

Harnett County Board of Commissioners Approved 2.5 Cent Property Tax Increase Monday Night

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People Speak Out

A large group gathered in the County Board room on Monday night to discuss the 2014-2015 County budget. The Meeting was open for public discussion where citizens of Harnett County could express their concerns about the proposed budget that would include a possible property tax increase.

Many in attendance expressed their concern and asked the board not to raise property taxes and to find alternative means of funding that would not make the property tax rate go up. There were many that took shots at county employees and the Sheriff's office. One man said "he could not understand why the Sheriff's office needed such large front bumper guards on their cruisers. After the gentleman finished speaking to the board another gentleman spoke up and said that he had prior law enforcement experience and that the bumper guards were needed to protect the lives of deputies and the damage sustained by hitting deer and pursuing criminals through tactical vehicle maneuvers.

Another man stated that he could not afford a tax increase because he had not received a raise and so the county should not be asking for a raise, he stated that they needed to find another way to raise money because the general public does not have it. Joe Langley a candidate spoke on the subject and said plain and simple we need one hundred million dollars' worth of schools here in Harnett. He then went on to say" that we have heard lots of numbers thrown out tonight but let me share some numbers with you both Republicans and Democrats that we need

to focus on. Mr. Langley proceeded to recite the telephone numbers for elected officials starting with the US senate all the way down to the NC house members that represent Harnett. "These are the numbers that everyone needs to be calling to inform their elected officials that we need help with the funding of schools."

Local native Ben Slaughter spoke on behalf of the tax and said "that we need to stop complaining about what type of bumper guards the sheriff's office has on their vehicles and focus on the problem that we're facing here in Harnett and that's the education of our children, we need to take care of our children because an education is much cheaper than keeping up an inmate in prison. We're setting almost dead last in education and that's not good for the growth of our county or the children of our county. We as a county should focus on producing educated children's to lead us into the future.

Maggie Sandrock the Chairwomen of the Harnett County GOP said that "I am going to keep this short and to the point, the republicans that were elected to this board ran on the basic principles of conservative candidates and that she is not in favor of any tax increase.

Daniel Glover a local businessman and community leader addressed the crowd and said "that in order for us to understand how we got to where we are today that we must look at last year's budget. "The whole issue that we're facing is due to smoke and mirrors that have been displayed to the citizens of Harnett County. "The only way that the budget from the prior year was balanced without an tax increase is because the Chairman of the board during the fiscal year took money from the public utilities enterprise funds and was able to make it appear that the county was fine. 'Exactly what you're seeing tonight was prophesized last year and has come true this year. "What people need to understand is that the county must keep a positive fund balance that is required by the local government commission or the state could come in and hike the property taxes to the maximum allowed by law. "So we either pass the tax now or face the chances of a higher tax rate imposed by the state if we're not able to keep the fund balance at a percentage of at least 8% of the general budget.

The meeting went on for hours with people one after another speaking for the tax increase or against it, after four hours of public comment the last speaker was current School Board Chairman Chuck Levorse that stated that many had asked what the ten million dollar request was for. It's simple we were asked by the Harnett County Board of Commissioners to seek the cost of added security to be implemented to the board after the tragic events that took place at sandyhook, we did exactly what the county board asked and they never did anything with our report that was provided.

Burgin's Proposal

After a 15min recessed the board reconvene and Commissioner Jim Burgin presented his version of the budget that included reducing staff in some areas and made claims that the money that was borrowed from public utilities was never used and that the fund balance information that was presented was only used as a scare tactic even though it's enforced by

general statute. Mr. Burgin presented a slide show that outlined the benefits that the county employees were receiving from the county and included in the benefits workers comp which is a requirement by the state and is not an actual benefit. Mr. Burgin said that there are talks with Target and Home Depot and that these corporations would obtain new tax revenue for the county although these corporations have not entered into any formal contracts with the county. Many of Burgin's points were valid but were solely based on projected revenue that has not been obtained by the county. Mr. Burgin also claimed that the county employees did receive over a 4% pay raise due to the new insurance policy that replaced the old policy that carried a high deductible. Mr. Burgin said that there had been rumors that he was going to present a special school district tax for the western part of the county, in fact I was not going to present a tax proposal for western Harnett but I ran the numbers and found out that if we did impose a tax for that side of the county that the revenue would be close to ten millions dollars.

After Mr. Burgin finish speaking, County Manager Tommy Burns presented his budget that included new vehicles for the sheriff's office due to some of the fleet currently in use being old with high mileage, Mr. Burns said that his staff had gone through the budget with a fine tooth and comb and tried to weed out any overspending but due to lack of funding from the feds and state that the revenue was not the same as the prior years and that the population in Harnett had grown but the number of employees had decreased.

Chairman Miller's closing remarks

Joe Miller, Chairman of the board spoke out and said that he was not fond of raising taxes but he also understands the shape that the county was in due to the growth that had occurred in the county over the last few years. " Let's face it people we have gotten the short end of the deal by our elected officials they have not stepped up to help us with the influx of military and we have become a sleeper community. " I have one question for everyone who in this room, who has contacted their Senator or NC house member about help for funding of local schools? Out of the 30 people left at the meeting about 5 raised their hands. Mr. Miller said we need to be asking for help and urge the crowd to contact their US and NC elected officials. "I as the chairman have great confidence in our county staff and feel like they are doing a great job for our county and are doing more for less and we're losing good employees to other surrounding counties. If you look at the numbers of the surrounding counties we still have a lower tax rate than most, including Johnston, Cumberland, Sampson and the list goes on. During this time Mr. Burgin said that we are higher than Lee and Wake, Mr. Miller responded by explaining yes this may be true but look at it like this, what would the tax value of a house worth a \$ 150.000 in Harnett be compared to wake, what? 245.000-275.000 so yes they may be lower but there property valuation is much higher.

The Vote

Commissioner Gary House made a motion to accept the original budget that included a 5.5 cent

tax increase and a hush fell over the board members, the motion stayed on the table for a couple of minutes without a 2nd and closed. Mr. Miller then made a motion to accept the proposed county budget with a 2.5 cent tax increase; Commissioner Hill spoke up and said that she could support a 2.5 cent increase because it would help with the school issue and other county related funding issues. Ms. Hill made a 2nd for the motion and the vote was taken and passed with Hill, House and Miller voting for the raise and Burgin and Springle against, the meeting was closed shortly after.

Drama after the meeting with Senator Rabin's Staff

After the meeting closed Gabe Snyder the legislative college intern stood up and said that if anyone needed to express their concerns with Senator Rabin that he would be more than happy to assist in any way he could. Mr. Snyder was bombarded by angry ladies and gentleman over the statement that they would be happy to assist. One lady said that I have contacted your office through way of phone and email and have not heard one word back from the senator or his office, another lady said that it was a waste of time because they called about HB1108 and were given a generic answer. Mr. Snyder said that they were in the middle of a transition and that may have been the reason that no one from their office had contacted them back. The lady told Mr. Snyder that they have the worse constituent service and that if they could not do any better then what they were attempting they should not even try. The constitutional rights of HB1108 were brought up and Mr. Snyder stated that he was not a lawyer and that they would have to research it. The drama continued outside of the building and an unnamed news reporter tried to defend Rabin's office and was quickly dismissed by the group of people. No one from Mr. Lewis or Ellmer's office was on hand to take questions or interact with the crowd.