

Tax Watch

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New Jail - Moving North

For over two years WCTA directors, other organizations and individuals questioned in public meetings the wisdom of building a jail in the center of downtown DeFuniak Springs.

As early as 2000, former Sheriff McMillian recommended building an off-site work camp rather than remodel the existing jail. County commissioners were presented estimates reflecting lower costs for building off-site, \$7.3 million off-site versus \$7.5 million downtown. The off-site location allowed for future expansion.

Following the 2000 elections, Sheriff Ralph Johnson presented a plan to county commissioners to build on forty acres of county-owned land north of DeFuniak Springs.

In 2002 the county commission formed a jail committee which recommended expanding the downtown site. Commissioners Jones, Pauls and Rees voted for the committee's recommendation. Commissioners Cuchens and

Pridgen voted "no" and were in favor of the off-site project.

In March 2003, costs of expanding the downtown jail had risen to over \$14 million. WCTA formed a law enforcement subcommittee (LECO) under the Citizens Budget and Finance Committee to conduct an extensive analysis on locations and construction costs of a new jail. LECO concluded in a report with supporting documentation that building the jail downtown

While the original contractor for the downtown jail expansion went through bankruptcy, WCTA asked commissioners to reconsider the project and their original vote. They refused.

In WCTA's February 2004 candidate forum, all nine candidates for sheriff favored building the jail outside of downtown DeFuniak Springs.

Following the 2004 election, Sheriff Johnson made another appeal to a new county commission.



Current temporary inmate housing at jail located in downtown DeFuniak Springs. New courthouse steel structure in background.

should be re-evaluated. This report was submitted by WCTA to the county commission in March 2003. It was rejected.

(see jail - page 5)

President's Message – Bonnie McQuiston



Talk about starting the year with a bang!

It is exciting to sit in county commission meetings and see action on issues WCTA has worked on for years.

I believe that local government is the only level of government where people have a real voice. The people have spoken, our county commissioners are listening and, most of all, they are acting.

WCTA has realized several victories in 2005, as you will read in this newsletter. I must acknowledge our appreciation for county administrator Ronnie Bell who brought our redistricting committee request to the county commission for a vote. Also, he worked hard in a short period of time to gather valuable information on the county jail and bring to the commissioners for a vote.

We extend thanks to our county commissioners for their commitment to make Walton County the best that it can be for all citizens of our county.

It has been my observation that Walton County has the most active citizen groups of any county in the Panhandle, and perhaps the state. Our citizens contribute to their communities and take an active role in their government. As our county grows, it will be even more important to stay involved with our elected officials and their decisions on how to spend our tax dollars.

WCTA is dedicating the first quarter of this year to increasing our membership. Enclosed is a member form. We ask each of you to recruit one new member. A group of individuals united in a

common cause can make a difference. Thank you for continuing to support our association and for your generous donations throughout the year.

We welcome two new directors to our board; Ray Padgett of Ponce de Leon and Bob Hudson of Santa Rosa Beach.

"The same prudence which in private life would forbid our paying our own money for unexplained projects, forbids it in the dispensation of the public moneys".



Quasi-Judicial Hearing Officer

In September 2003, WCTA hosted a panel discussion on quasi-judicial hearings at the request of county attorney Gary Vorbeck. Several county boards and commissions conduct quasi-judicial hearings which are lengthy, expensive and involve attorneys and expert witnesses. In 2004 the county attorney's office drafted an ordinance to utilize hearing officers for quasi-judicial hearings. The ordinance streamlines the process for obtaining development permits.

On January 11th 2005, county commission chairman Kenneth Pridgen asked the county attorney to proceed with haste to bring the quasi-judicial ordinance to the commission for a vote. Legal Services will schedule workshops with the planning commission and county commission. The ordinance should get a final vote in May or June of this year.

"The people have spoken, our county commissioners are listening and most of all, they are acting "

Impact Area—All of Walton County



Redistricting Committee

In May 2004, WCTA formerly requested the county commission appoint a redistricting committee to ensure that county commission districts are equal in population giving everyone equal representation. County population is projected to have increased in 2005 by 25% since the 2000 Census. Florida statute requires that the five county commission districts be equal, or nearly equal, in population.

