

TENTATIVE BUDGET HEARING

Commission Board Room
Dixie County Courthouse
214 NE Hwy 351, Cross City, FL 32628
September 03, 2026 – 5:30 PM

The Board meetings are audio recorded. The public can hear and participate in the meeting via conference call by dialing 1 469-551-3616 and enter code 908825494#

COMMISSIONERS

Mark Hatch, District 3, Chairman
Jody Stephenson, District 1
Daniel Wood, District 2
Jamie Storey, District 4, Vice Chairman
David Osteen, District 5

STAFF

John Jenkins, County Manager
Roy Bass, Assistant County Manager
Martha McCaskill, Administrative Asst/Grant Coordinator
Chana Watson, County Attorney
Barbie Higginbotham, Clerk of Court
Brenda Royal, Chief Financial Officer
Christie Zander, Deputy Clerk

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Mark Hatch called the workshop to order and welcomed all attendees, thanking everyone for coming. He explained the hearing is for adopting the tentative millage rate and budget.

INVOCATION AND PLEDGE TO THE AMERICAN FLAG

Vice Chairman Storey led the Invocation and Commissioner Wood led the Pledge to the American Flag.

DISCUSSION

Presentation – Tentative Millage Rate (Resolution 2026-41)

Speaker: Brenda Royal

Subject: Budget recap and millage rate resolution 2026-41

General Budget Recap:

- Thanks:
 - Department heads
 - Constitutional officers
 - Board membersfor their hard work on the budget.
- States this is a large project that involves the “whole team and community,” emphasizing being good stewards of public money.

- Notes a big change in transfers from the General Fund to other funds:
 - Last year: about \$1.5 million+ transferred from General Fund.
 - This year: reduced to \$70,000, which is an EM match that must be transferred from General Fund to EMS as part of a state grant.
 - Emphasizes this reduction took “a lot of sacrifices” from many people and department heads.

Millage Rollback:

- States that all three ad valorem taxes were rolled back:
 - General Fund
 - EMS
 - Library & Recreation
- Notes that in her 4½ years there, they had only been able to roll back Library in past years and usually had to “max out” the others.
- Explains that this time they were able to take the rollback rate from the Department of Revenue, which is a lower tax bracket for citizens.

Reading Resolution 2026-41 (Tentative Millage Rate):

- **Title:** Resolution 2026-41 – establishing the tentative millage rate in Dixie County, Florida, for fiscal year commencing October 1, 2026, providing for an effective date.
- Notes:
 - Dixie County Property Appraiser has certified the tax roll.
 - Dixie County Board of County Commissioners adopted the tentative millage rate following public hearing as required by Florida Statute 200.065.
 - Gross taxable value for operating purposes not exempt from taxation is \$893,678,383.
- **Tentative Operating Millage Rates for FY beginning October 1, 2026:**
 - General Fund: 9.4446 mills
 - Emergency Medical Services Fund (EMS): 3.0223 mills
 - Library and Recreation Fund: 0.4603 mills
 - Total Operating Millage Rate: 12.93 mills
 - This is a zero increase over the rollback rate of 12.93 mills.
- States the resolution takes effect immediately upon adoption and is resolved in public hearing on September 3, 2026, by majority vote of the Dixie County BOCC.
- Requests a motion to adopt.

Board Action – Tentative Millage Rate

Speaker: Chairman Hatch called for motion to adopt the tentative millage rate.

Motion made by: Vice-Chairman Storey

Seconded by: Commissioner Osteen

Chairman Hatch thanks Brenda and staff for their hard work, including:

- “Tim Johnson, Leon Wright, Darbi Chaires, Chief Brown,” and department heads.
- States rolling back millage is difficult, especially when “everything’s going up,” and acknowledges the effort it took.

Public Questions and Comments on Millage

Speaker: Citizen – Cindy Landosky

Question: Wants to know exactly what the millage decision means.

Chairman Hatch explains it means taxes are going down instead of going up.

Speaker: Bert (“Burt”) Buzbee

Question: Asks if it is possible to get a hard copy of what Brenda just spoke about, noting there was conversation that made it difficult to hear.

Chairman Hatch responded that a copy will be provided to him.

