

Citizens frustrated by lack of communication

By Wayne Knuckles

The Clayton Tribune

CLAYTON—Communication between elected and appointed local officials and the citizens they serve is the key to good government, say representatives of the Rabun County Coalition For Good Government.

And it's the lack of communication that has the non-partisan group of concerned citizens frustrated to the point

they're considering asking voters to give the upcoming Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax referendum a big thumbs down.

"The cities and the county don't communicate with each other well, and they don't communicate with the public well" said Bill Stueck, a Democrat and member of the coalition

"As a whole, our group is undecided (on a new

SPLOST)," added Carolee Williams, a Rabun County Republican.

"We're optimistic that things can change, but we want to see the communication. That, to us, is the biggest thing we're upset about. We're all here because we want the community to be successful. And (local government officials) take it as a personal affront to them,

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SPLOST

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that they're not doing their job so we're on their back. No. We just want to make sure everything is successful. We go to the meetings and we can't even hear them. They won't use their microphones and they don't put anything on the board."

"In theory, we're in favor of it," Stueck said. "In fact, none of us have ever voted against a SPLOST in our lives. But we feel the way SPLOST is being handled is a symptom of a much larger problem, which also relates to SDS and the water and sewer stalemate."

They say a lack of communication about the upcoming SPLOST projects and how the funds generated by the continuation of a one-cent sales tax will be used to benefit taxpayers is so glaring that voters might want to reject the proposed SPLOST for now as a wake-up call for local government.

"If you look at the ballot, it's the most basic, generic information that tells you nothing," Williams said. "The average voter won't know what they're voting on, unless they take it upon themselves to look it up. It's a little tough to get that information. I think they should have either published it or in their last meeting, put up a visual saying 'here's where we're at, and this is why we need the jail and this is why we need the sheriff's office' and break it down."

"It seems to me effective government is just as if you are running a business, you have to establish priorities," Stueck said. "We want to know, why \$4 million for a jail? Why a million dollars for a new sheriff's office, when we have a lot of road issues, when we have water and sewer issues, and other stuff? We want to see what their logic is in why they chose these items and why they chose this amount of money. For example, my inclination is to say yes, there probably is a need for a jail expansion. But why \$4 million instead of \$2 million?"

"Our streets and sidewalks are crumbling around us," Williams said. "We just need to understand their logic, their thinking, on what the priorities are."

Stueck said the burden is on elected and appointed officials, not citizens groups, to effectively communicate about SPLOST projects.

"Citizens have busy lives," he said. "They have families. They have

jobs, they have all kinds of pressures. Government has to make it easy. Now the government will come back and say, 'well, we had a public meeting and it was announced in the newspaper. How many people attended the public meeting?' Okay, fair point. But is that all you're going to do? You've got to be more proactive if you're going to be sensitive to how busy citizens are and how little time they can really afford to spend on these issues. You've got to be proactive in figuring out better ways to communicate."

Williams said some communities have implemented an oversight committee that includes ordinary citizens to serve as a watchdog, "a SPLOST advisory board, or whatever you want to call it."

"A citizens group that would be appointed by elected officials," Stueck added. "They would monitor the expenditures and how the expenditures correlate with what they said in the SPLOST, and communicate that with the public. The Alliance folks have done a little bit of research. There are other counties that are doing this kind of thing. And we think that's a great idea."

The group feels the upcoming Feb. 28 public forum on SPLOST at the courthouse is a positive step in the right direction toward better communication.

Representatives from county government and each of the municipalities have been invited to attend and answer questions about the proposed projects the upcoming SPLOST will fund.

"This forum, I think, is imperative," Williams said. "Anybody that wants any information (on SPLOST), this will determine, I think, the yes or no vote. An informed citizen will see that they need the money, or they will see that these people don't have their act together. How do we know they won't go off on a tangent and spend money for something it's not appropriated for?"

"You need forums like this because people don't have a lot of time," Stueck said. "Nothing is perfect, but this is as close, I think, to something you can realistically expect citizens to attend to help them make up their minds."

"We want them to succeed," Williams added. "We don't want them to fail. We know there is money that needs to go into specific projects. But where are their priorities? They need to work on their communication."

