

**Regular Meeting**  
**Courtroom A**  
Dixie County Courthouse  
214 NE Hwy 351, Cross City, FL 32628  
September 03, 2026 – 6:00 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 908-825-494#**

**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 – Not present  
Chana Watson, County Attorney  
Barbie Higginbotham, Clerk of Court  
Brenda Royal, Chief Financial Officer  
Christie Zander, Deputy Clerk

**CALL TO ORDER**

Chairman Hatch called the meeting to order.

**INVOCATION AND PLEDGE TO THE AMERICAN FLAG**

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

**VOUCHER APPROVAL**

**Motion to approve the vouchers made by Commissioner Osteen. Seconded by Commissioner Wood. Board approved.**

**CONSTITUTIONAL OFFICERS/CITY OFFICIALS**

Mayor Ryan Fulford reported the upcoming city election schedule:

- Early voting September 8 through September 11
- September 8: noon to 5:00 p.m.
- September 9 and 10: 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
- September 11: 9:00 a.m. to noon
- September 15: regular election day, 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.

No Board action taken.

### **DATA CENTER DISCUSSION**

- **Andrew Quincoses**, a resident of Dixie County for approximately four years, addressed the Board. He opened with a religious invocation and referenced scripture he had cited at the August 6 workshop concerning the love of money, asking the Board to weigh constituents, natural resources, and public health above financial gain.

Mr. Quincoses stated that he wished to clarify what was being requested. He explained that the Board cannot vote a moratorium into existence before one is drafted and described the process as follows: the Board authorizes the County Attorney to begin drafting a moratorium ordinance; the draft proceeds to the Planning Board; and once complete, it returns to the Board of County Commissioners for enactment. He stated that confusion had followed the previous meeting, including a belief that data centers cannot be defined or identified in county code, and said that the absence of such definitions is the reason the facilities have been built without regulation. He asked the Board to follow the approach taken by surrounding counties.

He reported on proceedings he attended in two neighboring counties. He stated that Levy County authorized its attorney to proceed with drafting a moratorium, and that at the Levy County Planning Board meeting an outside consultant assisting with the drafting addressed concerns regarding Senate Bill 180 and structured the ordinance's recitals accordingly. He further reported that the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability is conducting a major study of data center development that will not be released until July 1, 2027, and that state legislation defining and regulating these facilities is expected to follow. He urged the County to have protective language in place in the interim, warning that county code not aligned with the forthcoming state framework would create difficulties.

Mr. Quincoses presented figures on industry growth, stating that approximately 2,500 data centers were built in the United States between 1995 and 2021, and that approximately 5,500 have been added in the last five years. He stated that facilities are commonly sited through special exception permits, administrative approvals, and text amendments to county codes.

Regarding a workshop held in Taylor County, he stated that an industry presenter described a closed-loop facility in Atlanta, Georgia with generators contained within the building, and that while this represents good design practice, the majority of data centers are not built to that standard. He stated that an economic presenter at the same workshop reported that the facilities employ roughly one to three people per 12,000 square feet, generally not hired locally; that a host county receives on average approximately 26 percent of the buildout, with the remainder originating outside the county; and that revenue derives from tangible personal property tax. He cited Virginia as having collected approximately \$1.2 billion in such revenue and stated that Florida's tax structure would yield a substantially smaller share.

He also stated that a proponent of data center development who presented in Taylor County had characterized Dixie County's workshop as containing misinformation regarding infrasound. In

response, Mr. Quincoses stated that infrasound travels long distances and cited a study of long-term exposure in mice indicating cellular-level effects.

In closing, Mr. Quincoses stated that his objective is to protect the County; that he would support requiring surety bonds of any incoming development; and that he was asking only for authorization to begin drafting. He emphasized that a moratorium would not close the County to development, that no ban was being proposed, and that the Board would not be obligated to adopt the ordinance once drafted. He asked that the County put protective language in place and await the 2027 study and asked that the upcoming workshop be devoted to developing the substance of the ordinance rather than to further presentations.

- **Commissioner Jody Stephenson** stated during and following the presentation that any ordinance must be worded so that it does not harm the County, and that his position at the previous meeting had been that the County Attorney needs to research the matter in order to arrive at correct language. He stated that "one missed word in today's world, you will get crucified," and that counsel must advise the Board that an action will not harm the public. He stated that he is not in favor of data center development, that he is relying on the County Attorney to guide the Board, and that if the matter is handled incorrectly the County will end up with the facility.
- **Chair Mark Hatch** stated that he had not researched the matter. He noted that the County was built on two industries, that the timber industry has been the heart and soul of the county and supports more than 5,000 jobs, and that commercial fishing, the second industry, has been lost. He described the position before the Board as balancing a request to place a moratorium on a potential tax base against widespread objection to rising taxes.
- **County Attorney Chana Watson** advised that a workshop is scheduled and asked that speakers come to the podium so that their names could be recorded. In response to a question from the audience, she advised that the County does not administer oaths to speakers and that all statements are part of the public record.
- **Chairman Hatch** confirmed that he had previously stated his opposition to data center development, and that he is opposed to any facility that would draw on the county's water and power.
- A member of the public asked the Chair whether he had discussed bringing data center development to Dixie County with any entity or individual by telephone, electronic mail, or text message. A response referencing non-disclosure agreements is partially recorded; the recording does not establish who responded or the substance of the answer.
- **Christy Bass** addressed the Board, stating that she hoped to serve as a bridge between the two positions. She agreed that the drafting work should begin, comparing the request to submitting a first draft of a paper. Addressing the Chair's concerns regarding existing industry, she asked what is being done to diversify the county's timber products. She stated that bamboo is among the largest

segments of the global lumber industry, grows well and rapidly in Florida, and yields numerous byproducts, and argued that diversifying what is grown, manufactured, and hauled — and recruiting the industry that supports it — would benefit the county more than a data center. She noted that the nearest industry leader she identified is located in North Carolina and asked that the Board remain open to such businesses. She stated that she was not seeking to replace existing industry but to add to it.

- **Commissioner Stephenson** responded that most mills can accept logs only up to approximately 15 inches, leaving larger timber without a market, and that a pellet manufacturer coming into the county will be able to grind oversized logs, allowing the County to utilize timber the mills cannot take.
- **Chairman Hatch** responded that establishing such an industry requires substantial capital investment, and that the county, formed 106 years ago on timber, now depends on that industry alone. He stated that timber operators are hauling chips more than 300 miles, which is not sustainable, and that action will be necessary within the next six to eight years. He stated that the County must continue to fund fire protection and emergency medical services regardless of who holds office and encouraged anyone wishing to establish a bamboo operation or any other business to do so. He noted that employing 100 people typically requires an investment on the order of \$500 million, described economic development as the most difficult part of serving on the Board, and stated that he would support the timber industry fully for as long as he serves.
- **Commissioner Stephenson** addressed water resources, noting that he served on the water management district board prior to his election. He stated that groundwater withdrawals in the Jacksonville area have shifted the basin divide approximately six miles, altering where rainfall ultimately flows, and that when he raised the matter he was advised the issue was Dixie County's to resolve. He described the county as unique — bounded by rivers to the east and the Gulf to the west — and stated that the estuary functions as a nursery supporting the county's fisheries. He cautioned that chemical spraying is reaching the bay and damaging the grasses on which the estuary depends.
- **Gerald Goshorn**, a resident outside Old Town for five years, stated that he loves the county and the area where he lives, that he is not wealthy, and that many residents live on fixed Social Security incomes. He stated that he pays his taxes early each year and left the previous year's meeting dissatisfied. Regarding data centers, he stated that if a facility were self-contained, produced its own power and water, and were well maintained, he would support it.
- **Dave Carroll**, a resident of Horseshoe Beach for eight years, stated that he had been unaware the County was considering a data center and questioned the length of the discussion. He asked those present who opposed data centers to raise their hands and characterized the response as decisive. He stated that the matters he came to address were his property assessment, the fire department, and emergency medical services.

