

Splost V ...from Page 1A



Commissioner Lamar Paris with Fire Chief David Dyer, his two daughters Ava and Amelia, and County Manager Larry Garrett at the July 24 regular county meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

years. If it passes in the Nov. 6 General Election, SPLOST V will pick up right where SPLOST IV leaves off, and it, too, is estimated to collect \$24 million over a six-year term.

Usually, a new SPLOST referendum goes to vote the year before its implementation, which in this case would be 2020.

However, if the SPLOST referendum fails, the commissioner will have to wait at least 12 months before putting it back before county residents for another vote.

This would cause a disruption in continuous SPLOST collections should the referendum fail in 2020.

For this reason, the commissioner explained, he likes to put the SPLOST to vote a year early to allow him more time to pitch the tax to residents should the referendum fail.

Normally, holding the vote a year early would situate the SPLOST V referendum in 2019. But this is problematic, according to Paris, because there are no elections in 2019, meaning the county would have to schedule a special election to hold the SPLOST vote.

Holding a special election would likely cost the county upwards of \$10,000 or more, according to the Union County Registrar's Office.

So, to save money while giving the SPLOST an extra chance at passing, Paris has decided to put the referendum to vote during this year's gubernatorial election in November.

The City of Blairsville will receive 8.5 percent of SPLOST V collections if it passes, and

this money will go toward the city's own list of capital outlay projects, which emphasizes water/sewer improvements and public works projects.

County projects eligible for funding by SPLOST dollars include a wide variety of categories, and Commissioner Paris discussed these projects at length during the July 24 meeting.

"What does SPLOST cover, and why is it so critical to the operation of Union County Government?" said Paris. "Any new capital improvement, facility or building, parking lot, roof, heat and air equipment, any new vehicles, including motor graders ... sheriff's vehicles and other county vehicles ... or to purchase real estate, the paving of new roads but not patching ... includes gravel, asphalt and tar.

"What did you hear on these items that are not necessities? You really didn't hear anything. All of these are things that you have to do. New facilities and the purchase of real estate, sometimes, those may be optional, but everything else we would have to pay for and acquire with or without SPLOST.

"So, when I talk about property taxes increasing if we don't pass SPLOST, it's simple - that's just the way it is."

Continued Paris: "Just on paving alone, we spend over \$1 million out of our SPLOST, which would require a 17 percent property tax just for the paving part if we didn't do anything else with the money.

"We are blessed to have the second lowest property tax rate in the state of Georgia out of 159 counties. Our property tax

mill rate is 5.699. The average is almost 11 mills statewide. Just to break even would require probably a 30 percent property tax increase, and it would be bare bones.

"When you separate out everything that SPLOST pays for that is not optional, it is not optional for us to continue to have the best county in Georgia without SPLOST."

Paris went on to say that a SPLOST is a fairer tax than a property tax, since it places the taxpayer burden upon everyone in the county - not just property owners - and that includes visitors from other areas.

"Everyone that purchases a product in Union County helps pay it," said Paris.

In making his case, Paris listed a number of past SPLOST projects, such as the Union County Public Library, the Union County Saddle Club Arena, the Union County Farmers Market and Canning Plant, the North Enotah Drug Court Facility, the Byron Herbert Reece Farm & Heritage Center, the Suches Community Center and more.

"And we're going to have some huge costs in our 911 Center (soon), upgrading our radios and our electronic equipment this year and next year," said Paris, before continuing his extensive list of local SPLOST projects. "Meeks Park, including all ballfields, playgrounds, picnic pavilions, dog park, disc golf course, waterpark and pool, adult exercise area ... and much more for every age."

Added Paris: "Coming soon will be a double gymnasium in the next two to three years, and a new pavilion at Meeks Park will be started this year. And in

the future, (an amphitheater) at Meeks Park, we're hoping for that maybe in about three years from now."

The Union County SPLOST should not be confused with the Union County School System's five-year ESPLOST, which passed with 70 percent support earlier this year in the May 22 General Primary and Nonpartisan Elections.

Also in the July 24 meeting, the commissioner welcomed Sam Latimer, a

certified public account with Rushton & Company, to present the 2017 County Audit.

Latimer reported that the county has received a clean bill of financial health, noting that the county's net position (all capital and current assets minus current liabilities and long-term debt) was up \$700,000 from the previous year at \$50.45 million.

The county also has a healthy reserve of \$3.3 million, or 2.5 months' worth of

expenditures.

As previously reported, the FY17 budget was amended in June from \$15.2 million to \$17.5 million.

The amendment addressed an overage of about \$2.3 million in the FY17 budget, due to a combination of increased expenses, advantageous property acquisitions, decreased tax collections, and underbudgeting in some categories between 2016 and 2017.