

Walton Tax Watch

Founded 1982

www.waltontaxpayers.org

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*The eyes and ears of
Walton County for
taxpayers*

Focus on Public Safety

The primary focus of this issue of Walton Tax Watch is on public safety. We have worked diligently to produce the facts along with observations and questions that relate to the expenditure of taxpayer dollars and public safety.



“Those Showers Don’t Work and They Never Have”.

This statement was actually made to a WCTA board member experimenting on one of the lights at a crosswalk on Hwy. 30-A. In the latest give away of taxpayers’ money for an *unbudgeted* item, county commissioners voted 4 – 1 on March 14 to award a contract for “in pavement lighting” at 19 crosswalks on Scenic Drive (old Hwy. 98) at a cost of \$270,000. Commissioner Cuchens voted Nay.

This same type of lighting was installed on 9 crosswalks on Hwy. 30-A 2 ½ years ago at the recommendation of former District 5 Commissioner Tim Pauls. These lights costs \$125,000 and are not used. Our experiment showed that they do not show up during daylight. There has been no study to show that motorists stop as they approach the markers at night.

District 5 Commissioner Meadows suggested creation of a public education program to educate the public on how to use the lights.



\$270,000

**Genuine
Certified
Pork**

**First Amendment
Foundation Seminar
April 27
Page 8 for details**



President's Message

Bonnie McQuiston

Focus on Public Safety

The South Walton Fire District (SWFD) proposal to shake up Walton County's 911 system created controversy between SWFD, the Sheriff's office and county emergency operations center (EOC), even before it reached county commissioners for a vote on February 14. SWFD proposed to divide the county system to allow them to answer emergency calls at their own communications center south of the Choctawhatchee Bay. Comments to support their proposal cast a shadow of doubt on the county 911 system and whether it is inefficient or broken.

A duly elected board of SWFD fire commissioners approved a separate public safety answering point, the purchase of equipment and renovating a building for a dispatch center. The money is spent but unanswered questions remain: how to transfer information from EOC to SWFD dispatch, how, when and who pays to interface the two communications systems, how to share GIS data and updates, how to keep the separate systems in sync with the ability to enter additional information on each, and the backup plan for SWFD dispatch if a complete loss of their system occurs.

This issue of our newsletter spotlights the complexity of this proposal. We believe that oversight and accountability of government will allow the public to measure the performance of our leaders and hold them responsible for their actions, whether good or bad. This includes reviewing how government manages and spends our money.

"We believe that oversight and accountability of government will allow the public to measure the performance of our leaders...."



The WCTA Board Vote

On February 1, our board voted to take a close look at SWFD and the expenses associated with their proposal, which comes with a price tag for taxpayers south of the Bay. Several hundred thousand dollars were spent to purchase communications equipment and to renovate a temporary dispatch center before the SWFD gained the county's permission to split the 911 system. SWFD has a low call volume in relation to the rest of the county's 911 calls. Will the benefits justify the costs?

As our county and, proportionally, the tax base have grown, taxing authorities have enjoyed enormous increases in revenue. SWFD is an independent taxing district which collects ad valorem taxes only on property south of the Bay. Non-homesteaded property comprises 70% to 80% of all county property, and ninety-two percent of Walton County's total property valuation is south of the Bay.

Non-homesteaded property owners are writing checks for taxes on property appraisals which can double in a single year since they do not have the advantage of the 3% annual cap on appraisals.

Since the SWFD began collecting ad valorem taxes for the 1997 tax year, it has neither raised nor lowered its millage tax levy. By maintaining a static .83 mil tax levy, the SWFD has been the recipient of windfall tax revenues.

The Board of County Commission Vote

At the February 14 county commission meeting, the SWFD changed its original proposal to completely split the county 911 system. Instead, Chief Hallman requested approval for a secondary public safety answering point with \$50,000 from the county to fund part of its purchase.

Also requested was \$16,800 annually, a portion of Sprint's 50-cent/phone line 911 fee received by the county EOC. A secondary answering point would enable SWFD to receive 911 calls for fire and rescue south of the Bay and to view caller information and data received at the county EOC.

