

# CHEROKEE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

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## Pre-meeting Work Session

**JUNE 21, 2011**

**3:00 p.m.**

**Cherokee Hall**

### **Minutes**

Chairman Ahrens opened the Work Session at 3:05 p.m. saying he would skip the motivational reading as there was a lot of things to cover. All members were present. Chairman Ahrens asked Jannine Miller, Executive Director for GRTA to come up and introduce those with her.

#### **1. Presentation by GRTA staff**

Jannine introduced Jim Ritchey, who is the Director for the *Xpress* Bus Service and Ned Markham, who is the Governmental Affairs Officer for GRTA. She then began the PowerPoint presentation saying that the first slide illustrates how the *Xpress* Service can save on infrastructure costs, by showing on the left a typical auto filled portion of the highway and on the right what can happen when a majority of those single occupant cars are left behind by the drivers using the *Xpress* Service, Marta, Cobb County Transit etc. Next was a slide showing the system coverage map running all the way from Canton to Newnan and McDonough in the south. This also showed routes as far west as west Douglas County and east to Rockdale County.

The next slides gave a FY2010 Annual Boarding number of 2.1 million and Annual Passenger Miles as 50.4 million; then results of a satisfaction survey of the ridership done in Spring 2010 showed a 52% satisfaction level. A graph showed how riders had increased from the beginning in early 2005 and ramps up to the 2008 period demonstrating a high mark when gas prices were at \$4 a gallon; however when gas prices went down and unemployment went up, the ridership stayed consistent.

Jannine said she was going to pause for a minute and tell how *Xpress* got started. Around the region, eleven counties started the service with an up-front payment of \$20 million dollars in exchange for \$260 million dollars of GEO Bond Funds. In 2007, *Xpress* service began in Cherokee County with a \$500,000 investment and this has been extended to this year. The next slide will show how *Xpress* service has grown in ridership on Routes 490 and 491.

Jannine presented a slide that she said was the reason for the workshops showing the current state of *Xpress* operations. She said all the county funds will expire at some point in FY2012, as will the State General Fund appropriation. They are looking at a 2 year budget gap with nothing left to keep the service rolling. What they are hoping is that the Regional Transportation Tax is approved by the voters and they will be able to continue providing the service, with appropriate funding beginning in 2014.

Governor Deal and the General Assembly has included funds in the FY2012 budget to keep them rolling for the next year; they were urged to go talk to the counties for support of the second gap year. The fiscal 2013 budget is very unclear; in presenting this workshop to the counties, GDOT and so on, they have only received positive feedback. GRTA is evaluating distribution methods and working with the staff of all the counties to determine what might be the most equitable.

Jim Ritchey came up and briefly explained future activity for Cherokee County *Xpress* Services. Then he asked for any questions. When there were no questions regarding the service areas, Jannine came back up to answer questions from the Chairman and Commissioner Johnston. After a short period of time, she thanked the board for having them today and the Chairman thanked them for coming.

The Chairman said he was going to transition from this into the summary on the telephone town hall meeting.

## **2. Summary of telephone town hall 'meeting' re transportation – Chairman**

The Chairman asked if anyone present had received one of the calls on Tuesday, June 14 after 6 p.m.; no one raised their hand in the Hall. Commissioner Johnston said that they had received one at home, but were not available at the time. The Chairman said that he, Mayor Downey and Geoff Morton had went to the ARC Main office for their time period of 6 to 7 p.m. that night. There were 48,000 households called in Cherokee County and 7,000 who actually participated out of that number.

## **3. A review of per capita County taxes and spending in 10-county ARC-Metro Atlanta Region – Jerry Cooper**

Chairman Ahrens asked Mr. Cooper to come up next for his presentation. Mr. Cooper began by saying he had done this study based on the 10-county ARC-Metro Atlanta Region and including Forsyth County, considering their announcement that they have the lowest property tax rates in the region.

The categories he would discuss are taxes and government spending; agency and department comparisons; impacts/efficiencies and unique selling points. Overall the property tax rates are 12.6% lower today than in 1996. In looking at comparisons, Cherokee County has the second lowest tax burden in the region. Cherokee County has the second lowest governmental spending per capita in the region.

Mr. Cooper finished up speaking about the "Transparency Page" and what information would be available to the public within the next couple of weeks on the page.

