

## City, county leaders unite in support of SPLOST



Photo by Rachel Justice Bell

A standing room only crowd was on hand at the Rabun County Courthouse last Thursday as local elected officials discussed the upcoming SPLOST referendum.

Accountability and transparency needed in process, citizens say

By Wayne Knuckles

The Clayton Tribune

CLAYTON—A standing-room-only crowd listened for 90 minutes as county and municipal leaders made their case for approval of the upcoming Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) referendum at a public forum held at the Rabun County Courthouse last Thursday.

After three years of sometimes bitter disputes over water, sewer and a failed Service Delivery Strategy, county and municipal officials were in full agreement Thursday that passage of the SPLOST is needed to move a variety of public projects forward in Rabun County.

“Frankly, Tallulah Falls has to have the SPLOST,” Mayor Teri Dobbs said. “We have to have it to make budget, just plain and simple.”

“The SPLOST, to us, is a lifesaver,” said Dillard Mayor Bill Robinson. “We get our streets paved, we keep our sewer up, we just installed a water system. I will say that the SPLOST to us is very important.”

A SPLOST is a special one percent sales tax, which raises funds for public projects. The next round of SPLOST will generate approximately \$20 million for city and county municipal projects.

Rabun County voters

Please see **SPLOST**, A7



# SPLOST

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have approved a SPLOST six times previously.

New SPLOST funding, if approved by voters March 19, will go toward a variety of projects in local municipalities, as well as increasing bed space at the county jail. A new office for the Sheriff's Department and upgrades to courthouse facilities, in addition to road work, would also be paid for from SPLOST funds.

"When I came into office in 2017, there was an average daily population of about 90 people in our detention center at that point," Sheriff Chad Nichols said. "It's steadily risen since then. Some days it's gotten up to 133 (inmates). That's one of the main reasons our jail in Rabun County is in need of expansion. It's not a problem unique to Rabun County. It's pretty much statewide and a result of the Criminal Justice Reform Act of 2012-13."

Thursday's forum, sponsored by The League of Women Voters of Rabun County and The Clayton Tribune, was designed to provide information about the upcoming SPLOST referendum. Only Sky Valley and Mountain City did not send representatives Thursday.

Two main themes emerged over the course of the evening – the need for transparency and for local governments to work together.

"One of the times we all get together as city and county leaders is through the SPLOST discussions," county commissioner Stephen Arbitter said.

"I see how much this means to not just the county, but to each of the individual cities," county commissioner Scott Crane added.

"We're not only thankful, we're very happy that we're being included in the SPLOST this year," said Clayton council member Carl Butler.

"We are allocating \$1.5 million for roads and streets. It's going to be dedicated almost entirely to downtown. We need a lot of work on our infrastructure downtown. We are doing a major push on this with SPLOST money."

Tiger council member Mike Carnes said his city will use a large portion of SPLOST funds for roads and resurfacing if voters pass the referendum.

"One of those roads has become unsafe for the (school) bus to travel on," Carnes added. "Some of our sidewalks were built in the 1960s. They're dangerous for our young people to walk on, let alone our older people."

Carolee Williams, representing the Rabun County Coalition for Good Government, said citizens expect more communication and transparency going forward regardless of the SPLOST outcome.

"We fully understand the value of SPLOST income to our community, and the fact is we do need the money," Wil-

liams said. "We strongly believe that unless the county commits to new ways to communicate, and new ways of spending tax dollars, this SPLOST will be defeated. We are not against the concept of SPLOST, but we may need a time out of one year to all work together to improve relationships and to sustain and develop comprehensive plans for a future SPLOST. Rabun County citizens should no longer be held hostage to petty politics, past grievances, or prior dispute. Our future depends on it."

Williams said the citizens group will like to see the formation of a citizen advisory committee to evaluate and report on SPLOST projects.

While generally opposed to the creation of a new committee, county officials agreed that communication is vital.

"I'm a newly elected official," Crane said. "As a citizen, I was frustrated by the communication between the county and the cities in the SDS and the sewer wars. We are communicating (now). We want to be transparent. We want to let you know what we do with your money. That should never be in doubt. I want this to end just as bad as you want this to end. We're not going to get anywhere fighting with each other. We are communicating."