- **Commissioner Stephenson** responded that the County must continue to meet its obligations, including the purchase of fire apparatus and ambulances, and expressed concern that reassessment will shift the burden onto lower-value property owners while reducing the burden on higher-value property.
- **David Osteen** (Horseshoe Beach), stated he has lived in the county for 73 years addressed the Board at length in opposition to a moratorium. He stated that he had researched the subject for four days and that Virginia, a neighboring jurisdiction, and Texas each host several hundred facilities, arguing that they would not be sited adjacent to one another if the harms described were accurate. Drawing on approximately forty years of experience working in cooling towers at the Crystal River nuclear plant, he disputed claims regarding water contamination, stating that circulating water is not radioactive and evaporates. He stated that the facilities can operate on natural gas and that existing natural gas infrastructure in Florida is unused.

He asked how many data center operators the Board had met with, stating that he had spoken with several. He stated that he had obtained documentation from Virginia and that community benefits receive less attention in current coverage than costs. He urged the Board not to adopt a moratorium, arguing that it would deter large employers generally and that the Board already possesses the authority to approve or deny individual projects. He stated that a small-business tax base can no longer support the school system, ambulance service, solid waste operations, and fire protection, and referenced federal legislation requiring such facilities to fund their own grid infrastructure. He asked the Board to establish a committee to meet with data center operators.

- **Commissioner Stephenson** responded that he is looking out for the county's children, that unforeseen consequences are the risk in such decisions, and that the county is environmentally sensitive. In an extended exchange, the speaker asked the Commissioner to identify any business capable of paying in excess of \$1.2 million annually in property taxes. Commissioner Stephenson responded that such revenue would not justify damage to Pepperfish Key, which he stated remains the nursery producing the crabs and redfish harvested today. The speaker responded that the area had been degraded twenty years ago. The exchange included Commissioner Stephenson's statements that he is returning a portion of his salary to the County in an effort to balance the budget, that the County must pay its bills, and that the solid waste assessment has risen from \$100 to approximately \$200 over roughly three decades.
- **David Osteen (Horseshoe Beach)** Another member of the public stated that he is retired, that his home is paid for, and that he would lose it if he could not pay his property taxes and argued that a data center would carry the county's property tax burden.
- **Gary Bridges**, who lives off Spiller's Highway, stated that he regularly speaks with an acquaintance who designs and builds artificial intelligence systems and who is deeply concerned about the technology. He recounted an account regarding self-replicating microbots and stated that a college in Michigan studying how to reduce the energy demands of artificial intelligence concluded the systems could be built using human stem cells. He stated that he would not want such a facility in the county or near his home.

- **Ingrid Welch**, whose family has long resided in Dixie County, asked why, if recreation and fishing are the county's principal business, more is not being done to protect them from fertilizer runoff, noting the closure of scallop season. She compared data centers to computer systems that were once room-sized and now fit in a hand and asked why the county would host a facility likely to become an obsolete eyesore within a decade in a tourism area. She stated that the county's large yellow pine timber was lost long ago. Chairman Hatch responded that thousands of residents work in the timber industry today.
- **Commissioner Stephenson** reported that he had traveled to Tallahassee and met with the Department of Environmental Protection, which will provide testing equipment and personnel to sample the county's creeks and waterways, but that testing has been delayed because water tables are too low. He discussed changes in agricultural practice coinciding with the onset of statewide algae blooms, identifying fertilizer and herbicide-tolerant crops, and stated that pesticides are entering the waterways. He stated that the mill at Perry discharged through a large unfiltered outfall pipe, and that stormwater retention ponds convey automotive contaminants into the aquifer without filtration.
- **Guy Richardson** stated that he was present regarding the proposed tax increase and had understood that to be the purpose of the meeting. He stated that the Board need only ask those present whether they want a data center.
- **Jenny Welch**, of Old Town, asked how much timber would be lost to construction of a facility of the size discussed, and polled the Commissioners individually regarding their positions.
  - **Commissioner Jamie Storey** stated that he is still conducting a great deal of research, that his wife is completely opposed, and that he is continuing his research in order to make the best and most honest decision for the entire county rather than for any one group.
  - **Commissioner Jody Stephenson** stated that he is continuing to research the matter and will not act until the County Attorney advises that the County will not be harmed, reiterating that water is the county's most important resource.
  - **Commissioner David Osteen** stated that the Board has not done enough research to know anything about the subject and that the Board has not been approached by any party regarding a project.
- **Christy Bass** asked to participate directly when the County begins drafting code language, stating that her principal concerns are water and electricity and that no one will otherwise speak for the natural environment. She asked that any code require replacement planting when trees are removed.
- **Jenny Welch** stated that she grew up in Brevard County and witnessed the decline of the Indian River Lagoon. Commissioner Stephenson responded with an account from his work in occupational safety regarding a municipal operator who elected to pay daily fines rather than repair a sewer system discharging into Tampa Bay. Another speaker stated that the headwaters of the St. Johns

River lie on private land in Osceola County slated for development, including a proposed reservoir identified in a sector plan for the property.

- **Christine Pearson** stated that a website maintained by Erin Brockovich is collecting reports from residents near data centers experiencing effects attributed to water use, air pollution, and noise. She asked that the moratorium process be started so that such reports can be gathered and considered, stating that the revenue would not offset the health consequences.
- **Tal Strickland** stated that he has known Chairman Hatch since 2007. He stated that he does not know whether data centers are beneficial or harmful, only that siting matters and that they must be located where they will not harm the environment or the public. He stated that the facilities are capable of generating their own electricity and constructing their own generation capacity rather than drawing from the utility. He identified water as his principal concern, stating that continued withdrawals from the aquifer are unsustainable, and noted that substantial spring flow is discharged to the rivers uncaptured. He asked whether desalination from the Gulf had been considered, using rights-of-way for pipelines and pumping stations; a response indicated the concept is feasible. He stated that if a facility generates significant tax revenue, the County must be the recipient and cautioned that revenue timelines in other jurisdictions have been repeatedly deferred. He stated that any revenue should benefit residents of limited means, and raised the subject of officials' compensation, noting that Commissioners' salaries are set by the State.
- **Francis Bartsch** identified himself and spelled his surname for the record, stating that he has built data centers. He stated that the environmental impact is considerable, described the chilled water systems and cooling towers required to remove heat from the equipment, and stated that in his personal opinion, based on his experience building such facilities, the county is not prepared for one.
- **Chairman Hatch** thanked the speakers, and the Board proceeded to the next item of business.
- **No action was taken.** No motion was made and no vote was held on the request to authorize the County Attorney to begin drafting a moratorium ordinance.

#### **APPROVAL OF COMMISSION MINUTES**

08/20/2026 Regular BOCC Minutes, 08/25/2026 Emergency Budget Meeting, 08/27/2026 Emergency Budget Meeting

**Motion to approve the 08/20/2026 BOCC Regular Meeting Minutes made by Commissioner Osteen. Seconded by Vice Chairman Storey.**

**Motion to approve the 08/25/2026 Emergency Budget Meeting Minutes made by Commissioner Osteen. Seconded by Vice Chairman Storey.**

**Motion to approve the 08/27/2026 Emergency Budget Meeting Minutes made by Commissioner Osteen. Seconded by Vice Chairman Storey.**

**KATRINA VANAERNAM AND SHEILA FRIERSON, DIXIE COUNTY ANTI-DRUG COALITION**

Not present.

**NIKIE WAITS – ROAD 2 REDEMPTION**

Nothing to present currently.

**KAY MCCALLISTER, TOURISM DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL**

Not present.

**KAREN VANAERNAM, DIXIE COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

Not present.

**SCOTT NIOLET, SAVINACIOUS**

Mr. Niolet provided the Board with several funding updates. He reported that during the past week Dixie County and the City of Horseshoe Beach received two planning grants of \$75,000 each, together with a \$3 million grant for infrastructure improvements in Horseshoe Beach, as awarded by Governor DeSantis. He further reported that the County received an additional \$180,000 from the State this week, representing partial payments on project worksheet reimbursements.

Mr. Niolet stated that approval of the 12.5 percent local match waiver is still pending with the Governor's Office, and that he will be working with Finance in the coming week to continue reconciling the budgets and to bring available funds forward for the Board.

No action was taken.