YOUR OPINION

'Think About It' before voting on SPLOST

Thanks to *The Clayton Tribune* for its focus on the upcoming vote on a new SPLOST. I also like the ad in the current issue that says "Think About It." Since the 2013 SPLOST, I've been thinking a lot about them.

SPLOSTs are important. They enable capital projects which might not be possible in their absence. But they require voter approval of projects, and the county has fallen short of giving voters what they need to "Think About It." Past "projects" have included roads, streets and bridges, Senior Center and water and sewer, which are really categories, not projects. Which roads or water/sewers? What will be done? And why these projects, not others? Citizens deserve to know these things before they vote.

I have been particularly interested in what is done with roads, streets and bridges. Several years ago, Rabun County had the third highest percentage of unpaved roads in the state, and my sense is that hasn't changed much. Unpaved roads are less safe, more subject to damage, and more difficult for emergency vehicles to traverse.

I was pleased that the County put 25 percent of anticipated 2013 SPLOST funds in the roads and bridges category, but disappointed that there were no specific projects listed. Five years later, I was stunned to see the 2018 report that not a penny of the \$5 million allocation had been

spent. And it wasn't an issue of money, as SPLOST tax collections had been rolling in from the start.

If the county takes the same approach in the upcoming SPLOST, we will once again be asked to send our money to the county without knowing how or where it will be spent. If a friend told you he had an important project underway, and he asked you if you might consider contributing \$500 to help fund it, you would probably ask him what the project was. If his response was "I can't tell you that," how might you respond?

Think about it!

Mike Walters
LAKE BURTON

Public Forum can help us move forward together

There have been some contentious letters to the editor of late regarding the upcoming SPLOST. Thanks to this paper for hosting the upcoming Feb. 28th SPLOST Public Forum from 6:30-8 p.m. at the Courthouse. It will provide us with an opportunity to hear from our elected officials.

Citizens have the responsibility to step out of our complacency and attend public meetings and communicate with our elected officials in an informed and civil manner. Citizens who do not attend meetings cannot be informed. Effective two-way communication such as this Public Forum is a great place for our community to move forward together.

Rebecca Peterson
CLAYTON

Growing opposition to SPLOST no surprise

The county and the city of Clayton should not be surprised that there is growing opposition to passing the upcoming tax (SPLOST). I refuse to be held hostage by our politicians who tell us to vote yes on this SPLOST or face higher property taxes.

We have endured years of dysfunction in our local governments consisting of constant bickering, leaders acting like enemies and no clear leadership to drive consensus.

I have never voted "No" on a SPLOST vote in over 30 years of voting. I am not rich, but I do not mind kicking in a little to make the lives of everyone in my community better. But I will not vote for an increase in any tax until I see the leadership in this county that we deserve. I propose politicians start with a clean slate and USE THE TAXES WE ALREADY PAY to collaborate on fixing our entire water/sewer infrastructure, improving downtown Clayton and repairing our roads and bridges. We elect you to compromise and take care of the business for our community. You have not done this and until you sit down together, agree on a compromise on this water/sewer and write an SDS plan, I will not vote YES on any SPLOST.

Miranda Compton
LAKEMONT

LETTERS

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After SDS disaster, why vote SPLOST?

As a member of the Rabun County Coalition for Good Government, I attended most of the 2018 Clayton City Council, Board of Commissioners and Service Delivery Strategy (SDS) meetings. ALL SIDES displayed that they simply could not work together and hence the SDS brouhaha is now in the hands of the courts. It was embarrassing, even infuriating, to observe these failed SDS negotiations.

Our local governments FOR YEARS have spent our tax dollars on legal fees over SDS, the water wars and even past SPLOST's because elected and appointed officials refuse to make the compromises necessary to reach agreements on their own. The only winners have been the lawyers and consultants. The losers are all the rest of us. Now we are being told we must support a six-year \$20 million SPLOST or our taxes will go up. What's wrong with this picture?