Megan Broome/The Clayton Tribune

Michelle Duquette, left, Clayton council member, joins County Administrator Darrin Giles and County Commissioner Scott Crane in a light-hearted moment prior to last week's SPLOST forum.

We are working together." Arbitter pointed out that SDS and SPLOST are two different issues.

"SPLOST is one area where I've seen tremendous work between the cities and the county. It's one issue where all the oars are pulling together."

Arbitter said he would commit to meeting with the citizen's group as often as necessary, but was not in favor of adding another committee.

"With no disrespect to the group that's come together, I've been doing this six years, and this is

the third different group that has come up with the same idea, that they want to form a non-elected advisory board to help us do our job," he said. "You all have the power. If you don't like what I'm doing, kick the bums out. Unelected people have no power over decisions about your money."

"I was elected by the people of this county to do this job, and that's the job I'm going to do," Crane added.

"We're not looking for power or to make decisions on your behalf," Williams

responded. "We just want communication."

Using the example of the jail expansion, Crane said there are some projects that will need to proceed with or without SPLOST funding.

"Nobody wants a (jail expansion)," Crane said. "The sheriff doesn't want to have to build it, it's not popular, but it's one of those things we have to put up with. White County, for example, had overcrowding, they didn't build a new jail and somebody got hurt and the county got sued and they forced them to build a new jail. We have people laying on mats down there in the multi-use room. It's one of those things you don't want to hear, it's not popular, but it's needed. Sewer and water, infrastructure, those are what the SPLOST is designed for."

Clayton council member Michelle Duquette said the city will be as transparent as possible with the way it utilizes SPLOST funding.

"We can put something in the paper to update the status of these projects if you want us to," Duquette said. "We can update our website. We will put it out there. You can go by city hall and see a list of roads and they're in the order or priority. We need more (funds) honestly, but we'll use whatever we have and continue to prioritize."

Crane said the county supports Clayton's plans for downtown improvements.

"Clayton is the heartbeat of Rabun County," he said. "We want to see them thrive, because when they thrive, we thrive as a county. Working together only benefits all of us."



Rabun County Sheriff Chad Nichols talks about the need to expand the county jail as Dillard Mayor Bill Robinson listens.

*Thank you!*

We would like to thank everyone that has done so much for us during this time of Chuck's illness. All the prayers and love, visits, cards, phone calls and for the contributions to the raffle fundraiser giving from their hearts. We can't thank you enough for God and his love. Chuck continues to battle the lung fibrosis and cancer.

Chuck and Brenda S. Hooper

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PRESENTS RABUN COUNTY'S

**STUDENT OF THE MONTH**

**LUKE NIX**

**YEAR: Senior**

**SCHOOL: Rabun County High School**

**ABOUT: Luke is a bright student and an inspiration to his classmates and teachers. He is currently serving as the President of the RCHS TSA Club. His favorite subject is engineering and he plans to attend a college to obtain a bachelor's degree in engineering after graduation from RCHS. When not in school, Luke enjoys building race cars for Electrathon.**

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Marcia McKean and Cheryl Crouse work early voting polls in the SPLOST election on Monday. These clerks keep track of a numbered list of registered voters and count to make sure the machines match their documentation.



Megan Broome/The Clayton Tribune

Jennifer Kirchman and Kay Townsend check in voter Donna Nix for early voting at the Rabun County Board of Elections and Registration office on Monday. Voters begin at this table where clerks verify their name, date of birth and other information to confirm that they are registered voters.

# Early voting on SPLOST continues through next week

By Megan Broome

The Clayton Tribune

CLAYTON— Voting for the SPLOST election is underway, and day six of early voting proved a positive start for vot-

er turnout.

“It looks like we’re on schedule,” said Tammy Whitmire, elections supervisor, in an interview on Monday.

Whitmire said that on day six of early voting, 195 people

had voted in person since early voting began.