On January 25, 2005 the county commission approved the redistricting committee and each commissioner made two appointments. Two of our directors will serve on the committee; Robert Nelson appointed by Scott Brannon, and Tom Terrell appointed by Larry Jones.

The redistricting committee faces a formidable task. Our county stretches from the Alabama state line to the Gulf. There are natural and geographical obstacles such as the Choctawhatchee Bay, major highways Interstate I-10 and Highway 331, and thousands of acres of state-owned land in both north and south Walton. And then there are political considerations since a county commissioner must live in his or her district.

The school board will appoint their own redistricting committee to meet jointly with the county committee. While school districts and county commission districts are not required to be congruent, WCTA recommended they try to get as close to the same boundaries as possible.

Regardless of the obstacles, the redistricting process must be driven by the rule of law. The law is not about the number of acres in a district or which political party might benefit.

The law is about fair and equal representation in government.

County Audit the Best



William Pennington
Finance Director
Clerk of Court

Congratulations are in order!

Florida statute requires a financial audit annually of all counties in the state by an independent certified public accountant. The audit of Walton County Clerk of Courts financial statements was completed on November 5, 2004.

Fieldwork for the county commission was completed on December 30, 2004. All books were found correct and free from error.

The comprehensive annual financial report (CAFR) should be received in late February or early March and will be released to the public no later than March 31, 2005. The CAFR is the document utilized by Walton Taxpayers Budget and Finance Committee, Dan Scupin and Alan Powdermaker. They will analyze revenues, budgets and expenses and present their findings at a WCTA meeting in May.

Voters Change Funding of Court System

In November 1998 voters of Florida approved a constitutional amendment which became effective July 1, 2004. Basically, this amendment changed the funding mechanism of the court system. Instead of fees collected by a county remaining in that county, the court now must send all excess fees to the Florida Department of Revenue at the end of the year.

The clerk of the circuit court operates as both a fee and budget office. As comptroller for the county, the clerk is responsible for the day-to-day financial activities of the board of county commission. The court operates as a fee office with revenues used to fund court operations.



Until last July, the clerk's office remitted excess fees at the end of the year to the board of county commission to be used within the county. No longer. Now those fees must be remitted to the state to fund court systems in counties that are unable to meet financial obligations through their own fee collections.

The state mandates that county reserves can be no greater than 10% and those reserves are turned over to the state at the end of the year. The clerk court budget may not increase more than 3% per year.

(see court-page 8)

Time with Chairwoman Wilkerson

Interview by Bonnie McQuiston

Recently I had the opportunity to chat with Mildred Wilkerson, Chairwoman of the School Board, about her vision for the Walton County School District. She has some very definite ideas that are based on 37 years of experience in education.

With 33 years in the classroom and now serving a second term on the School Board, Mildred Wilkerson speaks with authority and conviction.

When asked to identify her top priorities for the school district, Wilkerson stressed her number one goal is for all students to get a quality education. To accomplish this, she believes that reading should be incorporated into all subject areas. Reading is the key to learning. Regardless of the school subject, knowing the correlated vocabulary is critical.

Wilkerson wants schools to emphasize writing skills so students can pass college entrance exams.

She is opposed to block scheduling and does not believe students do well in this kind of teaching environment. High school used to have a six-period day but now has eighty-five minute classes. The middle school 6th grade has 120-minute classes. Wilkerson believes this is too long to hold students' attention. According to statistics our schools are not preparing kids for college.

She would like more guidance for students in middle schools with assemblies on drugs, guns, alcohol and cigarettes. Emphasis should be on the code of conduct. Wilkerson said Walton County schools are losing too many kids through expulsion because the students don't understand the consequences of their actions. Kids understand rules if administration will tell them what those rules are.

Athletic directors should let kids and parents know the selection guidelines for sports and invite parents to attend the selection process. This would eliminate an appearance or accusation of biased selection.