**GREG BAILEY, NORTH FLORIDA PROFESSIONAL SERVICES**

Not present.

**JOHN LOCKLEAR, LOCKLEAR AND ASSOCIATES**

Not present.

**CINDY BELLOT, LIBRARY DIRECTOR**

Not present.

**RAELYNN BROWNELL, SUWANNEE WATER AND SEWER**

Not present.

**STEVE FREMEN, CODE ENFORCEMENT & VETERANS SERVICE OFFICER**

Not present.

**MIKEL GAINNEY, COUNTY ROAD SUPERINTENDENT**

Nothing to present at this time.

**TIM JOHNSON, SOLID WASTE DIRECTOR**

Nothing to present at this time.

**LEON WRIGHT, BUILDING AND ZONING OFFICIAL**

Mr. Wright advised the Board that the Local Planning Agency (LPA) meeting is scheduled for September 10, 2026 at 6:00 p.m. The Chair repeated the date for the record. Mr. Wright noted that the meeting will be the start of the AI/Data Center Moratorium conversation.

No action was taken.

**SCOTTY PENDARVIS, CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER**

Nothing to present currently.

**DARIAN BROWN, DIRECTOR OF EMERGENCY SERVICES**

Chief Darian Brown advised the Chairman that his only item was the final walkthrough on Station Three, scheduled for Wednesday, September 9. He stated that he did not recall the scheduled time, and that he hoped the department would be able to accept the shift following the walkthrough.

No action was taken.

**GAIL CARTER, INDIGENT CARE**

Nothing to present currently.

**ANGIE CROWLEY, HUMAN RESOURCES ADMINISTRATOR**

Not present.

**JOHN JENKINS, COUNTY MANAGER- SEE REPORT**

1. Introduce Extension Agent Director, Cynthia B. Sanders, Extension Agent Interim, Jessica Cooper starting Sept 9, 2026, and new Extension Administrative Assistant, Raylee Jenkins.
2. Request Board approval to execute the Fire Assessment Resolution 2026-39 for FY 2026-2027 at \$205.00 for Residential, \$0.23 Non-Residential, \$27.00 less than 160 Acres, and \$0.08 more than 160 Acres.

**Motion by Commissioner Stephenson to execute the Fire Assessment Resolution 2026-39 for FY 2026-2027 at \$205.00 for Residential, \$0.23 Non-Residential, \$27.00 less than 160 Acres, and \$0.08 more than 160 Acres. Seconded by Vice-Chairman Storey. Board approved.**

3. Request Board approval to execute the Solid Waste Assessment Resolution 2026-40 for FY 2026-2027 at \$210.00 For Residential, \$210.00 for Small Commercial, and \$357.00 per Annual Ton for Non-Residential.

**Motion by Commissioner Stephenson to execute the Fire Assessment Resolution 2026-39 for FY 2026-2027 at \$210.00 For Residential, \$210.00 for Small Commercial, and \$357.00 per Annual Ton for Non-Residential. Seconded by Commissioner Osteen. Board approved.**

4. Request Board approval of the Liberty Partners of Tallahassee, LLC TWO for the RIF grant (once awarded), to provide water and wastewater services to County owned leased property in the amount of \$149,202.00 in accordance with current continuing services contract.

**Motion by Commissioner Osteen to approve Liberty Partners of Tallahassee, LLC TWO for the RIF grant (once awarded), to provide water and wastewater services to County owned leased property in the amount of \$149,202.00 in accordance with current continuing services contract. Seconded by Vice-Chairman Storey. Board approved.**

5. Request Board approval for Dale Colson to use the County owned (formally Touchton) property located at 68 SE 234 St as a staging area.

**Motion by Commissioner Osteen to approve Dale Colson to use the County owned (formally Touchton) property located at 68 SE 234 St as a staging area. Seconded by Vice-Chairman Storey. Board approved.**

6. Request Board approval of the SHIP Emergency Repair Reimbursement for Nancy Lupo in the amount of \$13,000.00.

**Motion by Commissioner Osteen to approve the SHIP rehab reimbursement for Nancy Lupo in the amount of \$13,000.00. Seconded by Commissioner Wood. Board approved.**

7. Request Board approval of Another Way Domestic Violence vigil on Oct 15, 2026, at 6:30 pm on the Courthouse steps.

**Motion by Commissioner Osteen to approve the Another Way Domestic Violence vigil on Oct 15, 2026, at 6:30 pm on the Courthouse steps. Seconded by Vice-Chairman Storey. Board approved.**

8. Request Board approval of the FY 2026-2027 County Holiday schedule as presented.

**Motion by Commissioner Osteen to approve the FY 2026-2027 County Holiday schedule as presented. Seconded by Commissioner Wood. Board approved.**

9. Request Board approval to execute the FY 2027 SCCSW (Small County Consolidated Solid Waste) Grant CW106 for Dixie County in the amount of \$93,750.00.

**Motion by Commissioner Stephenson to execute FY 2027 SCCSW (Small County Consolidated Solid Waste) Grant CW106 for Dixie County. Seconded by Commissioner Osteen. Board approved.**

10. Request Board approval of the purchase of a Big Texas Goose Neck 36' trailer w/ramps based on SWTF recommendation.

**Motion by Commissioner Osteen to approve purchase of a Big Texas Goose Neck 36' trailer w/ramps based on SWTF recommendation. Seconded by Commissioner Stephenson. Board approved.**

11. Request Board approval to place a garbage container in Suwannee for their Labor Day Event.

**Motion by Commissioner Osteen to place a garbage container in Suwannee for their Labor Day event. Seconded by Commissioner Stephenson. Board approved.**

#### **Information Items:**

1. Reminder that County offices will be closed Monday, Sept 7, 2026, in observance of Labor Day.
2. Reminder of the AI Data Workshop Monday, Sep 14, 2026, at 3:00 pm in the BOCC meeting room.
3. Reminder of the BOCC meeting on Monday, Sep 14, 2026, at 5:30 pm at the BOCC meeting room.

#### **Minutes — Public Comment**

##### **Regular Meeting, September 3, 2026**

*Public comment received during consideration of the fire assessment and solid waste assessment for fiscal year 2026/2027, and on related county operations. Comments are recorded in the order received. Responses from the Board and staff are included where given.*

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#### **PUBLIC COMMENT**

- **John Osteen** objected to the proposed increases in both the fire assessment and the solid waste assessment. He stated that the road on which he lives has been a county road for fifty years and had not been graded in six months. He stated that he had not requested the new fire station, that the station had been obtained by grant, and that those who sought it should man it and pay for it. He asked that cuts be made elsewhere rather than the cost being placed on taxpayers.
- **Gerald Goshorn** stated that a new fire station had been built approximately half mile from his property when there was nothing wrong with the existing station at the intersection of State Road 351 and 340, and that the cost of the new station was approximately \$2 million. He advised that he lives on Social Security in a sixty-year-old mobile home, that the fire

assessment on his parcel would be \$244 this year and in years following, that he had been charged \$180 for solid waste on the prior year's tax bill for a service he does not use, and that between the two assessments his tax bill would increase by approximately \$500 in one year. He stated that a lien would be placed on his property if he did not pay.

