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## Giles: SPLOST helps county do more with less

By Wayne Knuckles  
The Clayton Tribune

*(Editor's note: This is the first in a series of articles on the upcoming Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax referendum)*

CLAYTON—Rabun County voters will go to the polls March 19 to decide whether to continue a one-percent sales tax that will generate an estimated \$20 million over the next six years to fund public projects.

To Rabun County Administrator Darrin Giles, giving the green

light to a Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) means generating funds for much-needed local projects in part by having non-residents who purchase goods and services locally contribute.

“(SPLOST) enables the county to do a lot of projects they wouldn’t ordinarily be able to do,” Giles said Monday. “If you look at the SPLOST with common sense, you can’t not go vote for it.”

Giles ticked off a long list of local projects SPLOST has funded over

### Public forum on SPLOST to be held on 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.

the years, including road work, water and sewer projects and emergency services improvements.

And he said Rabun County voters only paid for a portion of the costs. “There is a number

there that out-of-town people pay, as opposed to the taxpayers in the county,” Giles said.

“Why make (local taxpayers) pay 100 percent when you can take a percentage of that off?”

According to the website GeorgiaSPLOST.org, a 2010 study by the University of Georgia estimated that non-residents pay 26 percent of Rabun County’s SPLOST

Giles said the number of people visiting the county each year has grown substantially since then, and the figure could be much higher now.

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# SPLOST

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“I guess it could be debated over what the actual number is that out-of-town people pay for our infrastructure improvements, new roads, updates to our senior center, updates to our transfer station, our rec department, our new gym, and we’re working on our golf course now,” Giles said. “All of these projects are made possible by SPLOST. We couldn’t tax enough to get these projects done, or even the maintenance on them.”

One big-ticket item on the county’s list of SPLOST projects is \$4 million for an expansion of the Rabun County Jail. The county also proposes to spend \$1 million to construct a new facility to house the sheriff’s office, which would be relocated from the courthouse basement to a new site across the road from the jail complex.

“Basically, our jail is packed,” Giles said. “We’re probably sitting at capacity now. No, the population here has not grown that much. But what happened is we have a casino on the north end. And on the weekends we might double our population. That’s a good thing for us and a good thing for the SPLOST, but we stop more people out there on Highway 441. Most of the time it’s just average traffic stops, but there’s stuff found in the car, and if there are 4-5 in the car, they

go to the jail.”

The current jail facility off Bowen Creek is about 15 years old, and was designed so that it could be expanded by adding additional pods as more capacity is needed.

“The commission at the time (the jail was built) did a good job,” Giles said. “The jail is sound. The jail was built to add on to, so we’re just adding another pod.”

Giles said the current sheriff’s office has been plagued by plumbing, drainage and mold issues consistent with its age. He added the sheriff’s office has always been in the courthouse basement as far back as he can remember.

“With the amount of staff now, it’s just time to get them out of there,” he said.

Once a new building for the sheriff’s office is completed, the county plans to spend \$3 million of SPLOST money to renovate the space to be used for storage, and to make further courthouse improvements.

The biggest portion of the county’s share of SPLOST funds will go to water and sewer projects.

“We’ve built a 1.5 million gallon per day water plant out of the last SPLOST,” Giles said. “We have also done numerous water and sewer projects. One was the Parkdale sewer. They were having issues, and basically it could have shut them down. We ran the water and sewer line up there. That came out of SPLOST and it saved 200 jobs.”

This time around, the

county wants to run a line that hope will eventually tie the north and south treatment facilities together in a loop.

“If the sale ever happens between the city and the county, this loop would allow us to pull from both plants, and we could shut one section off if we need to make repairs. And we’ll have water on Highway 441. Everyone asks, ‘What are you doing for economic development?’ Well, you get water and sewer on the 441 corridor. To me, that’s a biggie. I know Dillard wants to consolidate with us on water and sewer and we’d like to consolidate too, in the future.”

A total of \$2.5 million will be earmarked for road and bridge work.

“Sometimes people will say ‘Oh, the county got \$5 million for roads and bridges.’ But when you have 361 center line miles of road, and the cost of that is around \$225,000 per mile just to resurface a county road, \$5 million does not go that far,” Giles said. “We’ve paved 36-37 miles of road out of the last SPLOST.”

Giles said the county will pair SPLOST money with matching grants from the state to make the dollars go further.

“It’s tough to maintain what we have without the SPLOST,” he said. “If we don’t have that, most definitely we’re going to have to tax and get money from somewhere to maintain our infrastructure. I feel like I’m behind now, and I am. A lot of our major roads—Warwoman, Betty’s Creek,

Burton Mountain—are crumbling, and I can’t get to them in a quick enough fashion, because I’m waiting on funding. With SPLOST, it helps make a dent in our road projects.”

Giles said he’s read the letters in the newspaper from those who are opposed to another SPLOST at this time.

“I don’t have a private slush fund sitting somewhere,” he said. “The commissioners vote on those projects. It’s the commissioner’s decision as to what they want to move forward with.”

Giles also responded to criticisms about the lack of specificity regarding SPLOST projects.

