

December 5, 2023

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**STATE OF GEORGIA
COUNTY OF HENRY**

The Henry County Board of Commissioners held a Called Public Meeting *in-person* on Thursday, December 5, 2024, 8:00 a.m., at the Henry County Administration Building (Community Room), 140 Henry Parkway, McDonough Georgia.

Carlotta Harrell, Chair
Johnny Wilson, District 1 Commissioner
Neat Robinson, District 2 Commissioner
Dee Anglyn, III, District 3 Commissioner
Michael Price, Vice-Chair/District 4 Commissioner (*Not present*)
Kevin J. Lewis, District 5 Commissioner

Also in attendance:

Delegation: Senator Gail Davenport/District 44; Senator Emanuel Jones (via phone)/District 10; Representative El-Mahdi Holly/District 116; Representative Mary Ann Santos/District 117; Representative Regina Lewis-Ward/District 115; Representative Demetruis Douglas/District 78 and Representative Robert Flournoy, Jr./District 74

Lobbyist: Don Bolia, Peachtree Government Relations

Henry County School District: Sophe Pope, Board Chair; and Dr. John Pace, III, Superintendent

Henry County Water Authority: Tony Carnell, General Manager

Henry County Development Authority: Irvin Culpepper, Board Chair and Sharon Hill, Executive Director

Henry County Chamber of Commerce: Joseph Henning, President/CEO

Atlanta Motor Speedway: Brandon Hutchinson, Executive Vice President/General Manager

Henry County Staff Present: Cheri Hobson-Matthews, County Manager; Ashley Larrow, CM Chief of Staff; Dr. Chalonda Smith, BOC Chair Chief of Staff; Serena Nowell, County Attorney; Stephanie Braun, County Clerk; Jasmin Head, Deputy County Clerk; and Amanda Reeves, Assistant Director, Community Resources

Cluster Leads: Shannan Sagnot, Roque Romero, Hutch Purvis, Toussaint Kirk, and David Smith

Henry County Public Safety: Fire Chief Jonathan Burnett, Police Chief Mike Ireland, and HCSO Chief Deputy Michael Yarbrough

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting of the Henry County Board of Commissioners for Thursday, December 5, 2024 at 8:30 a.m. was called to order.

Chair Carlotta Harrell extended a warm welcome to all attendees and introduced several delegation members in attendance.

Cheri Hobson-Matthews, County Manager, extended a warm welcome to all attendees and introduced several staff members in attendance.

Ashley Larrow, County Manager's Chief of Staff, stepped forward to provide a brief introduction to the topics that would be discussed. She stated that there are three priority issues on the agenda for today's discussion: Fire Services, De-Annexation, and Mental Health. The first speaker will be **Fire Chief Jonathan Burnette**.

Re: Fire Services

Fire Chief Jonathan Burnette outlined the main priorities, which include Fire Marshals and the installation of sprinklers in townhomes. He explained that Henry County Fire Rescue is the primary responding agency for fire and EMS calls across the County, except within the McDonough city limits. He noted that Henry County Fire Services is responsible for covering fire services for three of the four cities in the County, while McDonough manages its own fire services.

Chief Burnette also pointed out that all four cities have their own Fire Marshals. One issue he highlighted is a provision in the law allowing a city to have its own Fire Marshal, regardless of whether the city provides fire services. This lack of coordination creates problems, as there is no communication between the cities and the County regarding what can be built within city boundaries. Previously, before cities had their own Fire Marshals, the County's Fire Marshal was responsible for site plans, pre-plans, building inspections, and ensuring that health and safety aspects were incorporated into designs and construction. However, when cities adopted their own Fire Marshals, they moved away from County oversight. As a result, the County no longer has input on what is being built within city limits. The issue arises when emergencies occur inside these buildings. If a building catches fire, it becomes the County's responsibility to respond, despite having had no involvement in the oversight or planning stages.

Chief Burnette stated that sprinklers in townhomes present a significant challenge for fire services due to language in the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) law, which classifies a townhome as a single-family residence. The issue is that a single-family residence can exist under a shared rooftop, yet fire services have no authority to mandate sprinklers in these cases. In contrast, for other types of multi-family dwellings, fire services have the authority to require sprinklers. This discrepancy in the law creates challenges for ensuring adequate fire safety in townhomes.

Re: De-annexation

Ashley Larrow, CM/Chief of Staff, addressed the topic of De-Annexation, focusing on the County's ability to de-annex County-owned property from a city. She explained that the main issue they encounter is the lack of progress in the process. Although they initiated this process in April, it is now December, and the necessary information has yet to be submitted to the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA).

She pointed out that the current OCGA (Official Code of Georgia Annotated) does not provide clear guidance on timelines or procedures for appeals. Specifically, there is no time limit or requirement for a city to make a decision on a County's de-annexation request. Additionally, there is no established procedure for situations where a city refuses to act on or submit a de-annexation request to the DCA. This lack of structure creates significant delays and uncertainty in the process.