SWFD asked the county commission to consider allowing them to have a primary safety answering point in the future. The county commission voted 3 – 2 to deny SWFD's request and to keep the county 911 system intact.

The SWFD fire commission met on March 6 and directed Chief Hallman to continue plans for a communications/dispatch center, working with the county to resolve communication equipment problems. Chief Hallman has arranged a meeting on March 29 with the county EOC, State 911 coordinator and other relevant county officials.

A Busy Year Ahead for WCTA

We hope to be involved in the FY 2007 county budget reviews which begin in May with constitutional officers and their department heads. In these meetings, the county finance director reviews budget requests and justifications in detail. Taking part in these meetings will allow WCTA an advantage in preparing for the county budget workshops and public hearings in July.

2006 is an election year and we will once again host candidate forums. In January at our annual meeting, we discussed the possibility of eliminating party affiliations for local offices. In non-partisan elections, voters must choose the best qualified candidate without relying on political party labels.

The Florida Elections Commission has informed WCTA that state statute allows only charter counties to hold non-partisan races for local offices, if written into their charter. Walton is NOT a charter county. The Walton County School Board is allowed non-partisan races because school districts are governed by different state statutes.

WCTA membership is only \$10 per year. Join today and keep informed on how your tax dollars are spent in Walton County.

A Brief History - South Walton Fire

The South Walton Fire District comprises 84 square miles of Walton County's 1,058 total square miles. SWFD is governed by a board of seven elected fire commissioners who receive no compensation. Fire Chief Les Hallman and the fire board are to be commended for changing the district's antiquated fire department into a 21st century operation. With exceptional personnel, state-of-the-art equipment and systems, five fire stations built with two more targeted in the future, SWFD is positioned to provide fire protection and EMS services for the explosion of development south of the Bay. SWFD is closing in on its goal to have fire stations within five miles of any development in south Walton.

Since 2001, SWFD has provided emergency medical and transport services and in 2004 contracted to provide dispatch for Sacred Heart Health Systems air medical service. As a result, two SWFD dispatch positions were set up in the county EOC in DeFuniak Springs. Personnel costs, including benefits, were \$300,000 in 2005 for eight full-time employees to cover two positions 24 hours/7 days a week. Sacred Heart contributes \$77,250 to this cost.



Due to technology limitations at the EOC, SWFD dispatchers do not have the ability to speak directly with persons who dial 911 and require SWFD services. Following a special meeting at the EOC in March 2005, SWFD commissioners decided that technology and space limitations at the EOC necessitated developing their own communications center to be located in south Walton.

In May 2005, SWFD commissioners approved plans to renovate the old Santa Rosa Beach Fire Station for \$30,000 to serve as a temporary site for the communications center.

(See SWFD—page 8)

SWFD Communications Center Position

- SWFD is an independent fire district responsible to citizens south of the Bay.
- SWFD commissioners have the authority and responsibility to decide the level of service for the delivery of fire and rescue services to communities within its boundaries.
- SWFD commissioners have authority and responsibility to decide how, by whom and from where emergency communications for SWFD are provided.
- Florida Statute gives the county commission the responsibility to provide a 911 system that meets state requirements. The plan requires that any person who calls 911 be connected to the appropriate public safety agency in a timely manner.
- SWFD believes they can offer a higher level of service in the dense development south of the bay.

• SWFD commissioners made the decision to construct a state-of-the-

art communications center in south Walton to provide 911 dispatch services for SWFD. SWFD purchased equipment with the latest technology in processing emergency calls. A person in south Walton with an emergency dial 911; county EOC answers the call and has 30 to 40 seconds to determine the nature of the call and to transfer the caller and caller data to SWFD communications center.

- The county commission must allow SWFD access to voice and data information from a 911 caller; without the data, efficiency of the SWFD response is diminished.
- This process will not impact the operation of the Sheriff's office; will not remove control of county 911 system from county commissioners; will not interfere with operation of the county 911 system and will enhance the existing system.

