

A Town Hall Meeting of the Oconee County Board of Commissioners was held on Tuesday, January 10, 2017 at 6:00 p.m. in the Community Room of the Oconee Veterans Park Community Center.

Members Present: Chairman John Daniell
Commissioner Mark Thomas
Commissioner Chuck Horton
Commissioner W. E. "Bubber" Wilkes
Commissioner Mark Saxon

Staff Present: Jeff Benko, CPA, Administrative Officer
Kathy Hayes, County Clerk
Tracye Bailey, Executive Assistant/Deputy Clerk
Daniel Haygood, County Attorney
Wes Geddings, Director, Finance
John Gentry, Director, Parks & Recreation
Lisa Davol, Deputy Director, Parks & Recreation
Emil Beshara, Director, Public Works

Special Guests: State Representative Chuck Williams

Media Present: Michael Prochaska, Editor, The Oconee Enterprise

Chairman Daniell called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. and welcomed citizens to the meeting.

Purpose and Procedure of Meeting:

Administrative Officer Jeff Benko outlined the purpose of the meeting as a question-and-answer session for the citizens of Oconee County.

Question and Answer Session:

Russ Page (1080 Victoria Crossing) stated that he is encouraged by the recent meetings, asks for no closed-door sessions, and more communication. Regarding applicants for the Joint Comprehensive Plan Stakeholders Advisory Committee, he asks that an applicant is included on the committee that will protect agriculture. He would like the Board to consider Transferable Development Rights (TDRs) and an Agri-Tourism Ordinance. He stated that the solar energy amendments to the Unified Development Code (UDC) will not protect agriculture and does not follow the land use plan. Mr. Page asks that the Board consider a SPLOST Committee to oversee the SPLOST projects and spending.

Bill Gottis (1061 West Canyon Creek Court) stated that he is a member of the Recreational Affairs Citizens Advisory Committee. He asks that the Board implement a plan for recreational open space, explore the Rails to Trails Program, and work with the School System to create possible areas for recreation.

Robert Wyatt (1090 Apalachee Trace) stated he would like for the Board to respond to comments being made during the Town Hall Meeting. Mr. Wyatt supports solar energy and asked the Board to give reasons for voting against the solar energy rezone.

Commissioner Thomas stated that he voted against the motion to deny the rezone and supports any type of renewable energy.

Commissioner Saxon stated that he voted for the motion to deny the rezone. He supports solar energy, but the project location was in a residential area as indicated on the land use map.

Commissioner Horton voted for the motion to deny the rezone. He is not opposed to solar power, but did not think the project fit with the comprehensive plan.

Commissioner Wilkes voted for the motion to deny the rezone. He supports solar energy, but did not think the proposed project should be located next to residential areas.

Chairman Daniell stated that he voted for the amendment and the solar energy rezone was a good project. Regarding TDRs, the program is good for the south end of the county, but the north end is high density. Sewer issues would need consideration when TDRs are transferred as higher density requires additional sewer capacity. He is willing to discuss Ag Tourism again. He also discussed completing ball fields at Oconee Veterans Park as soon as possible.

Madan Abrol (1041 Fox Glen Drive) stated that Oconee County has expertise in many areas among its citizens, and discussions regarding schools and recreation for children are important. Oconee should be a county that considers children, recreation, the older population, and water/natural resources.

John Chenhall (1201 Beverly Drive) thanked the Board for providing the Town Hall Meeting. Mr. Chenhall is on the Land Use Transportation Planning Committee, but speaks this evening as a citizen. He asks that the Board set priorities regarding the intersection at the Oconee Connector and Highway 316.

Chairman Daniell stated that this intersection is a top priority. He would like to have a county-wide transportation plan to review problem areas, which would be useful when discussing projects for state funding. He stated that Highway 316 is now considered a freight corridor, which should provide funding options. Oconee will continue to work with MACORTS and may need a corridor study to provide the information needed for future decisions.

Commissioner Wilkes stated that the Oconee Connector and Highway 316 is a top priority and, after construction is complete, traffic will increase. He agrees that a study would be beneficial.

Commissioner Horton agrees that Highway 316 is a priority regarding safety issues. He would like the communication with MACORTS to be more open.

Commissioner Thomas supports the grade change at Highway 316 and encourages the Land Use Transportation Planning Committee to give input to the Board. He stated there are a number of county roads that need improvements. He agrees that a transportation study is needed to set priorities, and communication with MACORTS is important.

Commissioner Saxon stated that he supports the comments by Chairman Daniell.

Jim McGarvey (1170 Grace Lane) asked for clarification of the time commitment as a member of the Joint Comprehensive Plan Stakeholders Advisory Committee. Administrative Officer Jeff Benko stated that the hours will average approximately two to three hours per week, but not every week.