The elections office mailed out 406 absentee ballots, and as of Monday morning 288 had been returned, Whitmire said.

“[We’ve had] 483 total voters

so far, including in person and absentee,” Whitmire said on Monday.

Early voting continues until March 15, and March 9 is Saturday voting for the election from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. at the

Rabun County Elections and Registration office.

The SPLOST election will be held on Tuesday, March 19. Polls are open from 7 a.m. until 7 p.m.

## OUR OPINION

# Vote 'yes' on SPLOST

**R**abun County voters should vote "yes" to approve an extension of the one-percent Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) that is on the March 19 ballot.

All Rabun residents benefit from SPLOST proceeds, whether they live in the county or one of the cities.

Clayton, Tiger, Tallulah Falls, Dillard, Mountain City and Sky Valley and county officials have united in unanimous support of the SPLOST. That in itself is telling. When was the last time all the municipalities and the county were in total agreement on a public issue?

Proceeds from the proposed SPLOST will benefit all residents of Rabun County in the form of road improvements, public building upgrades, and enhancements to public safety, water, sewer and the infrastructure needed to sustain a growing community.

SPLOST funds will also pay for additional jail space and improved facilities for the Rabun County Sheriff's Department. Nobody wants a jail, nobody wants to talk about spending money on a jail, but the reality is the current facility is pushing its maximum capacity. Increasing space now is the most cost-effective way to deal with the problem.

To delay even another year will likely increase the eventual cost of the project due to the likelihood that construction materials will cost more in the future. To begin construction now will also help taxpayers avoid footing the bill for potential lawsuits that could result from jail overcrowding.

And putting the Sheriff's Department in a new facility near the jail makes good sense. Sheriff Chad Nichols' department has long outgrown their current courthouse facilities. Costly improvements to plumbing, a leaky roof and other problems inherent to an aging facility will continue to be paid for by Rabun County taxpayers without much direct benefit if the SPLOST is not approved.

Rabun County residents deserve a modern, well equipped sheriff's office.

The city of Clayton in particular will benefit greatly from approval of the SPLOST. Shut out completely last time, Clayton will receive \$2.3 million in SPLOST funds this time around if you vote to approve SPLOST. Much of the money will go toward improving sidewalks and downtown infrastructure.

Clayton is the economic hub of Rabun County. It's vital that timely investments be made to keep the wheels of commerce that benefit all residents spinning smoothly.

There's no better way to fund these capital improvements and public works than a SPLOST. A one-cent-per-dollar sales tax has been in place for as long as many can remember. So a new SPLOST is not a tax increase in that sense, it's a tax extension.

You can debate how much of the SPLOST proceeds are collected from tourists and non-residents. But what is not debatable is that some percentage of the projects built with SPLOST funds were paid for by folks who don't even live here. Whether that number is as low as 20 percent or as high as 50 percent, it provides real tax relief for local residents who would bear the full burden otherwise.

Local government has a lot of work to do to regain public confidence in the wake of the SDS disaster and the sewer and water wars. Some elected officials acknowledged as much at a public forum last week.

But to oppose SPLOST on the grounds that taking a "time out" will send some sort of message is like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. It will accomplish nothing except cost taxpayers even more in the long run.

In our view, the better course of action is to approve the SPLOST and insist on public and transparent periodic reports on how the money is being used.

We urge you to vote "yes" on SPLOST.

# A new call for unity and an end to The Jerry Springer Show

**A**mong life's lessons I've absorbed over the past six decades, there is this:

Some things I would love to see come to pass I simply won't live long enough to experience.

I doubt I'll live to see this country's national debt erased. It's highly unlikely I'll be around when there's a colony on the Mars. I know the Bigfoot conference is coming in April, but I'd rate my chances of seeing a Sasquatch anywhere other than in a Jack Links Beef Jerky commercial at pretty near zero.

I probably won't live long enough to see a cure for cancer, either.

But bless my unbelieving eyes if I didn't spy a sight last week that almost didn't seem possible in my lifetime.

Last Thursday, at the Rabun County Courthouse, elected officials of local municipalities and county government came together and voiced their unanimous support for a common cause that will benefit all residents of our community.