Speaker: Jody Stephenson

Subject: Broader comment about assessments and dumps (overlapping conversation)

- Talks about:
 - Garbage assessment history:
 - About 31 years ago, the garbage assessment was \$100.
 - Cites that with the new rate, it will be about \$200-something, but still not where it needs to be.
 - Explains balancing assessments with cutting costs within the county.
 - References the “First District dump” and plans:
 - Putting in fencing and gates.
 - Moving the dump to the rock pit where the county has already put out infrastructure for a compactor.
 - Notes that the First District is most populated, with more road mileage than any other district, and he believes that district has been “getting the short end” on certain services.
 - Emphasizes he is in favor of advancing the assessment to support these services.

Speaker: Bert Buzbee

Subject: Clarifying his original question

- Restates that his original question was simply whether he could get a hard copy of what Brenda spoke about, because side conversations made it hard to hear.
- Adds he is “100% in favor” of advancement of the assessment but reiterates he wants written information.

Speaker: Chairman Hatch

Subject: Closing public comment on millage

- Asks if anyone else wants to speak. No further comments recorded.
- Conducts the vote: “All in favor? Aye.”
- **Motion passes. Time 5:39p.m.**

Presentation – Tentative Budget (Resolution 26-42)

Speaker: Brenda Royal

Subject: Resolution 26-42 – Tentative Budget for FY 26–27

- Notes this step (adopting tentative budget) must follow adoption of the millage rate.
- Acknowledges some difficulty hearing in the room and raises her voice.

Reading Resolution 26-42:

- **Title:** Resolution 26-42 – adopting the tentative budget for fiscal year 26–27.
- Ms. Royal states:
 - BOCC of Dixie County held a public hearing on September 3, 2026 to adopt the tentative budget for tax year beginning October 1, 2026.
 - Hearing was duly advertised as required by Florida Statute 200.065.
 - Appropriations and revenue estimates for FY 26–27 total \$46,195,987.
- States the resolution adopts the tentative budget for the fiscal year commencing October 1, 2026, covering funds including:
 - General Fund
 - Communications
 - County Ordinance
 - Court Facilities
 - Cross City Airport Fire District Fund
 - Recreation/Library Fund
 - County Transportation Trust Fund
 - SHIP Fund
 - Solid Waste Fund
 - Emergency Medical Services Fund
 - Law Enforcement Trust Fund
 - Emergency 911 System
 - Impact Fee Fund
- Notes it is to be resolved in public hearing by majority vote and then asks for a motion.

Board Action – Tentative Budget

Chairman Hatch called for a motion to pass the Tentative Budget

- **Motion made by:** Commissioner Osteen
- **Seconded by:** Vice-chairman Storey
- **Motion passes. Time 6:14 p.m.**

Speaker: Chairman Hatch

Subject: Clarifying total budget and grants

- Asks Ms. Royal:
 - Confirms \$46 million is the total budget.
- Ms. Royal responds:
 - Yes, \$46 million total with grants.
- Chairman Hatch asks:
 - What portion is grants?
- Ms. Royal responds:
 - Approximately \$9.5 million in grants.

- Chairman Hatch states:
 - That means non-grant funding is around \$32 million.
- Asks:
 - What was last year's budget (current year) total without grants?
- Ms. Royal:
 - Gives a figure of about \$34,908,000+ (approximate amount) without grants.
 - With grants last year: about \$69,876,000.
- Chairman Hatch:
 - Establishes that the actual budget (excluding grants) increased by a little over \$2 million overall for the county.

Public Questions and Comments – Budget and EMS/Fire Operations

Speaker: Bert Buzbee

Mr. Buzbee asks if the \$9 million in grants is a “given” or not fully certain.

Then asks if that means the operating budget is effectively \$9 million less to work with.

Speaker: Jody Stephenson

Subject: Explanation – grants and budget pressure

- States:
 - Grant funds must be used only for the specific purpose they are awarded for (e.g., dredging).
 - The county cannot operate without grants but also cannot use them freely.
- Discusses:
 - Past financial challenges:
 - Mentions arriving with a \$2.5 million shortfall.
 - States the county has been under flood or hurricane emergencies almost every year, making it hard to “get your head above water.”
 - Notes that taxes and assessments were not raised for a long time and that the county is “trying to catch up.”
 - Indicates he and other commissioners have personally sacrificed:
 - He gave half of one year's salary back to the board.
 - Vice-Chairman gave up travel/gas money (clarified not “per diem”).
 - Commissioner Stephenson thanked constitutional officers for rolling their budgets back to last year's level to help balance.

