1170 students are projected for next year based on the school's average daily membership (ADM). Mr. Penney shared his frustration that the projected number of students correlates to a cost of \$19,997 per student. He went on to ask the Board how many "out of County" students are the taxpayers paying for and how much is given back to the County from other counties or the parents of those students. Mr. Penney was unable to locate a line item in the report that addresses this concern.

Mr. Bob Kane stated that he stands in opposition of the FY24 draft budget that requires a 23% tax increase because it is highly inflationary and unjustified.

Mr. Robert Haas questioned where this year's increases are coming from because he couldn't find any justification for it. Mr. Haas then asked why the undesignated fund was being increased by \$1M when the average is kept at 5-10%.

Mr. A.R. Campbell believes the current proposed tax increase of 14 cents is way beyond excessive and listed percentage increases in each category. Mr. Campbell asked how the government administration percentage increase can be so high in comparison to education.

Mr. Roland Rice asked why taxes increase every so often.

Mr. Phil Gates understands the need for taxes but doesn't understand why general administration needs a greater increase than the judicial administration.

Mr. Bruce Craig informed the public that Lancaster County does not plan to increase its property tax rate, however that is in part due to collecting taxes on meals, cigarettes, and lodging. The Board was invited to join the other Northern Neck counties in collecting cigarette tax several years ago but chose not to do so. Mr. Craig believes there has been no consideration of meals tax in the County and shared his frustration of the County not collecting lodging taxes while other jurisdictions collect up to eight percent. While some increases may be unavoidable, Mr. Craig urged the board to find new sources of income such as these mentioned that are less burdensome to the residents.

Mr. Glenn Haynie emphasized there is not enough industry in the County to help support a revenue income on the taxes proposed.

Mrs. Shay Haynie expressed her concern with spending roughly \$20,000 per student because the average cost per student in Virginia is \$12,800 and the National average is \$16,500. Mrs.

Haynie also asked why the money coming in and the money being spent isn't itemized for the public to see.

Mr. Jim Dise believes that throwing money at schools doesn't give you better students or better results. Mr. Dise also stated that he is unable to locate the school's audit on their website.

Mr. Allen Haynie stated the tax increase is going to make life harder for a lot of people. Mr. Haynie suggested looking for another source of income.

Mrs. Eileen Serafin stated that hearing the school numbers is alarming. She made the Board aware that she currently pays \$13,500 to an independent private school in Irvington. Her observations tonight have led her to believe that the issues in the County are lack of transparency, accountability, and justification.

Mr. Bill Graves believes it's time to give back to the community.

Mr. George Habib granted his comment time to Mr. Maurice Johnson. Mr. Johnson addressed concerns about percentage increases in several categories. He believes that the public needs to look at the actual dollar amounts because ultimately that is what they will be paying.

Mr. David Jennings thanked the teachers in the County and applauded them for a job well done. Mr. Jennings stated that the economy in the County is depressed, and it is believed to just get worse over time. Mr. Jennings believes the tax burden will force people out of the County, but instead, efforts should be made to invite the children to stay in the County after graduation.

Ms. Rosalie Coultrip stated that the area doesn't have much to offer the youth when they graduate from high school. Ms. Coultrip expressed her opposition to the large tax increase because it puts a burden on those who sacrifice higher paying employment to stay here.

Mr. Mike Bryson would like to know how much money the County receives and where it goes every year.

Mrs. Dorothy Paul questioned the timeline of all points broadband, the Virginia state lottery money provided to the schools, and the large tax increase.

Mr. David Heath asked what expenditures the Board is going to cut.

Mr. Grabus understands the County is suffering from expenses, just like everyone else, but he wants to see the Board make cuts from the budget.

Mrs. Joanne Gills appreciates everyone involved with education in the County but believes the County simply can't afford what the students are worth.

Mr. Luebker is concerned with the tax increase and gave a scenario that the County is offering less service although the citizens are paying more.

Ms. Lorraine Smith stated that in 1988 the property taxes were low, and the community was a really nice place to live in. She emphasized that the County needs to allow businesses to come in so children can stay nearby and stay out of trouble. Ms. Smith shared her concern that taxes continue to increase but the citizens aren't getting anything in return.

Ms. Kathy Elsdon asked if there was anything the citizens/organizations could do to help the Board manage the budget.

Mr. Dave Conlan believes this may be more of an issue of Economic Development and finding other solutions to bolster the economy in the County. Mr. Conlan also recognizes the challenges of this process but urged the Board to hire a third-party auditor to identify the issues occurring upstream.

Mrs. Lynn Stuart reiterated the citizens' concerns about the lack of transparency in the school system.

Mrs. Shelby Brooks stated that the School Division is the second largest employer in the County next to Omega Protein. She expects a tax increase because she understands that if it's costing her more to live, it's costing the County more to get things done. She stated that she has not seen much economic developmental growth in the County, and she has even had to send teachers out of the County for living opportunities. Mrs. Brooks concluded her statements by emphasizing this is a county issue and not just a school issue.

Mrs. Karen Pica has a PhD and offered her time to help go through details in the budget.

Mr. Gary Dickens believes that he has many students that would thrive in technical work if the County offered it, but he has to tell students to go elsewhere for a decent paying job. Mr. Dickens urged the Board to look for economic development opportunities so we can keep the best and brightest here in Northumberland County.

Dr. Crockett expressed her concern about the lack of resources that address mental health in the County.

Mr. Lance Marston believes the citizens need a good examination of how the County budgets. Mr. Marston suggested the Board form a citizens' advisory group made up of those with budget experience.

Public Hearing Closed.

Supervisor Brann and Supervisor Tomlin announced that they were not going to vote for a 23% tax increase.

Chairman Haynie added that he also won't vote for a 23% tax increase and that the Board plans to make some cuts to the expenditures.

3. Closing of Meeting

Action: A. Adjournment

Motion to adjourn.

Motion by: Thomas H. Tomlin, second by: James W. Brann.

Final Resolution: Motion Carried

Aye: James M. Long, Richard F. Haynie, Thomas H. Tomlin, James W. Brann