- **Chairman Mark Hatch** advised that the residential fire assessment had been \$125 and would go to \$205, that this was not the maximum the Board could have adopted, and that the Board had chosen not to go to the maximum; he confirmed that the solid waste assessment had been \$180 in the prior year and was proposed at \$210.
- **Gerald Goshorn** stated that the assessments amount to taxation without representation, as no vote of the citizens had been taken and the charge applies whether or not the service is used. He stated that the residents present had come out over the increases rather than over the data center.
- **Mary Goodrich** spoke in support of the fire assessment. She calculated that an increase from \$125 to \$205 amounts to less than \$11 a month, and that even a further increase would bring the total to roughly \$15 a month, which she compared to the cost of a pack of cigarettes. She advised that she is likewise on a fixed income but would rather pay the increase than be without emergency medical care and stated that she did not care how high the medical portion of the assessment was raised. She also questioned the value of the helicopter service absent paramedic-level care.
- **Christy Bass** asked the Board how the additional revenue from the proposed increase would be allocated, addressing EMS and fire only and not solid waste. She asked what the money would be used for — hiring, improved benefits, improved salaries, or upgraded equipment — and asked for transparency on that point.
- **Commissioner Jody Stephenson** answered that at present the funds are needed to obtain enough personnel to staff and operate the facilities.
- **Chief Darian Brown** responded at length to the questions raised. He advised that EMS, fire, and emergency management all operate under his umbrella; that EMS funding had been cut back over recent years because of the hurricanes, staffing, and shortfalls; and that the County had not yet received all of its staffing reimbursement from FEMA, though a portion had been received that day. He stated that personnel had been moved into fire where legally permissible in order to keep the system functioning. He reported increases of 40 to 75 percent across nearly everything the departments use: apparatus from \$400,000 to \$700,000, heart monitors from \$30,000 to \$80,000, and maintenance on the monitors from \$500 to \$2,500. He advised that the two combined budgets had seen a 24 percent overall increase over five years, with 40 to 65 percent growth in operating costs against 25 percent growth in revenue. He stated that the citizens expect the service, that the law requires the Board to provide it, and that the funds are necessary to provide it properly. He noted that he had been a volunteer firefighter beginning in 1988, that his father served seventeen years before that, and that his wife's grandfather founded the first fire department in the county.

Asked from the floor why the County continues to build stations without the manpower or equipment to staff them, the County Manager addressed each station. The Horseshoe Beach station was replaced because the existing building is not accessible, does not house personnel including volunteers, and consists of a bathroom and two bays with a third bay used by the city; during the hurricane the County spent hundreds of thousands of dollars a day to stage ambulances and apparatus outside the flood zone, and the State provided hurricane mitigation funds so that the County did not bear the cost of relocating the station out of the flood zone. As to the First District station scheduled for walkthrough the following week, he advised that the existing station lacks sufficient beds and bedrooms, that the walls are failing, that there is mold in the walls, that the air conditioning does not work, and that there is insufficient space for the apparatus; the new facility combines the volunteer fire station and the EMS station so the County is not paying utilities on two buildings, and frees the two existing buildings for the Board to lease or otherwise use. As to the station on Chavous, he advised that this is a new building where a volunteer station previously stood, built with the help of Chief Garner's father after he came here from Miami in 1998 following Hurricane Andrew, together with Mr. Thompson and Mr. Bolosky, and funded by boot drives at a time when no tax dollars were available for it.

- **An unidentified resident** stated that the County would take his home if he failed to pay his taxes, and that residents have no further money to give. He stated that a single ambulance transport had cost him approximately \$1,100 and that he has not used the service since, his wife transporting him instead.
- **Christy Bass** who advised that she works in emergency medical services billing, having billed for AMR, stated that the cost drivers in the industry lie well outside county government and that what the County provides is the bare minimum necessary for an essential service. She noted that Amendment 3 appears on the November ballot and, if approved, would reduce property taxes, and argued that the assessment increase should be weighed against that reduction. She advised that she had recently purchased a home and land in the county and that her own assessment is substantial.
- **Dave Carroll** of Horseshoe Beach, addressed the Board on several matters. He stated that he had originally suggested the solid waste sticker program, that his intent had been a sign-in system rather than stickers, and that he observes people dumping in Horseshoe Beach without stickers at the expense of paying residents. He stated that he owns two properties but is receiving three separate bills. He advised that he lives midway between stations near Lily Creek, that he had watched a nearby property burn without a response, and that response from an unmanned station ten minutes past his house would take too long to be of use. He objected to a bonus he said had been discussed at a prior meeting in Old Town for Mr. Leon, for work he was already paid to perform, which he characterized as mismanagement of funds. He also raised the condition of his road and the absence of grading, and the removal of construction and demolition debris collection from the outlying sites, which now requires him to haul to Cross City while paying taxes in this county. He stated that he opposes the data center, the solid waste increase, and the fire assessment increase.

- **Commissioner Stephenson** responded that the assessments had not been raised in the twenty-two years preceding the last revision, that the County operates three motor graders across a large road network, and that road maintenance revenue is limited. He also stated his concern that a failure to provide service could result in the death of a child.
- **John Mash Jr.** addressed the Board in support of the fire assessment. He thanked the Commissioners for their service and stated that he was not present to make enemies but to clarify certain matters for the Board and the citizens.

He advised that comparisons to Gilchrist and Taylor Counties cannot rest on the tax bill alone but must account for the services behind the number. Gilchrist County operates two primary ambulances and one fully staffed suppression unit while relying heavily on the municipal departments in Trenton and Fanning Springs for suppression. Taylor County contracts EMS through Survival Flight, a private agency, and staffs its outlying suppression engines with a single firefighter providing basic life support (BLS) only, without advanced life support (ALS).

He advised that he served eight years in the Dixie County department, beginning as a volunteer firefighter in 2018, and that Dixie County is among the most progressive fire and EMS agencies he has worked for. At full staffing the County can operate four full-time ALS ambulances and two full-time ALS engines, each engine carrying a firefighter/paramedic and a firefighter/EMT and each convertible to an additional ambulance, allowing up to six full-time ambulances to respond to 911 calls.

Mr. Mash stated that the fire department is paid not for what it does but for what it may have to do; that a resident is statistically likely to call 911 perhaps once in a lifetime; and that in a rural county, where a single critical transport can remove a unit from service for a significant period, the question in an emergency is not what neighboring counties charge but how long until help arrives. He advised that coastal communities consistently ask for dependable staffing closer to home but do not wish to pay for it, and that while volunteers will always have an important place in rural fire service and deserve respect, the era of relying on them has passed.

He noted that a significant share of personnel expense is presently carried in the EMS budget, and that strengthening the fire budget would allow fire personnel to be supported from fire revenue and reduce pressure on EMS — particularly if changes to ad valorem property taxes in November affect the revenue that supplements EMS. He stated that government should scrutinize every dollar, that waste should be cut and budgets held accountable, and that the Board had done that work at its tentative budget meeting, but that a distinction must be drawn between wasteful spending and payment for an essential service. He asked that comparisons with neighboring counties account for ambulances, staffing, ALS engines, paramedics, equipment, and backup capability, and for what happens when multiple emergencies occur simultaneously, noting that dispatchers sometimes receive four or five calls at once, leaving the county without available units. He stated that he did not want Dixie County to have the cheapest emergency services, but to know that trained and equipped responders are coming.

Mr. Mash then advised the Board of an additional funding avenue. Under Section 212.055(8), Florida Statutes, an eligible county may, by ordinance and with the approval of

a majority of county voters at a general election referendum, levy a discretionary sales surtax of up to 1 percent for emergency fire rescue services and facilities, and the statute expressly includes pre-hospital emergency medical treatment within emergency fire rescue services. He stated that such a surtax would spread the burden beyond property owners to everyone who spends in the county, including travelers passing through, and would be collected in small increments through purchases rather than as a single annual bill. He further advised that revenue received from such a surtax must be offset against the fire assessment, so that the County would be legally required to reduce the assessment by the corresponding amount. He asked the Board not to treat the assessment as the end of the matter, and stated that he would take the Board at its word that it will look into the surtax as a revenue source, and Vice-Chairman Storey at his word that the department is working to create other income for solid waste, and that he would expect to see assessments reduced in the next year or two as that revenue materializes.

- **Chairman Hatch** advised that a prior surtax proposal had been defeated notwithstanding his own support, and that the ratio presented at the time was that for every four cents paid by a county resident, six cents would be paid by pass-through traffic — a trade he stated he would take any day. He and other members indicated that the 1 percent sales surtax is a matter the Board should revisit and that they would support placing it before the voters. **Commissioner Stephenson** confirmed that a surtax would reach residents and out-of-county visitors alike and added his view that RV parks using county roads and generating county garbage should pay the assessment on every lot.
- **James Philmon** reminded the Board that a 1 percent surtax had previously been levied to build the jail and that those funds are still being spent. He raised the disparity between a homestead parcel and vacant agricultural land assessed at approximately \$30 and observed that a resident who owns neither land nor a dwelling generates no assessment revenue yet calls for the same fire and ambulance service — a circumstance a sales surtax would capture. He characterized the surtax as a fair tax and asked the Board to examine it closely. He also cautioned that residents who fuel up across the river rather than in the county already cost the county revenue. He spoke to the history of the Buckeye mill, noting that his father worked on its construction, that county residents voted to bring it here, and that the river below it is one of only two designated industrial waste rivers in the state. He asked that the County not reject a data center outright without first hearing from someone who builds them and understanding whether such a use would generate tax revenue on the order of 400 acres of land, while also not destroying what the county has. He spoke to the importance of the fishing industry to the county's history, noting that his great-grandfather fished these waters.