“The reason we keep the terms so broad is basically if we get into a project, say we get into a road project and we realize it’s going to cost a million dollars instead of a half million dollars, the commission now has the ability, with the way it’s written, to not do the project, but to go and do another road project. You can get into the weeds so much. If you name it in a SPLOST (ballot question), let’s take that window over there. If you name that window over there, and it turns out you could get one for half the cost, it doesn’t matter. If you

named it in SPLOST you have to get the exact same window. Our lawyers have told us to keep the terms broad, it gives you some leverage if you get into a project that’s going to cost too much, you can back out and do a different project, as long as that project falls into the same category.”

And flexibility is important when you’re projecting costs as much as six years down the road, Giles added.

“Projects go over budget,” he said. “You don’t know what the economic situation will be (in six years). There

are a lot of things that control the cost of a project that you can’t forecast even a year down the road. If that project runs over, the county has to fund it, because you’ve named that project. And whatever that overrun is, the county has to pull out of its fund balance or however it sees fit to run it. That’s another reason we stay broad.”

Giles said he hopes voters will approve continuing the SPLOST when they vote in March.

“Should you vote for SPLOST? My answer is yes,” he said.

## Rabun History Fascinating Facts

### Poor choice of words

From the September 24, 1931 Clayton Tribune: Judge Will Smith has disposed of the chain gang equipment and all the felony convicts numbering 24. There remains 13 misdemeanor convicts to be disposed of.

1931



[www.rabunhistory.org](http://www.rabunhistory.org)



# YOUR OPINION

## Citizens should educate themselves on SPLOST

Last week's editorial "Toxic effects of SDS Fiasco Continue to Linger" and the letters to the editor reflect the feeling of many of us that our leaders have not effectively communicated to us and have not responsibly managed our money. Hence, there is a growing movement to defeat the upcoming local sales tax called SPLOST.

Democracy is messy. It is not a perfect system. Our leaders are imperfect. Democracy works best when citizens FULLY PARTICIPATE and leaders are open to our input- even if it the input takes time and may "sting". Now, the only way forward is to "turn the page" on the unpleasant and expensive battles over SDS, SPLOST and the water wars. Citizens must attend public meetings and fully understand this upcoming SPLOST so together we make the best decision for Rabun's future.

**Pam Burchell  
TIGER**

## Elected officials, citizens need to come together

We need our politicians and our community to come together and heal from the lack of trust that has developed towards local government due to the multi-year struggles over the community water and sewer and the Service Delivery Strategy (SDS) mess.

Many citizens plan to vote "NO" on the March tax (SPLOST) because we want to

see changes. We want to see the CITIZENS more engaged in our local government and we want OUR LEADERS to improve their communication and collaboration with each other and with us.

If the March SPLOST fails, the county may request another SPLOST vote later in 2019. Let's take a "time out" from the hostility and spend some time working TOGETHER to build towards a future that is better for all of us. In order to build a better future for Rabun County we need the citizens to be involved, engaged and committed to become educated on the issues facing our local governments(s).

People have busy lives with lots of competing demands but occasionally attending a Clayton City Council meeting or a meeting of the County Board of Commissioners, reading the local newspaper to stay up on local issues, talking to friends, family and neighbors about issues that concern you regarding how the various cities in Rabun County and the county government work means we all need to be better informed. And our elected officials need to understand that we are holding them accountable. It is important for all citizens to know the facts.

We are a small county and we are blessed to live in one of the most beautiful places in the United States. Let's not blow it by being uniformed, or worse, ignorant of the issues facing our county.

**Judith Cox  
RABUN GAP**

## Not sure I can support the new SPLOST

Rabun citizens will go to the polls soon and cast a vote "yes" or "no" for a one-cent sales tax. This is a special tax called SPLOST. Should we vote to approve an additional sales tax?

The Service Delivery Strategy (SDS) debacle and the continued water and sewer wars are evidence that Rabun County citizens are being held hostage to petty politics and past grievances. The recent decision by a judge to TEMPORARILY lift the SDS sanctions is not a long-term remedy unless it is followed up by a cultural change in our local governments.

Our politicians encourage us to vote "yes" for SPLOST. These are the same politicians who allowed Rabun County to lose millions of dollars in State funds due to a three-year expired Service Delivery Strategy. These politicians have also spent our tax dollars for years on consultants and lawyers.

Since the politicians can request a SPLOST later, I am thinking of voting "no" to the upcoming SPLOST. In the past I have always supported special purpose taxes for the betterment of the community. This time I'm not sure I can in good conscience do so. We all need to think about it.

**Kristin Martin  
Clayton**

## Negativity and division can destroy us

I was never very good in math, but I do understand division. It seems to me as if there is some invisible force trying to divide us. It's easy to

Please see **LETTERS**, A5

# Categories and funding for SPLOST outlined

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.

Eligible citizens can register to vote in this special election through

Feb. 19.

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 Renovations: \$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

**Tallulah Falls Projects**

Water and Sewer Improvements: \$120,000

Roads and Bridges: \$50,000

Public Buildings: \$50,000

Total: \$220,000