I'm talking, of course, about the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, affectionately known as "the SPLOST," that's on the March 19 ballot.

When was the last time you saw our local elected leaders on the same wavelength about ANYTHING? From water wars to SDS, they've been on a different hymnal page for quite some time



**Wayne Knuckles**  
Publisher

Reasonable people can reasonably disagree, but our community is too small to stay divided.

Seeing so many of our elected leaders get together in one room to present a united front for the common good is a positive step in the right direction, if you ask me.

I've always thought of a SPLOST as a sort of no-brainer everywhere I've lived over the past 20 years. Visitors pay along with hard-working local residents. It's a good deal for hard-working local taxpayers, hands down.

It's a tax alright, but one Rabun County residents have been paying so long it's highly unlikely they even notice it. Just like they may not notice the improvements to roads, infrastructure and public facilities their penny-per-dollar is buying. The entire community benefits.

And third, I can't let the moment pass without acknowledging that for all the barbs we

toss their way, for all the criticism they receive, our local leaders are human beings of flesh and blood and feelings. I doubt any of them had on their bucket list a desire to face a possibly hostile audience while standing shoulder-to-shoulder on the same team with folks they're busy wrangling in court with.

But they did that last week at the SPLOST forum.

It was standing room only at the Rabun County Courthouse. Citizens are obviously engaged. Everyone was polite and respectful. The disagreements were not disagreeable. Many thanks to all who participated. And thanks to Patricia Howell and her dedicated volunteers with the League of Women Voters of Rabun County, who always encourage voter education in a non-partisan way.

Maybe if you came expecting to see an episode of *The Jerry Springer Show* you left disappointed, but most of the comments I heard were about how good it was to see everyone sitting down together and having a reasonable discussion.

I think our elected officials took a big step forward last week. They deserve credit for standing tall. They say they want the battles to stop.

They'd better mean it, for the sake of all of us.

*Wayne Knuckles is editor and publisher of The Clayton Tribune.*

## Great day for democracy in Rabun County

Back at the turn of the century, Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam made a splash with an article "Bowling Alone." He claimed that the vibrant civil society of our country was in decline and that this was bad news for our democracy.

If the standing room only crowd that showed up at the courthouse last Thursday for the forum on the SPLOST referendum is any indication, democracy in Rabun County is alive and well. And it wasn't just the size of crowd that was heartening. It was its conduct.

Never was a voice raised; not a soul got up and walked out in anger. Excellent questions were put to our leaders and they gave reasonable answers.

Not everyone, myself prominently included, agreed with all of those answers, but citizens all listened and interacted in a constructive fashion. A great day for democracy in Rabun County!

Many thanks to *The Clayton Tribune* and the League of Women Voters for organizing and managing the event.

**Bill Stueck  
DILLARD**

## Oversight for SPLOST would benefit everyone

There seems to be a disparity among county commissioners, municipalities and citizens of Rabun County as to how SPLOST 7 monies should

be spent, hence a possible "no" vote for the upcoming referendum.

It is difficult for the average citizen to understand "where, why and how" their millions of dollars are to be spent.

*The Clayton Tribune* is the main source of information for most of us. They service our community well, but it is impossible for them to give us all the facts. Calling our county commissioners with concerns and questions will not happen. People are too busy and the (commissioners) shouldn't be bombarded with calls. A citizen's advisory oversight committee would be very beneficial to help all have a better understanding.

Instead of voice our discontentments to friends and neighbors, citizens must become more proactive and involved. Therefore, as a citizen of Tiger, I have decided to "start small" by going to our town hall meeting March 11 (meetings held second Monday of every month).

If the SPLOST passes, Tiger would receive \$500,000. Mayor Tom Ramey stated in the Feb. 28 edition of *The Clayton Tribune* that these monies would be used to resurface sidewalks and for finding and buying property for a park, plus improvements.

I do have some questions, do you? Hoping to see you there!

**Sue Sevoiué  
TIGER**

## Lady Cats made us all extremely proud

Once again this winter, the

# LETTERS

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families.

