

January, 2016 Washington County Board of Commissioners Update

Economic Development

- Continue to work with state agencies, GDOT, regional partners, the Washington County Chamber of Commerce, the Washington County Development Authority, the local cities and many others on a wide variety of projects.
- Continued for third year a dedicated, one half mill of property taxes for Economic Development.

Improving Public Infrastructure

- Fall Line Freeway
 - To better connect the County to the Macon and Warner Robins areas.
 - Washington County, located half way between Macon/Warner Robins and Augusta will benefit from this connection
 - Completion of the new Oconee River Bridge in mid-2016.
 - Completion of four-laning of Highway 24 in Washington and Baldwin County in 2016.
- Highway 15 Improvements
 - Four-lane truck route around Sandersville-Tennille, largely funded with the TIA funds will begin in 2019 (TIA and STIP)
 - North and south-bound passing lanes currently being built near the Washington-Johnson County lines (STIP).
 - Four-lane truck route around Sparta has been funded starting about 2022 (TIA).
- County Road System Improvements:
 - Completed Year 3 of its 10 year program to re-surface over 100 miles of County-maintained paved roads.
 - Nearly 36 miles by end of 2015.
 - In 2015, 8.9 miles were added and it included portions of:
 - Tennille-Oconee
 - Walker-Dairy
 - Jordan Mill
 - Old Savannah
 - Paving of Kaolin Road (2.42 miles) completed in 2015.
 - The County maintains over 300 miles of paved roads and over 400 miles of unpaved roads.
- Kaolin Field Airport Improvements:
 - About \$3 million has been invested since 2010 in a new modern terminal and a parallel taxiway using mostly Economic Development grants and fuel tax/airline ticket user fees)
 - Airport Layout Plan (master plan) was completed in 2015.
 - Next investment is to build the first of two 15,000 square foot corporate hangars. Up to four corporate jets can be housed in each hangar.
 - Plans are underway to extend the runway to 5,500 feet in order to accommodate even larger corporate jets.
 - Improvements help make Kaolin Field one of the most desirable rural airports for pilots and visitors alike and is a key asset in Economic Development.
- New 200 Bed Jail Facility/Administration Building on Kaolin Road:
 - Estimated costs is \$16M and is on time and on budget.
 - Completion expected in April, 2016.

- County-Wide Digital Radio System:
 - Every Emergency Agency in the County including E911, Sheriff, Ambulance, nine Fire Departments, EMA, Sandersville Police, Tennille Police, Harrison Police, Davisboro Police, County Public Works, and City Public Works for Sandersville and Tennille are on the same digital radio platform.
 - In 2015, the County added equipment and repeaters to a Verizon tower near Davisboro to improve the portable unit coverage in that area of the County. City of Davisboro partnered with the County and will pay the ongoing utility costs.
 - The City of Sandersville tower on Ferncrest Drive and the 300 foot DOT Tower in Tennille are also part of this three tower system.
 - Now have 100% coverage in the County with mobile units and virtually 100% coverage with portable units.
- Health Department Building Improvements:
 - County awarded a \$500,000 community development block grant (CDBG) in 2014 to rehabilitate the Health Department Building.
 - Improvements include a low pitched roof, improve drainage and renovate the interior.
 - Completion expected in early 2016.
- Circle Drive Subdivision:
 - County completed a major road and drainage project in the Circle Drive subdivision in 2015 to improve flooding issues that has plagued residents using earlier CDBG grant.

Emphasizing Tourism to the County

- Renewed emphasis is being placed on tourism by many groups in our community.
- The commissioners applaud the recent efforts by the Chamber of Commerce, the Washington County Historical Society, the cities and many others to promote existing and new events here.
- Formed a multi-county Highway 15 Coalition along with Appling, Toombs, Johnson and Hancock Counties in 2015
 - Dedicated to improving this highway corridor with the goal of increased tourism and economic development.
 - Coalition wants this corridor to become the preferred route between NE GA/Athens to the Atlantic coast.
- Sandersville School Authority:
 - County had supported establishment of a Sandersville School Authority in 2014 with the stipulation that no County funds would be used.
 - Property was transferred to the Authority in 2015.
 - The School Authority plans to raise money through fundraising and grants to use this building as an asset for the community including use as a welcome center, museum, and for cultural arts.
- Linton Park:
 - The County, City of Sandersville and School Board all partnered to build a new Recreation Park off Linton Road.
 - Splash Pad was completed in summer, 2015.
 - 18 hole Disk Golf Course (on City land) to be completed by March, 2016.
 - Other improvements include a Walking Trail, picnic pavilion and a handicap-accessible destination playground.
 - Because it will have unique features, this park should be a local and regional attraction to our County.