Speaker: Vice-chairman Storey

Clarifies public criticism about “per diem”, and states that his compensation is for gas, not a “per diem” and wants that clear.

Speaker: Citizen – Donna Liepinis

Mrs. Liepinis asks about the Old Town fire department funding and why the annual boot drive stopped.

Speaker: Chairman Hatch

Explains:

- Call load has grown substantially:
 - Fire/EMS are running “61–6200 calls” (corrected to “not quite 6,000”).
- Staff do not have time to stand out and hold boots for donations because of the call volume.
- Ambulances are constantly going to Gainesville.
- They added an ambulance zone for safety.
- Built four new firehouses and closed four old ones.
 - New firehouses are built for 50-year service (similar logic to older courthouse and city hall).
- Emphasizes that if they waited five more years, costs for building new stations would be much higher and would fall more on local dollars rather than federal.

Mrs. Liepinis then asks what is being done with the four vacant firehouses that were closed.

Speaker: Chairman Hatch

- Responds:
 - One station is leased out to CareerSource near the building and zoning office.
 - One is targeted to become a walk-in primary care facility if possible.
 - Another was a double-wide trailer in bad condition (“no good”).
 - Another is an old firehouse near the Johnny Stevenson Community Building, also in poor condition (mold, etc.).

Speaker: Commissioner Stephenson

Subject: Personnel and station closures (question to Chief Brown)

- Points out:
 - They have **lost personnel** and do not have enough certified EMTs to staff all ambulances.
 - Asks Chief Brown to explain:
 - Whether some units had to be shut down because of lack of people.

Speaker: Chief Darian Brown (Fire/EMS Director)

Subject: Staffing, facilities, call load, and budgets

Staffing Shortages:

- States:
 - One station is temporarily closed due to lack of staffing.
 - Nearby jurisdictions and private companies are paying more than the county, making it hard to compete.
 - Volunteer numbers have dropped, and this trend is statewide.
 - He was recently down nine positions:
 - Eight paramedics
 - One EMT
 - Several left for higher-paying counties and private EMS agencies.
 - One new hire left due to insurance needs, long commute, and difficulty with the “every third day” shift but will stay on part-time.

Old vs. New Facilities:

- Describes old stations:
 - Some had ceilings falling in, mold, leaking A/C units, and were generally worn out.
 - One station was a barn with a bathroom that flooded in, which was not suitable during hurricanes.
 - Another old station near First District was close to EMS, but facilities were very old.
- Explains:
 - New stations were built using largely state grant funds.
 - Some old stations will be **closed** and consolidated into new facilities.
 - New Horseshoe station:
 - Moved out of a flood zone.
 - Built to be staffable during storms and in future growth.

Call Load and Operations:

- Provides call load figures:
 - Increase from about 2,500 calls to near 5,000–6,000 calls per year.
 - Last year: nearly 6,000 calls.
- Notes:
 - They added ambulances and apparatus but still do not have enough people to staff everything full-time.
 - Sometimes fire engines respond to medical calls because ambulances are out transporting to Gainesville.
 - Explained that:
 - Fire engines can provide ALS (Advanced Life Support)—they carry the same equipment as ambulances except for a stretcher.
 - Example: An amputation case where two ambulances were in Gainesville, and a fire engine had to respond initially.

Budget and Legal Constraints:

- Chief Brown explains that:
 - Fire and EMS are viewed by the public as one department, but they operate under two separate budgets and taxation laws.
 - There are strict rules on what can be funded from EMS monies vs. fire assessment monies.
 - They have shifted some expenses from EMS to fire where legal to stay within millage and budget constraints.
 - Stresses:
 - There are laws and percentage limits on how funds can be allocated.
 - He avoided detailing some transfers in a TV interview because it could be misconstrued as improper.

Disasters and Overtime:

- Chief Brown states:
 - The county has had multiple major storms (four in about a year and a half).

- When the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is activated, it is staffed almost entirely by fire/EMS staff, which creates overtime and additional unbudgeted costs.
- FEMA/state reimbursements come later, leaving shortfalls in the meantime.