Thanks to the players and coaches of the Rabun County Wildcats your performances on and off the court makes us proud.

Ken Rumsey  
CLAYTON

## More specifics needed on topics

What happened to the Police Blotter? It has always been in the front section.

Where are the detailed statistics about the SPLOST, showing what will be done in detail, what contractor or person will do what work, and what the specific expense will be. It seems it is always glossed over with numbers pulled out of the air. The newspaper should get the details and then share them with us!

Next, who ended up selling that building on the corner of Seed Tick (not Rickman Airfield), and 441 and what relationship do they have with those responsible

for buying it?

If that is to be used for welcoming tourists to Clayton, what brings on the need for constructing a Welcome Center? This seems to have a sort of smell to it.

Rozanne Dibble

## Name calling has no place in debate

I learned in childhood that name-calling and bullying are wrong. Adults employ rational fact-based debate to address differences.

Yet a recent letter writer apparently has no problem with calling supporters of the current presidential administration "ignorant, gullible, and bigoted."

Another letter writer uses veiled references to 45 degree salutes and fear of diversity to proclaim the same insults. Literary devices do not render her statements more palatable or benign.

I just have a couple of questions. Do these two people have a supernatural ability to read minds and divine hearts? By what authority do these self-appointed judges excoriate and condemn many of their neighbors





**The Rabun County Coalition for  
Good Government thanks County and City  
Leaders for participating in the  
SPLOST Forum last week.**

The standing room only crowd at the County Courthouse is a TERRIFIC step forward toward communication and cooperation between our Leaders and the Public

**Polls are open thru March 19 on the  
SPLOST Referendum  
Whatever your opinion, PLEASE VOTE!!!**

**Rabun County Coalition  
For Good Government**  
rabuncountyalliance.com  
email: rabungoodgov@gmail.com  
rabuncountyalliance@gmail.com

Democrats, Republicans, Progressives, and Rabun County Alliance



# **NOTICE OF ELECTION TO THE QUALIFIED VOTERS OF RABUN COUNTY, GEORGIA**

**NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN** that on the 19th day of March, 2019 an election will be held at regular polling places in all election districts of Rabun County, Georgia ("the County"), at which time there will be submitted to the qualified voters of the county for their determination the question of whether a one percent county special purpose local option sales and use tax (the "SPLOST") shall be imposed on all sales and uses in the special district created in the County for a period of six (6) years for the raising of approximately \$20,000,000.00 for the purpose of funding capital outlay projects ("the Projects") specified in the form of the ballot set forth below.

## **YOU WILL VOTE "YES" OR "NO" ON THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:**

"Shall a special one percent sales and use tax be imposed in the special district of Rabun County for a period of time not to exceed six (6) years and for the raising of an estimated amount of \$20,000,000.00 for the purpose of (1) funding Sheriff's Building Improvements, Jail, Courthouse-Administration Renovations, Water and Sewer, and Roads and Bridges for Rabun County; (2) for funding Roads and Streets, Water and Sewer System Improvements, City Hall Maintenance and Repair, and Public Safety for the City of Clayton; (3) for funding Roads and Bridges, Water and Sewer System Improvements, and City Complex Renovations in the City of Dillard; (4) for funding Buildings, Equipment, and Roads and Streets in the City of Sky Valley; (5) for funding City Complex Renovations, Roads and Bridges, and Public Safety for Mountain City; (6) for funding Roads and Bridges and Parks and Recreation for the Town of Tiger; and (7) for funding Water and Sewer Improvements, Roads and Bridges, and Public Buildings for the City of Tallulah Falls?"

**The special election will be held on March 19, 2019.**

**All persons who are not registered to vote and who desire to register to vote in the special election may register to vote through the close of business on February 19, 2019.**

**Early/Advance voting will be held at the Board of Elections & Registration office located at 19 Jo Dotson Circle, Suite 201 Clayton, Georgia 30525 from February 25, 2019 thru March 15, 2019 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM each day.**

**Polls will be open from 7:00 AM until 7:00 PM on election day held at the Rabun County Civic Center in Clayton.**