

I Will Take The Heat Gary A. House Vice Chairman Harnett County Board of Commissioners

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The Harnett County Board of Commissioners raised our property tax rate by 2 ½ cents last night.

I have fought against property tax increases for seven years. Other than the property tax revaluation several years ago, your tax bills have remained the same. Even in the revaluation year, I fought to reduce the tax rate to make the revaluation revenue neutral.

Last year, the residents of Harnett County passed a ¼ cent sales tax increase. I introduced a resolution that said that all of these increased sales taxes would go into a capital reserve fund for school construction, repair and renovation. I remember holding this resolution up at a joint meeting of the Harnett County Board of Commissioners and Harnett County Board of Education and stating that if this addition to sales tax were passed by the voters, it would only be a drop in the bucket to fund our school needs. I also stated at this meeting that we could not go around saying that if the residents voted for the ¼ cent sales tax increase, the property tax rates would not increase. It was reported to me the very next week that two commissioners were in public claiming that if the sales tax passed, property taxes would remain the same.

Due to the massive influx of children into our school system from the Base Realignment and Closure Act, our school infrastructure is beyond maxed out in Western Harnett. Harnett Central is also busting at the seams. There is so much overcrowding at some of the schools that I worry about the safety of our children not to mention the quality of education that they receive in those conditions.

Fact is Harnett County has needed a tax increase for a few years to adequately address our school needs. I could not vote to give the county more money under the previous administration because I could not trust the stewardship of the funds. Last year we had two commissioners recognizing we needed a tax increase and two who were adamantly opposed to an increase. That left me as the voice of compromise. I tried to build unity on the board by coming up with a solution to not raise taxes but to begin saving for our school construction needs.

I made a motion to leave the tax rate as is but that any excess of revenues over expenditures in the General Fund for 2012-2013 be placed in a capital reserve fund for school construction, repair and renovation. This proposal passed 3-2. When it came time to fund the capital reserve fund, Commissioners Jim Burgin and Gordon Springle would not honor their commitment on the budget to place the excess into the fund.

When we secured QSCB financing for the new Highland Middle School now under construction, Commissioner Jim Burgin made a motion to adopt a resolution that told the Local Government Commission that we would raise the property tax rate by 5.5 cent per \$100 (September 4, 2012 minutes) in order to meet our obligations.

The County is also in the process of selling some land for \$600,000. When we voted to sell this land, the proceeds, I thought, were to be placed into the capital reserve fund. Under the budget for 2014-2015, these funds will not go into the fund as I understood when I voted for the sale. This was one of the cuts in the budget.

The time is long past due that we begin to seriously address the school funding issues that we have in our county.

How did we get to this point?

When I took office almost 8 years ago, I was being told that the military was going to provide \$70 to \$80 million dollars to help us build schools to assist in handling the infrastructure needs caused by the influx of military students. Fort Bragg and Washington have let us down. Nothing has been provided to the county other than a minimal amount per student to assist in educating the militarily connected students.

Even the State of North Carolina has not remitted and never will remit over \$8 million in NC State Education Lottery money that we should have received for our school system. Evidently the lottery money is used balance the State's budget.

With Fort Bragg's, Washington's and North Carolina's unwillingness to help Harnett County with school infrastructure needs, they have, in effect, dumped the burden on the taxpayers of Harnett County.

Whether we build new schools, renovate old schools, go to year-round schools, buy more huts, or move students to commercial buildings, more revenue must be generated. I firmly believe that Harnett County Manager Tommy Burns and our finance officer have looked at every cut feasible. I did not have that confidence in our prior administration.

I know most of our departments are running on a shoe string budget. Fact is we are running so tight that we are losing good employees, morale is at an all-time low, and more employees are looking other employment/working second jobs.

We need to find an agreeable line where the county is pro-taxpayer and pro-employee. I really took offense to some of the comments at our budget hearing last night when a few people insinuated that our employees do not work hard. We have some great employees who are

doing more work with no more pay.

We also need to rid the county of this anti-school attitude. Contrary to what Commissioner Burgin claimed last night, industries do look at our educational system when choosing to locate here. If they do not, the Harnett Forward Together Committee, our economic development department, the Harnett County Business Education Partnership, Central Carolina Community College, and the School of Government's instructors have been not telling us the truth during my eight years on the Board. Commonsense leads you to believe that big business looks at many things—educational system, tax rate, quality of life, workforce, demographics, roads, etc. Anyone claiming otherwise is only making a poor attempt to manipulate residents.

I recognize the needs of our school system and they are massive. I cannot attest to how the school system spends its money. That monitoring needs to come from school board and residents of Harnett County. But I do know Harnett County has an obligation to provide an education to every child that lives in its borders.

I will stand up for our children and the education that they deserve.

I have always said that I would not come to the taxpayers for money unless I deemed that it was absolutely necessary. That time is here. We have the administration in place in which I have full faith that they use the County's money wisely. We need to be fiscally responsible to the needs of Harnett County.

I will take the heat for the 2 ½ property tax increase because I know it is in the best interest of Harnett County. I have grown accustomed to being in the oven.

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