Representative Mary Ann Santos from District 117 asked if there is a map available showing the de-annexations. **Ms. Larrow** responded that she would provide that information to her.

Cheri Hobson-Matthews, County Manager, stated that one of the issues they are facing involves developments seeking to partner with the County regarding properties located within city limits but owned

by the County. She explained that the County wants to remove these properties from the city to facilitate progress. She emphasized the need for a defined timeframe for the process, as there are currently no established guidelines to follow.

Re: Mental Health

Ashley Larrow, CM/COS, spoke on the topic of Mental Health, focusing on finding alternative resources to assist individuals dealing with mental health challenges.

Chief Deputy Yarbrough, Henry County Sheriff's Office, discussed the key issues surrounding mental health, particularly in terms of treatment and housing. He highlighted that bed space is a major concern when it comes to housing mental health patients, emphasizing that jails are not suitable places for treating individuals with mental health needs. Over the past year, they have worked diligently to bring in a healthcare unit called First-Class. Since their arrival, they have significantly increased psychiatric care, now providing 24-hour care, which was previously unavailable. This ensures that officers are not responding alone and that patients in urgent need of services are not left waiting. Their goal is to divert mental health patients from the jail. To address this, the Sheriff's Office has created a 48-bed housing unit specifically for mental health patients. The most acute patients are receiving the best care possible. Additionally, they are working to secure the necessary training and funding to better prepare their officers and provide ongoing aftercare services for these individuals.

Chief Deputy Yarbrough mentioned that they have successfully secured funding through a grant to bring in 48 Cortex beds, but they also had to find funding in the amount of \$90,000 to remove the old beds and install the new ones.

Representative El-Mahdi Holly/District 116 thanked the presenters and shared his thoughts on the issue. He mentioned that he uses the Nextdoor app and often sees people expressing NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) sentiments. He emphasized that having a mental health issue should not lead to criminalization. He suggested that a new approach may be needed to communicate the value of providing housing for individuals with mental health needs.

Representative Holly has been working on a bill for several years aimed at offering tax incentives to those willing to house individuals with mental health challenges. While not a full tax credit, the idea is to provide some form of compensation. He pointed out that many faith-based institutions in the area receive tax write-offs and insurance coverage to keep their churches open, but often these buildings sit underutilized throughout the week. He proposed that a small tax credit could encourage churches to open their doors to help house individuals in need, potentially incentivizing pastors to expand their church's services and support their community.

Amanda Reeves, Assistant Director of Community Resources, came forward to explain that her department focuses on assisting individuals who are encountered by public safety officials or other residents of the community. She shared that they now have a place to refer these individuals to receive the services they need, whether they are already homeless or facing homelessness due to mental illness or other crises in their lives.

Ms. Reeves highlighted that her department provides solutions to help people, including securing hotel accommodations, with discounts offered by local partners willing to work with them. **Mr. Reeves** emphasized that homelessness and mental health are closely connected, and addressing both issues together is essential for effective support.

Don Bolia from Peachtree Government Relations came forward and stated that they have been able to make some changes without going through the legislative process. By using home rule, the County is now able to appoint its election supervisor and implement other changes. He also spoke about the de-annexation bill, explaining that it must be a general bill, not a local bill, and it is specifically focused on County-owned property that wishes to be de-annexed from the cities.

Dr. John Pace, III, Superintendent came forward to discuss the board's legislative priorities. He emphasized that teachers are the key drivers of student success and that the board's number one priority is always the students. He highlighted two major ongoing concerns: Safety and Security, and Mental Health and Wellness.

Regarding safety and security, **Dr. Pace** explained that School Resource Officers (SROs) are present at nearly all schools. He proposed reviewing the Quality Basic Education (QBE) allotment to fund school safety personnel, such as campus safety monitors, SROs, and school crossing guards. He also advocated for increased funding to help districts invest in and maintain enhanced technologies to improve school safety measures, including campus alert systems, weapons detection technology and structural reinforcement. He noted that, this year alone, the district has invested over \$10 million in safety and security operating costs.

On mental health and wellness, **Dr. Pace** stressed that it is a crucial part of the school ecosystem, closely tied to both the community and the schools. He pointed out that the board has invested nearly \$6 million in mental health and wellness facilitators at every school. Unfortunately, there is currently no state funding for this initiative, and any assistance in this area would be greatly appreciated. He mentioned that the current ratio of counselors to students is 1 counselor for every 450 students.

Dr. Pace further explained that for students with special needs, psychologists and social workers play a key role in ensuring that Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) remain relevant. However, the current ratio of psychologists and social workers is 1 for every 2,475 students. He emphasized that these professionals are essential not only for mental health and wellness but also for providing educational services to students with special needs.

Finally, he expressed a desire to partner with the County, stating that Henry County serves as a model for Georgia and the nation. If they continue on this path, they can show both Georgia and the United States the positive impact of their efforts.

Chair Harrell asked if any of the commissioners wished to speak. All the commissioners expressed their gratitude and thanked everyone for attending.

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 9:43 a.m.*

Carlotta Harrell, Chair

Stephanie Braun, County Clerk