Samantha Thacker,
MOUNTAIN CITY

Officials invited to take part in SPLOST forum Feb. 28

The League of Women Voters of Rabun County and *The Clayton Tribune* will host a public forum on the upcoming Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) February 28 at the Rabun County Courthouse at 6:30 p.m.

Representatives from county and municipal governments, as well as other interested parties, have been invited to discuss the upcoming SPLOST vote on March 21.

A SPLOST is special-purpose local-option sales tax used as a financing method for funding capital outlay projects. It is an optional one-percent sales tax levied by any county for the purpose of funding the building of parks, schools, roads, and other public facilities.



Will our leaders use a new Special Options Sales Tax (SPLOST) wisely?

They have failed to:
agree on a new Service Delivery Strategy (SDS)
resolve water & sewer system issues
provide plans for use of a new SPLOST

**SHOULD WE APPROVE A NEW SPLOST IN
THE MARCH 19 REFERENDUM?**

ATTEND THE FORUM

**FEB. 28 AT 6:30 PM AT THE COUNTY COURTHOUSE
TO GET INFORMATION TO MAKE UP YOUR
MIND BEFORE VOTING**

**Rabun County Coalition
For Good Government**

Learn more. Visit rcc4gg.com
email: rabungoodgov@gmail.com
rabuncountyalliance@gmail.com

Paid for by Rabun County Republicans, Democrats, and Rabun County Alliance

Projects to be funded by upcoming SPLOST

On March 19, Rabun County voters will go to the polls to decide whether or not to approve a \$20 million Special Purpose Local Option Tax (SPLOST) for a period of six years to fund public projects in both the county and each municipality.

Early voting begins Feb. 25.

According to the inter-governmental agreement between all local governments, the money will be distributed as follows:

County Projects: \$15.5 million

County Projects
Sheriff's Building: \$1 million

Administration/Courthouse: \$3 million

Jail: \$4 million

Water and Sewer: \$5 million

Roads and bridges: \$2.5 million

Clayton Projects

Roads and Streets: \$1.5 million

Water and Sewer Improvements: \$500,000

City Hall Maintenance and Repair: \$240,000

Public Safety: \$60,000

Total: \$2.3 million

Dillard Projects

Roads and Bridges: \$170,000

Water and Sewer Improvements: \$170,000

City Complex Renovations: \$100,000

Total: \$440,000
Sky Valley Projects

Buildings: \$50,000

Equipment: \$100,000

Roads and Streets:

\$240,000

Total: \$390,000

Mountain City Projects

City Complex Renova-

tions: \$310,000

Roads and Bridges:

\$250,000

Public Safety: \$90,000

Total: \$650,000

Tiger Projects

Roads and Bridges:

\$350,000

Parks and Recreation:

\$150,000

Total: \$500,000

Tallah Falls Projects

Water and Sewer Improvements: \$120,000

Roads and Bridges: \$50,000

Public Buildings: \$50,000

Total: \$220,000

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Jail expansion is a critical need, sheriff says

By **Wayne Knuckles**

The Clayton Tribune

CLAYTON—The Rabun County Sheriff's Department will benefit from the continuation of the one percent sales tax to the tune of about \$5 million as projected by the upcoming Special Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) referendum March 19.

If voters approve the next SPLOST, about \$4 million of the proceeds

will go toward expanding the 96-bed county jail, with an additional \$1 million earmarked for a new sheriff's office facility to be relocated to a site near the jail facility off Bowen Creek Road.

Sheriff Chad Nichols said both projects are needed to meet both state and federal requirements and the need for efficient law enforcement in the county.

"As sheriff, I wouldn't

approach the county if I didn't see these as 'needs' versus 'wants,'" Nichols said last week. "We may have a list of wants, but until we can get the needs taken care of, we'll have to worry about the wants later."

While the jail is relatively new in terms of its useful lifespan, more space is needed for a variety of reasons.

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An additional 60 beds will be added to the Rabun County Jail from SPLOST funds if voters approve a continuation of the one percent sales tax next month.

JAIL

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As far as the sheriff's office, Nichols said there are moisture and plumbing issues as well as a lack of space. The office has been located in the courthouse in Clayton for many years, but Nichols said the time has come to consolidate services at a new facility that will also be close to the jail.