Mr. Philmon stated he was a former airport firefighter of five years, stated that he supports fire protection and agrees with the Fire Chief's assessment of need, but questioned whether the County can afford the full level of service at once, noting that a number of new stations had been built largely with grant funds. He suggested bringing stations into service one at a time as funds allow.

- **Commissioner Stephenson** explained that the Horseshoe Beach station was placed as far out into the county as possible so that residents in that area, including those around

Wayne, could obtain reduced insurance rates by being within the required distance of a station. The speaker acknowledged the insurance benefit but noted that he pays a charge on that amendment ride in addition to his insurance premium, and that collection losses in low-income counties are themselves a factor not yet discussed. He recalled that five years earlier the assessment had gone from 180 to 310, that he had attended that meeting in Old Town, and that the same discussion had been had then; he predicted the Board would return for another increase in less than five years.

- **Commissioner Stephenson** advised that five years ago the assessment had not been touched in twenty-two years and stated that his goal and Vice-Chairman Storey's goal is to make changes and cuts in the departments in the coming year and bring the rates back down.
- **Mr. Philmon** asked that the sound system in the courtroom be repaired, stating that speakers cannot be heard from the audience.
- **Commissioner Stephenson** responded that the County has outgrown the courthouse and that space constraints are among the shortfalls the Board is working through.
- **Tim Johnson** presented a written breakdown of the solid waste budget, copies of which were distributed to the audience. He advised that the total solid waste assessment for the year was \$1,700,793, based on \$180 per unit. Of that amount, \$90,000 comes off the top for the engineering services required to monitor the construction and demolition hill, the water systems, and the monitoring wells, which are tested for arsenic and similar contaminants; none of that is available to the department. Operating expenses to run solid waste for the year were \$675,000. He advised that tipping fees at the regional landfill had been raised, adding two dollars per ton, and that each load hauled costs between \$1,200 and \$1,600. Part-time site help costs \$385,000 for the year with one month still to run. Hauling costs were approximately \$552,000. He advised that an employee at \$16.45 an hour costs roughly \$54,000 a year once insurance and FICA are added, and that repair and maintenance must come out of the same \$1.7 million, leaving very little.
- Mr. Johnson advised that when he began roughly ten years ago the regional landfill charged approximately \$43 a ton and now charges \$47 a ton, with no assurance against a further increase. He noted that much of the County's equipment is aged and most of the cans at the sites are rotted out, that compactors last about twenty years against roughly five years for a four-yard can, and that he is working to conserve the taxpayers' money.
- **Vice-Chairman Storey** summarized the figures. Expenditures shown in red on the distributed sheet total approximately \$2,501,500. Against that, commercial tipping fees at the transfer station brought in approximately \$321,000, scrap metal brought in \$20,000, and the State small county consolidated waste grant provided \$93,750. Taking revenues against expenditures, the department finished the year approximately \$273,000 short, and that shortfall was taken from the general fund; the proposal to raise the assessment to \$210 is intended to avoid drawing on the general fund.

He advised the audience of steps under way to reduce costs. A recycling operation is being established: the operator, Mr. Tim Whitbro, has purchased 30 acres across the street from the County transfer station, was to sign on the property Monday, and has begun clearing; Vice-Chairman Storey advised that he and Mr. Johnson had worked with him for about a year. Cardboard, cans, plastic, and glass absorb water and add weight for which the County pays \$47 a ton at the Greenville regional landfill, an hour and a half away under good conditions; removing that weight is expected to cut the figure roughly in half within two years, with some revenue returning to the County within three. Special collection cans are to be placed at all sites so cardboard can be separated out, with savings anticipated within about six months. He further advised that the County is obtaining prices on hauling its own metal, and that WC Mills currently hauls it because the County lacks the equipment, the County preferring to realize some revenue rather than let the material accumulate.

Vice-Chairman Storey also reported on the fleet. Four trucks were purchased over three years after the prior fleet — including a 2001 roll-off truck, with the newest at 2007 — broke down simultaneously at a cost of over a quarter of a million dollars in repairs. The 2012 packer truck is worn out and the newest is a 2019. He advised that the County had no choice but to purchase a new packer truck and a new roll-off truck, and that the planned compactors should make this the last packer truck the County must buy, since two roll-off trucks can be acquired for substantially less than one packer truck and can service the compactors.

- **John Osteen** asked why the County does not sell the approximately 100 acres purchased for the pellet mill at a cost of \$1.2 million, stating that no pellet mill is coming.
- **Vice-Chairman Storey** advised that the pellet mill is coming and that lease payments are already being made, that the County has a ten-year arrangement through the State with no payments and no interest for ten years, and that the payments received are being placed in an interest-bearing account. He also advised that the County receives approximately \$69,000 back from the three partner counties for hauling to the regional landfill, a check for which had been received that week.
- **Chairman Hatch** offered corrections on portions of that account.
- **Melissa Weedman** asked the Board to confirm that if the assessments are adopted and a 1 percent surtax later takes effect, the savings would be reflected on the ratepayers' bills, and asked that it be placed on the record that some of the savings from the recycling program would come back to the citizens. **Commissioner Stephenson** advised that revenue obtained from another source would be returned. **Vice-Chairman Storey** answered that his plan and hope is that as savings are realized in the coming year, the assessment can be brought back down.
- **Chairman Hatch** advised the audience that the Board had adopted rollback rates for property taxes. The general millage was reduced from 10 mills to 9.446, the EMS millage was reduced to 3.2, and the lottery levy was likewise decreased. He stated that by taking the rollback rates the Board had foregone approximately \$600,000 in revenue, and that for a homestead property the assessment increases should largely wash out against the millage

reductions — on the order of a \$110 annual increase against roughly a \$110 annual decrease. He further advised that in this year's budget no employee received a raise unless they were below \$15 an hour, and that nineteen positions vacated during the year were not filled: ten roll-off attendants, four in the road department, one in Ms. Marty's office, three paramedic and firefighter positions, and one on his own side. He described the staffing decisions as among the hardest the Board makes, while the County must still remove garbage safely and maintain fire protection.

- **Anne Hodges**, a certified public accountant who with her husband owns the property on which her office is located, advised the Board that her property is being assessed \$2,912 because the records show a dumpster on it, assessed at the dumpster rate for seven estimated tons of garbage, when in fact the office has a single garbage can for which she is billed \$18 a month by the city. She stated that she had already submitted the matter to the County Manager for correction and provided copies of her documentation to the Board. She advised that having read the materials, appearing before the Board seemed the only way to be certain a correction was made, and she urged property owners to read their notices and recognize that there may be errors on them. She noted that the error appeared to have persisted for about five years without her noticing it. She thanked the Board for its patience in hearing from the public.
- **Chairman Hatch** thanked Mrs. Hodges and advised that the County now performs the assessment study every five years, having gone nineteen years without one previously, that some errors are to be expected, and that owners should bring them to the County Manager's office to be corrected.
- **Sandy Newbar**, of Accenture, the consulting firm that assisted the County in developing both the fire and solid waste assessment programs, advised the Board and the audience that the bottom of each assessment notice states that errors will be corrected and provides a telephone number for the County Manager's office. She stated that if the units, dwelling units, square footage, or tonnage shown on a notice are incorrect, the property owner should call; that there is a process to correct the notice before it goes onto the tax bills; and that errors identified after the tax bills go out can also be corrected. She emphasized that the County does not want to charge anyone incorrectly.
- **Kathy Block**, a fourth-generation resident, advised the Board that her concern was not the ambulance or fire service, which she acknowledged must be paid for, but the County's scrap metal contract. She stated that approximately three years ago her brother appeared before the Board and bid for the County's scrap metal at \$6.50 a ton, while W. C. Mills bid, to her recollection, \$5.25 a ton, and the Board approved the lower bid. She stated that the sheet distributed at this meeting shows a current rate of \$4 per hundred pounds, significantly less than at the time of the vote. She advised that her brother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2019 after thirty to forty years as a mechanic, that the scrap business was the livelihood remaining to him, and that its loss took that from him. She further stated that Vice-Chairman Storey had said at the earlier meeting that the contract would go back out for bid the following year, that it never did, that no notice was issued, and that the award was quietly renewed with W. C. Mills.