Sheriff's Communications Center Position

Law enforcement goes door to door in mandatory evacua-

- The state 911 plan calls for a *centralized, consolidated* primary safety answering point for the county.
- If not achievable, the primary answering point should be located with the public agency receiving the majority of 911 calls; in Walton County, this is law enforcement.
- The EOC and Sheriff have worked to create and improve an efficient 911 system.
- The state plan requires that a 911 caller NEVER be required to talk to more than two people. If the call is transferred from EOC to SWFD, the call cannot be further transferred to the Sheriff's dispatch. Many calls require law enforcement to secure a scene prior to entrance by other responders. This is for the safety of other responders as well as to protect a crime scene from being compromised.
- In hurricane evacuations, the Sheriff is responsible for determining when to close the Hwy. 331 bridge and for monitoring traffic and roads.

tions and sets up security checkpoints when residents return home. A centralized EOC allows total county coordination with all rescue and safety operations in these events.

- The new jail being built north of DeFuniak Springs will have state-of-the-art emergency communications equipment. The Sheriff and EOC have worked together to make certain the jail can serve as a backup emergency system to the county EOC.
- The south Walton Sheriff annex was built to hurricane wind standards. If necessary, the annex can be a primary public safety answering point south of the Bay.
- The Sheriff is a duly elected constitutional officer accountable to the voters. County commissioners have responsibility for the county EOC and also are elected and accountable to voters. The SWFD fire chief is not elected. He is accountable to a board of fire commissioners for a limited geographic area.



Some time ago, WCTA asked the county commission to hold public hearings on *unbudgeted* items of significant expense to taxpayers before they vote on the expenditures. This did not occur with this lavish expenditure of taxpayer dollars on something of little value to the county as a whole.

For more information and photos of crosswalk lights, go to www.waltontaxpayers.org.

Courthouse Construction Photo 03-16-06



East side entry



West side



**Front of the
historical
courthouse
facing U. S. 90**

Corner—from page 6

Mr. Brian McBroom was hired for the position and in November began to collect unpaid personal property taxes. This has resulted in the receipt of nearly \$75,000 that might have otherwise gone uncollected. Mr. McBroom began conducting field inspections of mobile homes in January, 2006. Since then, over 187 notices of violation have been issued resulting in 101 brought into compliance.

WCTA Accomplishments in First Quarter 2006

At the end of 2005, District 5 Commissioner Cindy Meadows suggested that WCTA review the county's Expense Approval List (EAL), a list of expenses approved for payment at county commission meetings, to see if expenses could be reduced.

We began that review and believe we have had an impact in several areas. This is a drop in the bucket compared to some expenditures but the county is expected to pay bills in a prudent and responsible manner.

- The District 5 county commission office had an unnecessary T-1 data line that cost \$769/month. A meeting with Finance Director Bill Imfeld at the District 5 office resulted in replacing the T-1 line with other technology which cost \$99/month. The T-1 line had been in place for several years.
- Late fees recurred each month on copy machine leases, dish satellite, and bottled water vendors. Over \$4,000 in late fees were incurred on copy machine leases over January and February. These items are now being paid on time.
- County credit cards, issued principally to department heads, are for travel, recruiting, and emergency expenses. Each card has a \$2,000 limit. Expenses must be approved by a manager at least one level higher than the employee and submitted with a voucher to the Court Clerk's office for payment. Payment delays due to missing receipts result in late fees. The county's credit card policy is being modified by Finance and Human Resources to require personal payment of late charges by an employee who does not submit proper receipts on time.
- Rental property claimed an invalid exemption for ad valorem taxes. Property Appraiser Patrick Pilcher took bold measures to remove the exemption.
- SWFD took WCTA's recommendation to post meeting agendas and Minutes on their web site www.swfd.org

H. L. Mencken

Unquestionably, there is progress. The average American now pays out twice as much in taxes as he formerly got in wages.