Overall, Wilkerson would like to have schools as they were ten years ago. Teachers could discipline students and there were shorter periods for teaching. Wilkerson believes that every child should get the attention they need and should not be categorized as failures.

Consolidation/Streamline Study

Kenneth Pridgen asked the county commission to look at consolidating county services to reduce costs and enhance



Ronnie Bell
County Administrator

services. County Administrator Ronnie Bell put together a team currently consisting of four members. He hopes to expand that number.

The team met four times in January and began reviewing county commission operations. This includes constitutional offices to identify functions or services that may overlap. They are looking at organizational charts, staffing and functions of each department.

From this review, the team will provide the county commission with alternatives for more efficient, more cost-effective services, which could include outsourcing. They will make periodic recommendations to the commission as they go through the review process. The ultimate goal is to streamline county government. As Chairman Pridgen said, "the bottom line is to save the taxpayers money".

“Commitment to Service” a Campaign Promise



About six weeks ago Walton County voters welcomed Rhonda Skipper as the new Tax Collector. During the campaign “Commitment to Service” became the focus of what she envisioned. That theme has now been adopted in a strategic plan that focuses on several priority

issues.

Tax Collector Skipper has adopted a mission statement “to provide fast, accurate, professional and courteous collection and distribution of taxes, licenses, fees and information to the public, businesses and government agencies that demonstrates our commitment to service, while supporting a positive work environment for our employees”.

The Tax Collector’s Office serves the public at two locations. One is in the Government Annex in South Walton, and the other is located at 49 N. 6th Street in DeFuniak Springs. This is across 6th Avenue from the courthouse.

According to information provided by Skipper, in January the office processed approximately 10,000 transactions related to vehicle and vessel registrations/renewals, and permits. This produced some \$532,048.27 in fees.

As of February 1, 2005 taxes had been collected on 68,469 parcels to the tune of \$77,176,704.25.

Implementing a campaign promise to improve staff efficiency and service to the public Rhonda Skipper is well on

the way to bringing about some of the changes that were promised.

Directors and Supervisors have created office procedures, position descriptions, and performance expectations for the employees. Duties are defined, and responsibilities and standards for service delivery to the public has been established.

Procedures have been implemented to address employee rights, federal and state regulations, ethics, requests for public records, Americans with Disability Act, information technology and many others.

Immediate steps have been taken to address records retention and surplus of property to make room for much needed office space. Compliance with state records management retention guidelines is a priority. New personnel policies beneficial to the employees are being addressed.

A new created website is expected by the end of February. It will feature acceptance of credit card and debit card payments.

(jail-continued from page 1)

The sheriff reported a lengthy list of problems; inmate overcrowding, increased costs for temporary inmate housing, and the inability of the current jail foundation to withstand a second story expansion.

Finally, on January 25, 2005 county commissioners voted unanimously to halt downtown jail expansion and to construct a new facility on the forty acres owned by the county north of DeFuniak Springs. Pod units currently being constructed at the old jail will be incorporated into the new location. The immediate overcrowding situation will be eased with a temporary structure constructed behind the current jail with an estimated cost of \$381,000 a year.

Campaigns Turn Into Big Business

Walton County started the 2004 election year riveted to the sheriff's race where nine candidates were vying to replace the incumbent sheriff. Before the election the focus changed sharply.

The 2004 county commissioner races were unlike any seen before in this county as campaign finances spiraled out of sight. The bar was raised to an all time high in campaign contributions.

Walton County is considered a small county in the state of Florida with a population of approximately 50,000 people. There are 33,395 registered voters. The steady increase in the costs to run for public office may in part be attributed to our evolving from a "small town" to a progressive growing county.



- When in an incumbent's term should he/she start amassing a campaign war chest? Does this raise a question of ethics when the incumbent is in a position to vote on a contributor's specific issue or development?
- Do people feel compelled to contribute to a campaign fund when asked by a sitting official?

The county commissioner races became a daily spectacle in the last few weeks before the general election. A lot of money was spent. Some candidates say this is what it cost to get their message out.