Equipment and Cost Examples:

- Chief Brown gives specific figures:
 - Fire engines are now about \$1 million each.
 - Ladder truck: approximately \$2.5 million with equipment.
 - Turnout gear + SCBA:
 - Around \$15,000 per firefighter (about \$5,000 gear + \$10,000 breathing apparatus).
 - Air cylinders:
 - Good for 15 years, then must be discarded.
 - Cost about \$1,500 each, and each firefighter needs at least two.
 - Cardiac monitor/defibrillator:
 - Maintenance fees alone for 10 units total around \$80,000.
- Notes they received a large fire marshal grant that paid for many sets of gear and SCBAs, saving the county's budget.

Mutual Aid:

- Describes:
 - When the Chiefland (Chavous) station was opened, mutual aid requests from other counties dropped and Dixie could help others more.
 - After closing one station due to staffing, mutual aid requests increased sharply, sometimes requiring multiple outside units and every local fire apparatus to respond to calls.

Property Tax and Future Risks:

- Mentions:
 - There is a statewide proposal about property taxes coming to the ballot.
 - If property tax revenues are reduced, it will hit small rural counties hardest because they lack large surpluses.
- States:
 - The county mainly operates off current revenues with limited reserves.
 - One significant storm can quickly consume available funds.

Public Invitation:

- Repeatedly offers:
 - For any citizen to come to his office 1-on-1 for a full explanation of the budget and operations.
- Notes he has about 190 days left before retiring, finishing a 39-year career.

Speaker: Citizen – Stephen Arnam

Questions:

1. When EMS transports someone to Gainesville (3-hour round trip), they send a bill for around **\$1,200–\$1,300**.

- Asks what portion of that is **above** what is already funded by taxes, and how that fits into the budget.
2. Asks:
- If a house burns down and the homeowner has **no insurance**, does the county **bill for fire response**?

Speaker: Chief Brown

- States:
 - Fire services are not billed.
 - County does not send a bill when a house burns.
 - Fire is funded through taxes and assessments, not per-call billing.
 - EMS billing:
 - They collect about \$1.2 million in EMS transport revenue.
 - Most citizens are on Medicare/Medicaid, which pays only a partial percentage of charges (about 30% mentioned).
 - They cannot collect the full billed amount, which contributes to revenue shortfalls.

Time Constraint and Meeting Management

Speaker: Attorney Chana Watson

Subject: Time notice and meeting shift

- Notes:
 - Another meeting is scheduled at 6:00 p.m. in another location.
 - This is a budget meeting and there is already a motion and second on the floor.
 - Requests:
 - To close this budget item and then adjourn to the next room to continue discussions related more to the rate resolution than the yearly budget.
- Acknowledges and apologizes to Mr. Norman for cutting short further discussion here but suggests continuing in the next venue.

10. Vote and Closing Actions on Budget

Speaker: Brenda Royal / Mark Hatch

Subject: Recording votes and closing of item

- Mark:
 - Calls the vote on the tentative budget resolution.
 - The board responds “Aye,” with no nays recorded.
- Brenda:
 - Reads or notes tally (e.g., “614,” likely an internal vote/record number in the system).

Speaker: Chairman Hatch

Stated “Thank you, gentlemen. That’s all I have for you.”

- He asks if anyone has anything else for Ms. Royal.
- Chairman Hatch thanked Brenda for her work.

ADJOURN

Motion to adjourn made by Vice Chairman Storey. Seconded by Commissioner Wood. Meeting adjourned.

PLEASE BE ADVISED that if a person decides to appeal any decision made by the Board with respect to any matter considered at such meeting or hearings, he/ she will need a record of the proceedings, and for such purpose, he/ she will need to ensure that a verbatim record of the proceedings is made, which record includes the testimony and evidence upon which the appeal is to be based.

“Persons with disabilities requesting reasonable accommodations to participate in this proceeding should contact (352) 486-4931 (Voice & TDD) or via Florida Relay Service at (800) 955-8771.”

The Board meets the first Thursday of each month at 10:00 AM and the third Thursday of each month at 6:00 PM. Individuals that would like to be placed on the agenda should call Barbie Higginbotham, Clerk of Court, by 4:00 PM on the Friday Preceding the Board meeting, at (352) 498-1200.