**4. Summary of employee suggestions re efficiencies, budget, etc  
BOC – Chairman**

Chairman Ahrens said on May 23<sup>rd</sup> he had sent a letter out to all employees asking for their thoughts and ideas of how to generate more revenues, how to operate more efficiently with less cost, helping to identify specific areas where costs can be reduced? Overall, he believed there had been a good response with mostly a positive spin. The range of responses was quite broad and he wanted to share some of those this afternoon. The Chairman said it was very clear that some of the employees and certainly some of the citizens as well don't understand the use of funds or the restrictions on use of funds, for example several replies said please stop spending that money on parks, we need that money for salaries and operating expenses. However, those funds are restricted as to what they can be used for operating funds.

Some of the other suggestions were to consolidate offices where possible, sell excess buildings, lease out unused space at the Bluffs to a third party. Several mentions of reducing the number of paid holidays; probably the most frequently suggested was a 4-day 10 hour workweek. A couple said put it on the millage rate. Use of inmate labor where possible; the Animal Shelter is already using some inmate labor. Another was minimize overtime and use comp time as a substitute. To collaborate with the cities and combine employee benefits or liability insurance coverage. Another suggestion was a temporary pay reduction. Reduction of fees paid to boards and committees. One that surprised the Chairman was a voluntary reduction to a 4 day week or 32 hours. An obvious idea was to offer an incentivized retirement, with a cap of 6 months approximately; in order for there to be a cost savings, that position is held open. Chairman Ahrens said this is something they are going to take a look at and they will have something by the next meeting. After some discussion, the Chairman said we will go right into the Millage Rate discussion. And he added, this will need to be added to the agenda tonight; to go out and advertise the public hearings.

**5. 2012 Outlook & Impact on Millage Rate – Janelle Funk**

Janelle began the PowerPoint presentation saying that this is re-visiting the slide that she had presented in the last meeting. The starting shortfall in 2012 is approximately \$5 million dollars in the General Fund, because the County will not have the \$1.5 million dollar Blalock Land Sale or the \$2 million dollar option of reducing contributions to the defined benefit fund. And the \$600,000 cost coverage from the Jail Fund, requiring \$470,000 from fund reserves, cannot be used anymore as it is meant to cover jail emergencies. There are already several funds who are using their reserves to make it through 2011 such as Fire, Victim Witness, E911, Animal Services and Senior Services.

In addition to that, there has been a decrease in the tax digest, for the third year in a row. Janelle said the first option is to roll up the millage rate and she showed a slide on the impact of a roll up in dollars and cents, using her home's value, as an example. Then

she gave possible offsets to the shortfall; and gave a summary of how this would affect the average homeowner. Janelle said while these are possible offsets to the shortfall, there are a few that are uncertain or not defined and therefore no direction on how to achieve.

Janelle finished her presentation saying that an increase in the millage rate would require three public hearings before adoption; and the public hearing ad should run this Sunday, June 26<sup>th</sup>, for the first public hearing to be held on July 5, the second on July 19 and the third on July 28<sup>th</sup>. Chairman Ahrens said that something should be put out on Sunday that makes a statement or a cap, something we can't go beyond. Commissioner Johnston said he felt that we should go to the highest rate and that would leave some flexibility, if another option should present itself, to lower the final rate somewhat.

Commissioner Bosch said she thought Commissioner Johnston was saying that the millage rate should be advertised to cover the entire shortfall of \$5 million; Commissioner Johnston agreed. Janelle said then in that case, the total millage rate would be at 9.549. Discussion continued with the consensus being that while an increase in the millage rate and therefore an increase in taxes would no doubt generate plenty of comment, better to start out high and be able to go lower if possible.

Chairman Ahrens closed the discussion out and asked if the maps could be brought up on the big screen on re-districting. While that was being done, the Chairman said he had attended the State delegation meeting at Calvin Hill's office on Monday.

The first thing the attendants were told was that the delegation could not answer any questions about re-districting. The message the Chairman brought back is he does not think they are going to get to any County recommendations until the Special Session, so there is no need to finalize anything at this point.

Commissioner Johnston took over the explanation of the maps that he had gotten together with Joe Woycke on, that Joe had brought up. There was about a 20 minute discussion among the board members, with Joe bringing up different versions. Finally, the Chairman said he wanted to call a halt but he would like to have something set by the next meeting for the legislators, and be able to pass it along for the Special Session on August 15, whether they do anything with it or not.

After asking if there was anything else, hearing none, he asked for a motion to adjourn. Vice Chair/Commissioner Hubbard made the motion to adjourn to Executive Session at 5:08 p.m. to discuss personnel issues, pending litigation and property acquisition. Commissioner Nelms seconded and the vote was unanimous to approve.

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These Minutes were approved at the regular meeting on July 5, 2011.