- **Commissioner Stephenson** confirmed that he had voted against the award at the time and had been opposed to it.
- **Vice-Chairman Storey** responded that he thinks highly of Ms. Block's brother and considers him among the best mechanics he has known, but that during the eight or nine years in which that group gathered the County's scrap metal the County received no payment at all, and that he is glad to be receiving some revenue now. Ms. Block responded that an employee cannot be held responsible for the conduct of the person he works under.
- **Commissioner Stephenson** added that under the original arrangement trucks were required to be weighed before delivery, and that the Board subsequently voted to allow trucks to proceed directly to the scrap mill without returning to be weighed.
- **Nicole Myers**, a resident of four years, advised the Board that she lives near the new fire station on Chavous and that, while she appreciates the apparatus and ambulances, they continue to use the dirt portion of the road rather than the paved road, leaving her road badly potholed. She stated that she had called about grading repeatedly, that the road on 349 is in poor condition, and that if heavy apparatus is to use these roads the County must maintain them.
- **Commissioner Stephenson** responded that the County is working toward that. He advised that grading alone is insufficient — material dropped into a pothole blows out in the wind or washes out in the rain — and that the roads need to be ripped so the lime rock can be brought back up and recompacted and crowned so water runs off. He noted that some roads in his district sit higher than the adjacent fence and still hold water, that reduced manpower and budget constraints limit the work, and that the roads completed to date are making a difference.
- **Sandy Occhiogrosso**, a property owner in the First District, advised the Board that she had come to the meeting to thank County staff rather than to complain. She reported that the previous evening at about 5:00 p.m. lightning from the thunderstorms set one of her sheds on fire; her uncle attempted to fight it with a fire extinguisher without success, and the fire spread to two additional sheds in both directions, moving toward a camper. The fire department responded, extinguished the fire, and remained on her property more than five hours with three trucks, an ambulance, and fire backup. Three sheds were lost, containing a washer and dryer, a freezer of food, a backup refrigerator, tools, and items of sentimental value belonging to her grandparents; the home, thirty feet away, was spared. She also advised the Board that thirteen years earlier a portable methamphetamine lab set up on the back of her property had caused a fire in the family's barn and yard.

Ms. Occhiogrosso advised that she has lived in Dixie County for thirty years, having come here as a child, and that while she is not able to absorb increases either, prices have risen on every item and essential services are among the things the community must fund. She stated that needs must be distinguished from wants, that she had helped care for grandparents on a fixed income through strokes, Alzheimer's, and dementia, and that discretionary spending should be given up before emergency personnel. She spoke in support of the 1 percent sales surtax, noting from her work in Gainesville that the inclusive

playgrounds and similar public facilities there were built with such a levy and that the incremental cost is not noticed. She stated that she had been disappointed by the conduct of the earlier portion of the meeting, describing interruption and people talking over one another, and asked that residents work together rather than against one another. She stated that length of residence should not determine whose voice counts, and thanked Leon and the other staff who assisted her that day, Roy Bass for his assistance with paperwork, and the Fire Chief, who made time while busy to provide her fire report and to review the cost documentation with her.

- **Commissioner Stephenson** agreed that anyone who moves to the county and buys property is a citizen of Dixie County and offered to provide and process game from his farm to assist her family.
- **Alan Peters**, a volunteer firefighter, advised the Board and the audience that while the County's population growth means residents now expect an immediate response, volunteers can still reduce costs, and he challenged those able to do so to come in the following week and volunteer. He advised that Station 31 once had seven members and now has four, most of whom work other jobs, and that he is 64 years old and still responding.
- **Commissioner Stephenson** noted that the county once had one of the strongest volunteer fire services in the state and thanked Mr. Peters for continuing to serve.
- **Chairman Hatch** also thanked him.
- **Bert Buzbee** advised the Board that, having heard the evening's discussion, he intends to remain in Dixie County and would accept an increase in his assessments. He stated that the Fire Chief's department had responded to his oldest son two weeks earlier and that his son would not have survived otherwise, and he thanked the Chief and the entire department. He commended Mr. Johnson and the County's employees, advised the Board that it has good people working for it, and asked the Board to support them. He then asked the question he said many residents have not yet had answered: the disposition of the County's solid waste sites, and what the Board intends to do with them to save money.
- **Commissioner Stephenson** advised that he had sought to keep the First District site open as an unmanned site taking household garbage only, with all other material directed to the main roll-off facility to cross the scale so that volume is captured and each user pays proportionally. He stated his view that the assessment should reflect the amount of garbage a household actually generates.
- **Vice-Chairman Storey** advised that the First District site will be closed to save money, and that site 317 would follow, though not necessarily permanently. He noted that Commissioner Stephenson had himself seconded the motion to close that site at the recent budget meeting and had the opportunity to raise it then. He advised that Pole Gap, on 349, is the County's most heavily used site and will remain open seven days a week as the only site on that schedule, with the remaining sites reduced in hours and days.

- Mr. Buzbee asked about the compactor placed at Pole Gap and how many cans it had allowed the County to remove.
- **Vice-Chairman Storey** advised that the County has 18 cans there and has not yet removed cans by reason of the compactor but is able to.
- **Mr. Johnson** advised that the site once had 52 cans and that approximately half have been removed. Vice-Chairman Storey advised that a second compactor has been ordered and paid for from the prior year's funds but not yet delivered, that it will be placed at that site with additional dumpsters then removed, and that power is not yet run to the unit at the rock pit on 351.
- Mr. Buzbee asked what determined the selection of the First District site for closure and was advised that it takes in the least garbage of any site.
- **Commissioner Stephenson** advised that the site serves the north end of the county, with residents traveling up to fifteen miles from the county line and reiterated his preference for an unmanned site there. Mr. Buzbee stated that he was not asking that the site be kept open, and that given the residents of that district an unmanned site there would remain the cleanest site in the county.
- Mr. Buzbee also urged the Commissioners to set aside the disagreement between them, observing that Commissioner Stephenson had acted in what he believed to be the interest of the largest district in the county — the largest by land mass, population, and road mileage — while Vice-Chairman Storey was acting in the interest of the county as a whole. He stated that the Board should do what is financially best for the county, whether that means closing a site, reducing days of operation, or reducing the number of site managers, and asked that the Board and the public speak to one another decently.
- **Vice-Chairman Storey** presented a comparison with Gilchrist County, offering to provide copies of his notes from an hour-and-a-half visit to that county's facility. He advised that Gilchrist County is of comparable size with two to three thousand more residents and operates six sites against Dixie County's nine. At Gilchrist County the transfer station is the only place scrap may be hauled, and users cross the scale and pay \$4 per hundred pounds; Gilchrist charges per mattress, charges \$4 per hundred pounds for limbs and yard debris at its single site, and charges roughly \$12 per tire against the \$5 Dixie County pays. Gilchrist County's assessment is \$135 against Dixie County's \$180. He advised that Dixie County charges for none of those items, that this is a matter he is examining, and that the present practice uses general revenue and staff time — two or three men to burn the material — to dispose of yard debris hauled in by others. He also advised that Levy County operates four sites open three days a week, with residents holding their household waste until a site is open and stated that residents here have had it easier for longer than most.
- **Vice-Chairman Storey** summarized the history: the County's own landfill five miles up the road was closed by the State in the 1990s, and because a single small county cannot afford a lined landfill with the required engineering and monitoring, Dixie County joined with Taylor, Jefferson, and Madison Counties to own the regional landfill at Greenville. Dixie

County hauls the waste and receives approximately \$69,000 back from the other three counties to help with fuel. The round trip exceeds thirty minutes each way, the truck and trailer average four and a half to five miles per gallon, and fuel is approximately \$6 a gallon. He advised that the department remains \$275,000 short, that the County is seeking to avoid drawing that from the general fund, and that he had distributed the breakdown so residents could see where the money goes. He asked for a few years to bring the recycling program online and reduce the cost, noting that his term begins again in November.

