STATE OF GEORGIA
COUNTY OF HENRY

The Henry County Board of Commissioners held a Called Meeting for Millage Rate Public Hearing ***in-person*** on Tuesday, July 25, 2023, 6:00 p.m., at the Henry County Administration Building (Community Room), 140 Henry Parkway, McDonough GA. HenryTV also streamed this live online at its website, as well as Charter/Spectrum Channel 180 and Facebook Live.

Carlotta Harrell, Chair
Johnny Wilson, District 1 Commissioner
Neat Robinson, District 2 Commissioner
Dee Anglyn, III, District 3 Commissioner
Kevin J. Lewis, Vice Chair/District 5 Commissioner

ABSENT: Vivian Thomas, District 4 Commissioner

Also in attendance: Cheri Hobson-Matthews, County Manager; Nancy Rowan, County Attorney; Bernita Campbell, Budget Director; Michael Harris, Henry County Tax Commissioner; Stephanie Braun, County Clerk; and Jasmin Head, Deputy County Clerk

HENRY COUNTY CODE OF CONDUCT

(Sec. 2-2-128: Conduct during public meetings)

INVOCATION

No Invocation was given.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Pledge was recited.

CALL TO ORDER

Carlotta Harrell, Chair, called the Meeting for the Millage Rate Public Hearing of the Henry County Board of Commissioners for Tuesday, July 25, 2023 at 6:00 p.m. to order.

MILLAGE RATE – PUBLIC HEARING

2023-2024 Millage Rate Presentation

Bernita Campbell, Budget Director, approached to provide highlights from the Budget for the Board, as she had done at the morning meeting. The FY2024 Adopted General Fund Budget has a 7% increase year-over-year. The Budget was based on the current millage rate at 12.733. Of note, current revenues were used on current projected expenditures and Fund Balance was not used to balance the Budget. She noted that some of the expenditures included the Class & Comp Study implementation, Judicial supplement increases and countywide contract increases. The expected Tax Digest growth is 14%, upon which the FY2024 Budget was based. She then yielded the floor to the Tax Commissioner for further presentation.

Michael Harris, Henry County Tax Commissioner, approached and commented that the millage rate having stayed the same for the last 6+ years is a testament to the work from staff and management in the budget being drafted effectively without raising the millage rate. He then repeated his presentation from this morning's meeting in explanation of the millage rate and how property values are calculated. He went through the process of compiling the tax bill and that property owners receive an assessed value notice, which is not a tax bill, every year and property owners are able to file appeals if they disagree with the assessed value. Mr. Harris then explained the process of calculating property tax values upon homesteaded and non-homesteaded property at a millage rate of 12.733 mills. He continues to emphasize that this is the millage rate for the county taxes only, not the school board or other entities that have separate millage rates.

Mr. Harris then presented the process of determining how a property is eligible for frozen homestead exemption and how that exemption is beneficial to the property owners.

Mr. Harris then provided a sample of the tax bill (using an example bill from 2020) to clarify how the property is assessed for taxes and how the millage rate is applied to that as well. Upon showing an example bill from 2021, he noted that the taxable value stayed the same (for county taxes) for 2020, 2021 and 2022, but that the exemption value increased over that time, to help offset in the increase in the fair market value (FMV) thus keeping the taxable value the same for the county taxes.

Chair Harrell asked about the slide discussing what happens to the tax bill and remarked that property values go up and millage rate stays the same. Since the county does not control property values going up; she asked how the property values are assessed. **Mr. Harris** stated that the Tax Assessor determines that value based on sales, market trends, etc. and they follow strict guidelines to make the assessments. Increase in property value is not controlled by the Board of Commissioners; it is a formula that the Tax Assessor's office has to use in calculating the property values. If the frozen homestead applies, the taxable value would stay the same. The Chair then pointed out if the property owner has not filed for a homestead exemption, then they do not qualify for the frozen exemption; Mr. Harris affirmed same. Notices of information stressing new homeowners to apply for homestead exemption are sent out; if not filed, then the property owner is subject to increasing tax rates each year.

Chair Harrell then remarked on the example bills with the increases coming from the School and Water; **Mr. Harris** explained that with a sample FMV of $178,000 with M&O and School Bond tax rates in 2020, in 2021, the county taxes remain the same but the M&O and School Bond have both increased. The School Board taxes are not part of the frozen exemption. Mr. Harris added that there is age exemption offered beginning at age 62 but they must come in re-apply by January 1st of that year, and they can deduct a certain amount off of the School Board assessed taxes, which would lower the tax value. He noted that at age 70, the School Board taxes are no longer paid by the property owner. Other exemptions such as disability veterans, disability citizens, surviving spouses, etc. can also apply.

Mr. Harris then presented the graph, as was done this morning, to show where the tax dollars go, with the majority going to the School Board taxes, at 58%. The School Board has been at 20 mills for years and that is the max rate. He went through the Digest process itself, from assessment of property at the Tax Assessor's office to prepare the Digest; from there, it goes to the Tax Commissioner's Office to work through the millage process in perfecting the Digest; then the Board of Education sets their millage rate (much the same way as the Board of Commissioners based on their budget and budget needs).

Chair Harrell noted that the Tax Commissioner's office probably received numerous citizens' concerns over property value increases. She asked if the homeowner relief grant, as presented in this morning's meeting, would provide tax relief to those who receive same. **Mr. Harris** responded that this program was passed by the state and unknown to the county but those who are eligible will see this relief as "HTRG" credit on their next tax bill; that relief would be a little more if the homeowner lives within city limits.