Commissioner Horton encouraged citizens to get involved in the process and attend meetings even if not chosen for the committee.

Richard Reaves (1200 Beverly Drive) thanked the Board for having the Town Hall Meeting. He would like to know when the road construction will be completed from Quick Trip to Butlers Crossing. Also he asked if the road would open upon completion or if the road will be open in sections. Administrative Officer Jeff Benko stated the completion date is May 2018. Public Works Director Emil Beshara stated that the road will open in different sections. He also stated that the public should expect a major traffic shift in the next two to three weeks.

Robert Wyatt (1090 Apalachee Trace) asked the Board for its thoughts regarding a SPLOST Committee.

Commissioner Daniell stated that he would prefer not to have another committee. Regarding SPLOST funds for 2004 and 2009, he stated that expenditure of these funds during the 2009-2011 economic downturn would not have been good for the county and citizens. The present economy will allow the Board to begin projects and consistent reporting will be available to the citizens.

Commissioner Wilkes agreed with Chairman Daniell that citizens needs to be informed, but he prefers not to have another committee. He asks that citizens talk directly to Board members.

Commissioner Horton agrees that the Board should inform the public of projects while the project is underway.

Commissioner Thomas is not opposed to having another committee and would like to have a five-year strategic plan which would include SPLOST planning. He would like to work with the Board of Education regarding planning for infrastructure and roads.

Commissioner Saxon stated that he does not want another committee. Prior to the SPLOST vote, the Board provided an opportunity for citizen input and decisions were made regarding the areas for SPLOST funding.

State Representative Chuck Williams (2410 Old Watson Springs Road) thanked the Board for its service to the citizens of Oconee County. He stated that on behalf of the Oconee County Legislation (State Representative Regina Quick and Senator Bill Cowsert), they look forward to working with the Board. He looks forward to hearing from the Board with issues that impact Oconee County.

Cindy McGarvey (1170 Grace Lane) asked if there were any reports regarding the Calls Creek sewer line or alternatives.

Commissioner Daniell stated that the Board will have a Work Session to discuss Water Resources on January 18, 2017, at 9:00 am in the Conference Room of the Oconee Veterans Park Community Center. No decisions will be made at the meeting, but a discussion may be held at the Agenda Setting Meeting of the Board on January 31, 2017.

Russ Page (1080 Victoria Crossing) asked that the Board review hydroelectric power at the Hard Labor Creek Reservoir.

Laura Carmichael (250 Pineridge Road) stated that she appreciates the new tone of the Board. She is disappointed that a 37-house subdivision was approved in Bogart and believes this was a missed opportunity for a mixed-use commercial/residential development.

Steve Wortham (1040 Patrick Place), Chairman of Keep Oconee Clean and Beautiful Commission (KOCBC), asked for direction regarding recycling and litter abatement. The previous Board tasked the KOCBC with the Mars Hill Road landscape project. What will be expected from this Board?

Chairman Daniell stated that the KOCBC has a "blank canvas" but should also consider maintenance after the project's installation.

Commissioner Wilkes stated that using community service workers was a good program for litter abatement and agrees with Chairman Daniell regarding the Mars Hill Road landscape project.

Commissioner Horton stated that recycling and litter abatement starts with young people and suggested that the KOCBC work with the school system and youth groups. He asks that the KOCBC consider drought-resistant plantings for the Mars Hill Road landscape project. This is an opportunity for the Mars Hill Road area but will require planning.

Commissioner Thomas stated that the Mars Hill Road landscape project should be a low-maintenance plan that is "pleasing to the eye" with minimal maintenance. He suggested that the KOCBC meet with the Health Department to discuss recycling needs pertaining to business refuse.

Commissioner Saxon suggested that collaboration with the schools be used to work with litter abatement. School groups such as athletic programs and student groups could have a sign every four miles indicating which group picks up litter for a particular section of road.

Mr. Wortham stated that the KOCBC is revising the Adopt-A-Mile Program and that the addition of Executive Director Cindy Pritchard has been very beneficial. Ms. Pritchard has been contacting the schools and other groups regarding community service activities.

Sara Bell (1201 Arrowhead Road) stated she likes the new attitudes of the Board and sees an opportunity to make changes. She would like the Board to consider a Code of Ethics for Volunteers.

Administrative Officer Jeff Benko stated that time had run out, but the Board will stay after the meeting for individual discussions with citizens. He also reminded the citizens that the new County website publishes public meetings and notices, and citizens can sign up for news/alerts and can send comments via the website.

There being no further business, on motion by Commissioner Wilkes and seconded by Commissioner Horton, the meeting was adjourned at 7:33 p.m.

County Clerk

Chairman

Date