- **Hamburg State Park:**
 - In 2015, County has partnered with the State Parks Department to fully fund Hamburg State Park and return it to being a State Park instead of an Outdoor Recreational facility.
 - County portion of the funding is \$30,000/year.
 - The Park will have most of the amenities it formerly had including on-line reservations for Campers, a store and boat and canoe rentals most of the year.
 - Future improvements being investigated include a mountain bike trail.
- **Courthouse Grounds Park:**
 - Effort underway to have a Vietnam wall in the park next to the Courthouse.
 - County and Chamber are currently collecting names of Washington County natives who served in Vietnam.
 - The Park is being refurbished and will have better landscaping, brick sidewalks, better handicap access and other improvements to honor veterans from Washington County.
- **Bicycle State Route 35 marked in Washington County:**
 - Designates the Waco portion of the “March to the Sea” State route.
 - Baldwin Co. has marked theirs also.

Improving County Government Services

- **On Line Services:**
 - New on line services are being offered including: payment of property taxes, payment of auto tags, marching permits and voter registration.
 - Registration and payment for recreation department events on line.
 - Citizens may access these services and useful information by visiting www.washingtoncountygva.gov.
- **Elections & Registrar Board Created:**
 - Commissioner approved creation of a five person Elections Board which fully takes effect January 1, 2016.
 - Five members of the Registrar Board were appointed to this new “Combined Elections and Registrar” board.
 - Elections had previously been run by the Probate Judge on a part time basis.
 - However, holding elections have become increasingly complex with new regulations and rules to comply with.
 - Because of their complexity, cities in Washington County often call on County staff to hold their elections whereas they may have run the elections themselves before.
 - Cathy Hagans was named Director of Elections and Registrar by the Combined Board. Cathy is the first Black Department Head in the County.
- **Collection Center Expanded to Include Contractor Waste/Landfill Closed:**
 - County Landfill was closed on October 1, 2015. County Landfill lost between \$50K and \$150K/year.
 - Replaced with an Expanded Collection Center on Kaolin Road.
 - County citizens who have a garbage card may take their waste to the collection center.
 - City residents, contractors and businesses may take waste there for a fee.
 - Open six days/week.

WCRMC

- Continues to incur operating losses at the Hospital.
- Effort underway to Partnering with larger hospital system.
- University Hospital no longer has a relationship for WCRMC as of December, 2015.
- GRU is interested in a management agreement but will not risk any advance funding.

- County raised the property tax millage rate by 1 mill in 2015 at the request of the Hospital Authority who has said that funds would be exhausted within a few months if it was not done.
- The agreement also includes another emergency advancement of funds through a sale and leaseback on part of the facility. This portion has not been exercised. However, it is widely known that much more funding will be needed to preserve the Hospital at the level of services it currently provides.
- The commissioners believe the path forward is to have a county wide ballot initiative and let the people of Washington County have more direct decision-making into the future of WCRMC. It is expected that tax increases will be needed to fund operating expenses of the hospital as well as a bond offering in order to fund needed capital improvements. The vote may take place in late spring or summer of 2016.

County's Solid Financial Position

- Despite many challenges, the financial position of the County continues to be solid. Despite a deep recession and the decline of the Kaolin industry, the County has not increased property taxes since 2010 (other than for Economic Development funding and the hospital tax).
- The property tax digest has fallen by 10% and sales taxes declined by 28% between 2008 and 2014. The County has made tough budgetary decisions in order to maintain this position.
- The County has excellent bond ratings with Standard & Poor's (A+) and Moody's (AA3). The Board of Commissioners are committed to maintaining the County's solid financial position even though significant challenges remain.