A 2018 report by the Georgia Sheriff's Association indicates the county will eventually need 240 beds to meet projected inmate needs through 2040.

Nichols said the SPLOST, if approved, would only provide funding for about 60 of the needed beds, but it's a good start.

"It's a great facility," Nichols said of the current jail facility, which was first populated in 2005. "The commissioners at the time, and Sheriff (Don) Page had the vision to cast ahead to make this jail where it would be easy to add on to. Here we are 13-14 years later, and we're looking at having to expand. We're at the point we're running over capacity a little bit."

Nichols said several factors have created the need for a jail expansion, but housing out-of-county prisoners is not one of them.

"Every inmate we have is a Rabun County inmate," he said. "We have probably a handful of other county's inmates, but what we've done is switch one of ours for one of theirs."

Nichols said when the current jail was first

built, there was excess capacity to house inmates from outside the county.

"I don't know what the statistics would be, but the county at one time was making good money off that," he said. "But after the first five years, other counties started building their new jails."

Nichols said a new crime classification system implemented a couple of years ago, is playing a big part in the need for expansion.

"Some people told us (the current jail) would last us 20-30 years," he said. "But several years ago, Gov. Deal did the criminal justice reform. That rescheduled a bunch of crimes, where what would have went to prison before, and been out of our county jail, are not being sent to prison, and are being dealt with at the county jail.

He used shoplifting as an example.

"Back before flat screen televisions got affordable, you could steal one and get a felony, and you would be going off to prison. Now you can take two or three flat screen tv's and you'll be sentenced to (county) jail. A lot of those laws that were once considered a felony are now misdemeanors."

Another factor is the increase in the number of females being arrested.

"It still shocks me, when I used to work at the jail (when it was located at the courthouse), we might have had two or four (female) inmates at the most," Nichols said. "We have a little over 30 right now. We only had one pod of females for the longest time. We've actually had to house some of the male inmates out and we've had to make

two pods for females. That was really where we were struggling to meet the standards, because we had so many, but we only had one pod."

Nichols said his administration might also be contributing to the shortage of bed space at the jail.

"A lot of people say the sheriff is really hard on drugs and that's why, but the last two years of the former sheriff, (the jail population) was knocking on the door of the mid-90s. I think that trend was already starting. I probably pushed it a little harder, but we were trending in that direction."

The current jail was built so individual "pods" could be added to it at a later date.

"The existing kitchen, our laundry, our booking area, they're saying we won't have to add that in the new part. What we're adding can sustain itself."

Nichols said the proposed expansion would add four pods with about 60 beds total and one rec room.

"To get (our projected need for beds) about halfway, I think is a good start," he added. "Ten years from now, if they have to add on again, it shouldn't be a problem. And if we get to a point we're not using a pod, we're not using two pods, we can cut the power and water off to them by flipping a switch."

As for a new sheriff's office, Nichols said his department has been housed in the basement of the courthouse since the late 1960's, and the jail was also housed there before it was eventually moved to its current location.

"A building this age has its issues, and of course the sheriff's office has grown," Nichols said. "We've outgrown where we are now. We're split up on different levels, and we're away from the jail. As the sheriff, I'd like to be closer to the jail than what we are. We just feel so disconnected from the jail with them out there and we being downtown."

The current office space also has a number of structural issues, according to Nichols.

"We have leaky ceiling, leaky floors," he said. "We have one room with mold issues. Several of the investigators started getting sick with respiratory problems.

We just need more room. And it would be nice to all be together on one level, the investigators and the deputies. With all the training we do, we really don't have a room that can accommodate all of us."

Nichols said the funds generated by the SPLOST are needed to upgrade both facilities. Otherwise, the entire cost of the projects could potentially be shouldered by Rabun County taxpayers alone.

"Both of them could be built off this SPLOST tax, and keep the burden off the taxpayers," he said. "I don't want my taxes going up, either. I just encourage everyone, for the sake of the sheriff's office, to vote yes on SPLOST, and if you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to me. Look at the jail study, see the needs and how everything was calculated, and make an informed decision that the SPLOST is probably the best way to fund these needs."