The Walton County School Board recently discussed the advantages of single member districts as a means of reducing campaign costs. Candidates campaign only in their district.

We elect state and federal representatives by district. County Commissioners and School Board members may be elected by either single member district or at-large voting. A county's voting method is decided by public referendum. Walton County historically has elected at-large except when a public referendum was passed in 1986 for single member districts. Under the single member system, one election was held in 1988 for county commissioner. In 1990 another public referendum converted the county back to at-large voting.

In 2002, WCTA researched voting methods in Florida's sixty-seven counties. Results:

- 34 elected at-large (county-wide)
- 26 elected by single member district
- 7 elected by both methods (5 elected by district and 2 at-large)

- Does this mean the end to small town politics with a grass roots approach and small donors?
- Will only big money decide who runs for office and will that money come from out of county? If yes, will we continue to have local government represent the people of Walton County or only special interests?
- Does this set the standard for future elections?
- Will people think twice about throwing their hat into the ring when campaigns are turned into who can raise the most money instead of a candidate's stand on issues or voting records of incumbents? Are we pricing the average man out of public service in local government?

CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS – 2000 COUNTY COMMISSION RACE – TOTAL \$94,567

District 1		District 3		District 5	
Joel Paul	\$3,190	Infinger	\$4,200	Judkins	\$2,670
Miles	\$6,883	Jones *	\$5,850	McLean	\$16,705
Rees *	\$27,853	J. Padgett	\$100	Pasquarello	\$7,076
				Tim Pauls *	\$15,640
				Workman	\$4,400

CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS – 2002 COUNTY COMMISSION RACE – TOTAL \$93,469

District 2		District 4	
Bodiford	\$4,300	Cuchens *	\$15,860
Pridgen *	\$23,150	Harris	\$3,000
Robbins	\$3,900	Ryan	\$10,650
Walker	\$20,724	Senterfitt	\$3,877
Young	\$100	Whitaker	\$516

CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS – 2004 COUNTY COMMISSION RACE – TOTAL \$363,672

DISTRICT 1		DISTRICT 3		DISTRICT 5	
Brannon *	\$73,815	Jones *	\$18,550	Burke	\$6,554
Frohwein	\$100	Porter	\$4,000	Meadows *	\$66,644
Rees	\$82,428	Rhodes	\$2,400	Pauls	\$27,324
				Perry	\$74,200
				Turner	\$8,065

*** winner**

Contributions to individual candidates do not include the money spent on campaigns by electioneering communications organizations or political action committees. They pay for their own campaign activities, including advertisements for a particular candidate. Reported in 2004 election—\$77,600

**Walton County Taxpayers
Association, Inc.**

P. O. Box 1085
Santa Rosa Beach, FL 32459

Fax: 850-231-5609
E-mail: Hal7m@aol.com

Tax Watch

*The eyes and ears of Walton
County for tax payers*



(court— from page 3)

These mandates affect employee salaries and operating and capital expenditures associated with the court. The constitutional amendment opened the door for the state to get even deeper into county court systems in the future.

Constitutional amendments have become the norm in Florida elections. They are briefly summarized on our ballots and often contain confusing language. It may be said that we don't always know the true ramifications of these amendments. The bottom line is that more and more of our money is not being retained in our county. It is being disbursed throughout the state to counties that are not managing their finances.

Membership

Since members renew at different times during the year, we include a membership form in all newsletters. If you have contributed for 2005, please disregard this form or give it to someone to join WCTA. Thank you for your support.

(voting—from page 5)

Single Member—Pros and Cons

- Ensures more partisan fairness among the major political parties.
- Encourages representative accountability to constituents on ideology.
- More efficient contact with constituents and identification with issues in district.
- Gives minority groups control of their representation.
- Limited representation; discourages communication with representatives outside of district
- No vote on representatives outside district.

At-Large—Pros and Cons

- All representatives are accountable for issues throughout the county.
- Encourages communication with all representatives.
- Some minority groups may be under-represented with higher risk of litigation.