Mr. Harris advised that this is the second Public Hearing, with the third hearing and adoption to follow on August 1, 2023 at 9:00 a.m.

Chair Harrell called the Budget Director forward. She then commented about the rollback in Henry County due to the fact that the City of Stockbridge started its own Police Department. **Mr. Harris** stated that the Police Special Services District had Stockbridge receiving services from Henry County but last year, the city started its own police force. Prior, they were paying 1.94 mill to cover the county's police services for them. Since Stockbridge has its own police force, that 1.94 mill that Stockbridge citizens paid has now been eliminated and Stockbridge has not yet established a millage rate of its own as of yet.

Chair Harrell asked what percentage of the county budget goes to Public Safety; **Ms. Campbell** responded that 52% of the overall General Fund Budget. The Chair asked what percentage goes to Parks & Recreation and Senior Services; Ms. Campbell estimated 10% and does not include Senior Services, which is covered under the General Fund.

There were no further questions. **Chair Harrell** opened the floor for Public Hearing. Persons wishing to speak to come forward and state their name, giving each person three (3) minutes to speak.

Mindy Mayers expressed concern on increasing taxes in any way since Stockbridge is going to implement a separate tax. She asked the Board to consider the impact that it is having on pricing out residents from their homes with the drastic increase in taxes annually.

Joseph Robles also expressed concern on managing the taxes; however, with the increase in taxes and with inflation going up 4-8% since the pandemic, home value increase has gone up about 15% each year but salaries are only increasing about 3% on the whole. He suggested a decrease in the millage rate and with the tax credit from Governor Kemp and home property values increasing, it does not benefit the homeowner to be able to afford to pay their taxes.

Brooke Winfrey remarked with a concern on the School Board taxes which is affecting the increase in taxes the most and suggested to work with the School Board in helping to bring some relief to the homeowners in the county.

Robin James stated that the School Board tax continues to go up and does not benefit her husband she since they have no children and should not be impacted by this School Board tax.

CHAIR HARRELL BRIEFLY LEFT THE MEETING

Jamal Avery, commented that with his understanding of taxes, he hopes that the Board of Commissioners can work with the School Board on maintaining their tax rate so as not to negatively impact those who do not have children in the School System. He expressed concern with the current tax dollars budget allocated as he passes trash along the highway and driving over pot holes which are problems in Henry County and asked if cuts can be made to budgets that do not directly affect residents in favor of paying for the services that are needed in these areas.

CHAIR HARRELL RETURNED TO THE MEETING

Joshua Eckhoff, referred to the School Board meeting he attended and the fact that the taxes keep increasing and pricing people out. There are only 25 members of the Department of Transportation (DOT) that mow the grass 3 times a year. He noted that Code Enforcement is becoming more effective and he appreciates it, but if these taxes continue to increase, residents could get priced out of their homes. He expressed a willingness to help out himself if the Board needs and if it would make a difference.

No one else came forward.

Chair Harrell called the Tax Commissioner forward.

Chair Harrell noted concern for Mrs. James' remarks and asked if they applied for the age exemption discount; **Mr. Harris** asked to see Mrs. James and her husband to discuss further. Mr. Harris also corrected a comment made earlier that it is not 18%, but rather it is $18,000 reduction in the assessed value and not a percentage, with $18,000 times millage rate for the School Board and county General Fund, which is a flat fee number. The increases come from non-homesteaded entities, such as investor owned and commercial digests, which valuations went up as properties went up. The industrial aspect equates to about 19% of the Digest.

Dee Anglyn III, District 3 Commissioner, reiterated his comment from earlier that it is important to understand that asking for a millage rate reduction is not always beneficial. He has the frozen tax exemption, which kept his county taxes the same. Commercial and industrial have the lowest impact on county services but have the highest impact on the roads. If someone asks for a reduction in taxes with a frozen homestead exemption, the reality is that the commercial and industrial reduction would take place. Henry County is in the bottom one-third in tax values in the State of Georgia, as verified on the state website. He urged citizens to get the frozen homestead exemption for their primary residences as Henry County is one of the few counties to offer this benefit.

Chair Harrell explained that the School Board has its own Board, sets their own budget, and unfortunately, their taxes are not under the frozen exemption.

Stephanie Braun, County Clerk, advised that Councilwoman Thomas was waiting to make public comment if the Public Hearing was still open. **Chair Harrell** had no objection.

Vanessa Thomas, Councilwoman-at-Large, City of McDonough, spoke about the city tax, county tax and School Board tax. Working together is an option that should be considered as taxes continue to increase and affect senior citizens who are on fixed incomes. While the exemptions are beneficial, it is in progression of age. Clayton County gives full exemption to their senior property owners at age 65 and she suggested that be done in Henry County especially for seniors who now live on fixed incomes.

UPCOMING MEETINGS & EVENTS

A. Tuesday, August 1, 2023 at 9:00 a.m., Regular BOC Meeting to include the third Millage Rate Public Hearing and Adoption

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to come before the Henry County Board of Commissioners at this time **Chair Harrell** adjourned the meeting. ***Meeting adjourned at 6:52 p.m.***

Carlotta Harrell, Chair

Stephanie Braun, County Clerk