Walton County Emergency Operations Center Position

- As a result of September 11th attacks, Homeland Security recommends *centralized* public safety answering points in order to have a co-ordinated response to a county-wide emergency.
- A centralized system serves as a clearinghouse for all calls, for recordkeeping and coordination. Fracturing the system sets a precedent for every municipality to want its own answering point.
- More and more people are eliminating land phone lines and opting for cell phones. Most tourists will use cell phones in emergencies, making it difficult to track where calls originate. Cell phone 911 calls must go the county primary safety answering point.
- SWFD bought equipment that is incompatible with county equipment. Separate and different equipment requires cross training in cases of systems shut down.
- The county EOC is located in a building east of DeFuniak Springs built by the State of Florida as an alternate location for the Governor to be housed in the event of a statewide catastrophe. Concrete walls are several inches thick and the entire facility is equipped with a system of electronic locks and security cameras.
- Call takers/dispatchers receive extensive training and are nationally certified. With continuing education, re-certification occurs every two years.
- The CAD system purchased by the county was upgraded in January 2006 with final training for EOC dispatchers in March.
- The CAD system utilizes maps created and updated by the county GIS (Geographic Identification System) to locate emergency callers and to ensure a quick response.
- In March the county completed fiber optic installation to EOC to interface internet and intranet into one seamless unit.
- Computers were recently replaced as part of the county three-year computer technology cycle. EOC contains recorders, radios and various other technologies to make sure that every need can be met quickly for all citizens of the county.
- The county spent approximately \$250,000 in the last two years in upgrades and installations to keep the EOC facility on a par with Houston's Ground Control.
- The EOC has a complete portable backup system located in Freeport.
- The EOC receives Sprint 911 50-cent/month fees charged on all land phone lines, fax lines and cell phones.
- The EOC FY 2005 budget was \$966,875.

(See EOC—page 5)

TAX COLLECTOR'S CORNER

The deadline for payment of 2005 property tax bills is close of business March 31. Real estate taxes become delinquent on April 1 and a mandatory 3% interest is added to the amount due at that time. In order to assist customers in avoiding late penalties, the tax collector's offices will remain open an additional hour on March 31.

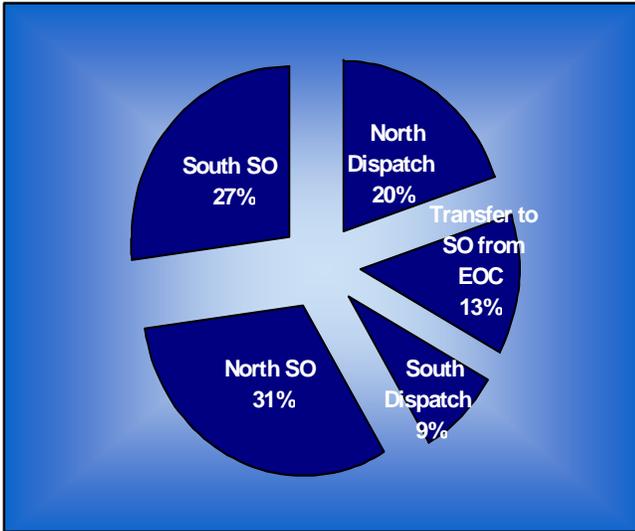
For more information and payment options, go to the Tax Collector web site www.waltontaxcollector.com. You may also view their 2005 Annual Report at this web site.

In August 2005, the position of Tax and Licensing Inspector was added to the Tax Collector office. The primary objective is to maintain voluntary compliance in the payment of delinquent tangible personal property taxes and mobile home registration.