- **Commissioner Stephenson** addressed the earlier recycling attempt, advising that residents would not be required to separate materials at home, and that the previous program failed because separation was attempted at the site. He recounted an incident in which a Department of Transportation inspector, preparing to go beneath one of the County's trucks, observed the material falling from it. He stated that separation must occur at the other end of the process.
- **Jennifer Hickman**, of Old Town, advised the Board that while fire and EMS service is plainly necessary, she wished to know what measures had been examined before an assessment was placed on residents — whether an income tax increase, a sales tax as Mr. Mash had described, or a levy reaching visitors and tourism had been considered. She noted that a substantial share of the county is owned by Bascom Global and Campbell Global, the latter she understood now held by J.P. Morgan, and stated that those owners could afford to pay somewhat more rather than the burden falling on citizens. She advised that she had reviewed one parcel of nearly 500 acres assessed at approximately \$1,700, roughly \$200 more than her own home, and that even an increase to ten cents would not be material to owners making billions. She stated that the county is poor in its residents but rich in land, and that greater transparency — a clear statement that the alternatives had been examined and that this was the only option — would have reduced the public frustration evident at the meeting.
- **Commissioner Stephenson** advised that the County has a tourist development tax but that its proceeds may be spent only on advertising and events and cannot be applied to these services, and that the permissible uses of a sales tax depend on the purpose for which it is levied. He stated that the Board is looking at all avenues and that he would vote to place the 1 percent levy on the November ballot.
- **County Attorney Chana Watson** addressed Ms. Hickman's question from a legal standpoint. She advised that these assessments must be proportionate as a matter of state law; that the consulting firm conducts a full study, reviews historical records, and projects future need; and that changing the rate for one class of property changes all of the other figures, because the classes — large property owners, homeowners, and commercial — are interwoven and the allocation must remain proportional. She advised that she had asked Ms. Newbar to run such numbers previously and that Ms. Newbar could demonstrate the effect.
- **Gerald Goshorn**, who spelled his name for the record, suggested an additional revenue source: tire reclamation. He advised that machinery developed approximately twenty years ago separates the steel belts from the rubber of steel-belted tires using a closed water

system, recovering both the rubber and the cleaned steel for sale without polluting the water. Commissioner Stephenson responded that the County's goal is for the transfer facility to run self-sufficiently, described the financing of the facility through a low-interest municipal loan at approximately 2.5 percent while County funds remained on deposit earning approximately 6 percent, and noted that while waste from other counties could be brought in for additional revenue, doing so would shorten the useful life of the County's own facility, which he wished to preserve.

- **David Sanders**, a business owner in the county, advised the Board that his business brings substantial revenue into the county and spends it here on salaries, parts, and other costs, without earning anything within the county itself. He stated that he appreciates the Board turning its attention to the budget in order to reduce the burden on taxpayers, and that he accepts fire and solid waste service as necessary but believes other areas of the budget can be examined. Specifically, he asked why Madison County and Taylor County operate their sheriff's departments on 13 to 15 percent of their tax budgets while Dixie County's is 31.24 percent and urged the Board to make cuts there before raising taxes on residents.
- **Commissioner Stephenson** responded as to the revenue base in Taylor County. Mr. Sanders replied that Madison County operates on a comparable sheriff's budget to Taylor County's while Dixie County's is more than twice as large, that in his view the department is over-budgeted, and that it is the Board's job to curtail overspending and to examine where reductions are possible before raising taxes. He advised that as a business owner of more than twenty years he had cut back during COVID, manages his own budget, and has not borrowed money. He asked the Board to stop approving departmental requests for increases over the prior year's budget without examining them and questioned the number of county-tagged vehicles at the school system against the annual increases in the school budget, recalling that when he attended school only the truant officer had a vehicle. He advised that he is a fifth-generation resident and that he knows where waste exists. During his remarks Mr. Sanders objected to interruptions from the dais and asked the Chair to confirm that he held the floor, which the Chair confirmed.
- **Jovante Teague** asked whether the Board had considered inviting DOGE or FAFO to review the County's operations, advising that she works closely with the Chief Financial Officer and that he has agreed to come to any county to scrutinize its finances and assist.
- **Red Hodge** advised the Board that he had heard of cutbacks in the County offices while the fire and trash assessments are being raised. He stated that the road on which he lives, 266, had been graded once in a year, in the course of which the lime rock was scraped off the road and grass placed in a hole. He also questioned the County paying an outside vendor to crush rock when the County owns a rock crusher that is repeatedly out of service and asked that the motor grader be run past his house.
- **Andrew Quincoses** offered what he described as a different perspective, stating that it was a shame so many residents had already left the meeting. He advised that in his view the frustration in the room is directed at the wrong target: the currency continues to lose value, particularly for those on fixed incomes whose benefits were set at a fixed rate, and costs rise accordingly. He advised that the county continues to grow, that additional residents will

require additional ambulances, facilities, and resources, and that he understands Vice Chairman Storey's position on solid waste, though he is not pleased to pay more. He stated that he dislikes taxes, that he believes budgets can likely be managed better and that the Commissioners must be held accountable, but that he does not regard them as bad men and that the underlying cost pressures are not of their making.

- **Ms. Myers** asked further why construction and demolition debris collection had been withdrawn from the sites. Mr. Johnson explained that under Department of Environmental Protection rules, if construction and demolition material is mixed with even one bag of household garbage the entire load becomes garbage and must be disposed of in the Class Three cell at the regional landfill at additional cost to the County, and that the material was removed from the sites because users could not be kept from mixing garbage into it. Asked whether residents would comply with recycling requirements or whether the County would have to hire people to pull cardboard out of the trash, staff advised that no additional personnel would be hired and that inmate labor is not used for that purpose.
- **Jerry Spire**, who advised that he relocated to Florida from a dairy farm in New York and later to Dixie County, described two medical emergencies. In the first, shortly after the family moved here and while living in a converted shipping container, his wife suffered a sudden diabetic episode; on driving her to the EMS station he found no ambulance present, the nearest unit twenty minutes away, and the person on site attempting to obtain guidance by telephone. In the second, two years ago, he suffered abdominal pain that proved to be a ruptured artery to his kidney; on reaching Fanning Springs he stopped at the fire station, which had discontinued its ambulance the week before, and waited approximately twenty minutes for a unit, remembering nothing after arrival at the hospital. He asked how many ambulances the county has in service on a Friday afternoon and reported that returning from Gainesville the previous day he had passed one Dixie County ambulance travelling at the speed limit, another in Jonesville, and a third heading toward Gainesville without lights, which he took to mean that much of the county's fleet was an hour away.
- **Chief Brown** advised that on any given day the County has three ambulances in service, having temporarily closed one unit for lack of staff, and four at full staffing. He advised that the County runs approximately 6,000 calls a year to Gainesville, that each is roughly a three-hour round trip before any wait time at the hospital, and that crews cover 700 square miles including three coastal districts at distances of 23, 18, and 18 miles one way, with an additional 45 minutes to reach the coast. He advised residents to call 911 rather than stopping at a station, since the nearest available unit is dispatched and crews may be anywhere in the county; he noted that personnel had been sent from the previous evening's meeting to the shed fire Ms. Occhiogrosso had described.
- **Mr. Spire** asked whether the County has approached hospital systems about establishing an on-site emergency room, suggesting the heliport, the airport, the fire station next door, or the former doctor's office nearby as possible locations, and asked whether a patient requesting transport must be taken to a hospital or may be taken to an emergency room.