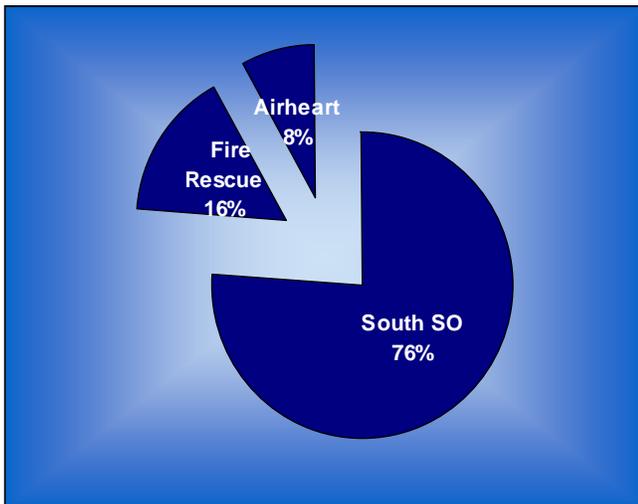
(See Corner—page 5)

Comparative Statistics

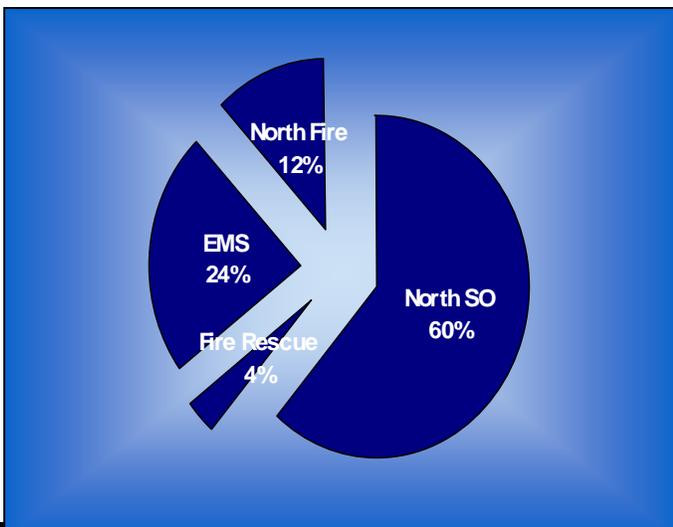
SO - Sheriffs Office



North Walton Dispatch (911 Control EOC)	15013
Transfer to SO from EOC	9771
South Walton Dispatch	6450
North SO Dispatch	23464
South SO Dispatch	20581



South Walton Dispatch	
South SO	20581
Fire Rescue (South Walton Dispatch)	4282
Airheart (South Walton Dispatch)	2168
Total for South Walton Dispatch	6450



North Walton Dispatch	
North SO Dispatch	23464
Fire Rescue (911 Control EOC)	1374
EMS (911 Control EOC)	9066
North Fire (911 Control EOC)	4573
Total for 911 Control EOC	15013

Walton County Taxpayers
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Santa Rosa Beach, FL 32459

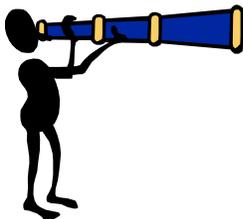
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Walton

Tax Watch

*The eyes and ears of Walton
County for taxpayers*



New Jail Construction Photo 03-15-06



SWFD—from page 3

In September 2005, SWFD commissioners approved the purchase of communications equipment (cost \$355,491) for the center. In November 2005, fire commissioners voted to proceed with a RFP for design of a 2-story building behind SWFD headquarters on Hwy. 393 north to serve as a communications center, training center for firefighters, EMS and dispatch personnel, and critical storage space. The building will withstand 200 mph winds and is estimated to cost \$1.5 million.

In 2006, SWFD was awarded the lifeguard program contract for six county public beach accesses. This program is financed by the Tourist Development Council.

**Sponsored by the Walton County Taxpayers Association, Inc.
Free to the Public**

Sunshine and Florida Public Records Law Seminar

Thursday, April 27, 2006

9:00 AM—12:00 PM

Coastal Branch Library

Greenway Trail off Hwy 331 South—in South Annex Government Center

Presented by: First Amendment Foundation

Barbara Petersen, President

With some of the strongest public access laws for government records and meetings in the country, Florida lawmakers still chip away each year at the right to access. The Florida Legislature approved 27 new exemptions to public records laws since 2004 and renewed 13 existing exemptions.

Ms. Petersen, an attorney, believes that what is lost with many of the new exemptions is the public's right to keep a close watch on its government. The public loses the ability to hold government accountable.