- **Chief Brown** advised that the County has repeatedly asked HCA and Shands, both in Gainesville, to place a hospital or freestanding emergency department in Dixie County, and that both have responded that the volume is insufficient. He advised that he has worked for three years to find a private company to build a hospital here, that a prospective operator is currently examining three parcels — two in Dixie County and one nearby — and is prepared to spend the money but requires management and staff.

He further advised that the county has three healthcare facilities: a federally qualified health center funded by the federal government and operated out of the Leon County area, which has closed its office and moved to Taylor County; one in Old Town funded through Shands, which as of his last information was not accepting patients; and one local facility which is seeing patients. He advised that inadequate local healthcare access is part of the reason transport volumes are so high, as residents without a physician call EMS for conditions that would otherwise be treated in an office, and that the County is required by law to transport to an emergency room, generally located at a hospital.

He explained the effect of freestanding emergency departments, which generate emergency admissions that are then transferred to the main hospitals where beds are unavailable, leaving patients waiting in the emergency department. He advised that on a recent day Shands had 68 beds available to the emergency department and 60 patients waiting to go upstairs, leaving eight beds to serve Dixie County and the surrounding counties. He agreed that a local hospital would reduce transport times and keep units in the county. He advised that transport destination is determined by the closest appropriate facility together with the patient's needs, that patients who ask to be taken to Lake City or elsewhere within range are accommodated, and that most county residents' physicians are in the Gainesville area.

#### **CHANA WATSON, COUNTY ATTORNEY**

Nothing further to present currently.

#### **BARBIE HIGGINBOTHAM, CLERK OF COURT**

Mrs. Higginbotham thanked the Board and staff for their assistance with the budget, noting that it had been a demanding several weeks involving a number of late nights and a great deal of work.

She also thanked the Commissioners for what the Board had agreed to give up the previous evening and expressed her appreciation on behalf of staff.

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#### **BRENDA ROYAL, CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER**

Nothing further to present currently.

#### **COUNTY COMMISSION ITEMS**

**Chairman Hatch** called upon the members of the Board for closing comments.

**Vice-Chairman Storey** stated that the Board had held a good, long meeting and that the members had managed to get through it without turning on one another, which he counted as a positive. He expressed regret at the increases the Board had found it necessary to adopt and stated that his objective is to bring the rates back down within four years.

#### **PUBLIC COMMENTS AND CONCERNS**

- **James Philmon** responded from the floor that he had never seen an assessment go back down.
- **Alison Stevens** who advised that she has lived on the road in question for forty years asked whether the County could clear the shoulders of the road on which she lives. She stated that the road carries heavy traffic, that motorists travel it at high speed to avoid the traffic signal, and that drivers cannot determine where the edge of the roadway ends and must pull off into the grass to allow oncoming vehicles to pass. She advised that the condition is worse around the curve, and she identified the point at which the road changes from county to city jurisdiction. She suggested that markers be installed so that the boundaries of the roadway can be identified.
- **Bert Buzbee** concurred, noting that two vehicles cannot pass on the road.
- **Chairman Hatch** and **Commissioner Stephenson** acknowledged the request, and Commissioner Stephenson advised that trees along the corridor likely need trimming as well, though he was uncertain whether they stand within the right of way or on private property.
- **Commissioner Stephenson** offered closing remarks. He apologized to anyone he may have offended during the meeting, stating that the county is very dear to him and that he becomes overwhelmed at times.

On the comparison drawn earlier in the evening between Dixie County and its neighbors, Commissioner Stephenson advised that Taylor County and the others have a hospital within their county, and that the County would operate far more efficiently if it had one. He advised that a company remains willing to build a sixteen-bed emergency facility at Old Town, adjacent to the fire station, and that the funding is still available and being held. He stated that he has approached every hospital system in Gainesville, and that the obstacle is staffing: the providers will not commit the funds until staffing can be secured. He attributed the staffing difficulty in part to the disappearance of small-town physicians over the past seven or eight years, as the cost of malpractice insurance has driven doctors to practice in groups. He stated that if staffing can be

arranged, a hospital would be built immediately, and that once open the facility would draw patients from Levy, Lafayette, and surrounding counties. He advised that such a facility would allow patients to be stabilized locally and would allow minor injuries to be treated here rather than transported an hour to Gainesville.

- **An unidentified resident** responded that his wife is a registered nurse and would not make the drive to Shands, as the wage offered there is five dollars an hour less than she earns in St. Petersburg and is comparable to the starting wage for a new graduate.
- **Commissioner Stephenson** closed by speaking of a difficult period in his own life following the deaths of his parents and the loss of his house in Horseshoe Beach, and of the encouragement given to him before his death by his friend Mr. Paul Martin, who had moved to the county thirty years ago and died at the age of 92. He stated that Mr. Martin's words restored him and continue to drive his service to the county. Commissioner Stephenson further announced that services for Mr. Paul Martin, a retired FBI agent, will depart from Rick Gooding Funeral Home on Thursday at 7:30 a.m. for the National Cemetery at Bushnell, where the remainder of the service will be conducted, and invited any who wish to attend.
- **Commissioner David Osteen** thanked everyone for the hard work and long hours devoted to the budget, including all of the constitutional officers and Ms. Brenda, whose tireless work and commitment he said mean a great deal to the Board. He further thanked the members of the public who came and spoke on the assessments and on the data center and expressed appreciation for the community coming together and being heard.

#### CLOSING PUBLIC COMMENT

- **James Philmon** asked the Board whether it had just voted on the assessments and was advised that it had. Mr. Philmon stated that the members had made up their minds before arriving, that there had accordingly been no reason for the public to attend, and that he had not been aware the vote was being taken, as he has difficulty hearing. He asked that the record reflect that all five Commissioners voted in favor of the assessments, and asked whether any member had voted against them, requesting that any such member identify himself.
- **Justin Hardy** advised the Board that he is employed by the County, that he likes his job and reports to work each day, and that he does not earn a great deal. He stated that he has no objection to the fire department, but that he can barely meet his obligations now and cannot absorb a tax increase.

- **Gerald Goshorn** told the Board that it needs to be more transparent and to give residents advance notice of these meetings and of what is to be decided, advising that this meeting was the first notice he received and that the decision to raise the assessments had already been made.
- **Commissioner Stephenson** responded that all of the meetings were advertised in advance, with the dates, times, and places published in the newspaper of record, which is where the County is legally required to place such notices. He offered to telephone Mr. Hardy directly in advance of future meetings and to provide him with a printed schedule. Mr. Goshorn provided his telephone number for that purpose.
- **Mary Goodrich** raised a further question concerning road maintenance, referring to the earlier comments about grading. She asked who verifies that the grader operator is performing the work assigned — if a resident calls, a work order is issued, and the operator is given five roads to grade in a day, who goes out and inspects those roads. She stated that he had observed the grader stopped on the road at 9:30 and 10:30 with the operator on his telephone, and asked what hours the operator works, how much time is allowed for lunch, and what time he finishes. She stated that she did not question that the calls are received and the work orders issued but asked who supervises the work in the field.
- **Janet Osteen** addressed the Board in appreciation of the County's emergency medical service. She advised that her husband was attended by EMS on many occasions and nearly died several times, that she cared for him until crews arrived, and that response times varied from five to thirty minutes although she lives ten minutes from the station. She stated that the ambulance service is not used as it once was, and that residents call for conditions such as a hurt foot or ankle, which delays response to genuine emergencies. She advised that many services the County's personnel provide go unrecognized, citing one employee present who spends hours at the homes of elderly residents and frequently spends her own money assisting people in need. She stated that a solution is needed for residents who live far from care, acknowledging the legal requirement to transport patients to a hospital, and observed that a principal reason for the rising cost is that those who call for minor complaints do not pay their bills, and that many call because they have no other means of reaching a doctor. She thanked the EMS personnel by name, including Chief Brown, Chief Ferguson, and Mikel Gainey, and thanked the Board for finally paving her road as promised.

## **ADJOURN**

**Motion to Adjourn made by Vice Chairman Storey. Seconded by Commissioner Osteen. Board approved.**

ATTEST:

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Mark Hatch, Chairman

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Barbie Higginbotham, Clerk-Auditor

**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.