



BRYAN COUNTY CLARIFIES CONCERNS SURROUNDING MILLAGE EQUALIZATION, SERVICE DELIVERY STRATEGY

BRYAN COUNTY, GA – AUGUST 15, 2018 – The Bryan County Board of Commissioners on Tuesday night voted to approve a new, equalized millage rate of 8.8 mills for all property owners in the county. This move will lower taxes in unincorporated areas of the county and Pembroke while raising Richmond Hill's rate by just under 1 mill. This increase results in roughly an additional \$28 a year for a home valued at \$150,000 with a homestead exemption.

Some Richmond Hill residents and officials contested the equalization, saying the raise in taxes for some homeowners was unfair. However, Bryan County leaders were quick to point out the simple reasoning behind the adjustment of property taxes, which exclusively pay for countywide services, such as the sheriff's department, courts, the county road system, elections, emergency medical services, libraries, recreation, tax assessor, tax commissioner and more.

According to County Commission Chairman Carter Infinger, the equalization corrects an inequity that, if left unchecked, would mean some citizens pay more than others for countywide services.

"As an uneven payment system is not fair to all residents of our county, it only seems right to adopt a rate that ensures everyone contributes fairly to the funding source that covers countywide services," Infinger said. "Property taxes pay for specific services, and we cannot change that. It's a hard fact: These services are provided to all citizens of the county and some are even established as countywide services by legislation or case law.

"So, why should residents in some areas be entitled to pay less for the same services that are provided to everyone?" the chairman asked. "Plain and simple, that shouldn't happen. When the inequity became clear to us during our budgeting process, we took steps to correct it. Ignoring the problem would have been irresponsible and unfair."

The equalization comes at a time when the county is working diligently to square away another standard, procedural issue that, unexpectedly, has been met with opposition – the Service Delivery Strategy.

Local governments are required by the Official Code of Georgia to have an SDS in place, giving governments and authorities the opportunity to reach an agreement on the delivery of services to citizens in an effective and cost-efficient manner. Bryan County and the Cities of Pembroke and Richmond Hill renegotiate the SDS every 10 years (or as needed) to minimize any duplication among those providing services to Bryan County residents.

The key provisions of the Service Delivery Strategy Act require that county services that primarily benefit unincorporated areas — as well as the county’s share of county/city jointly funded services — must be funded with unincorporated area revenues, including assessments and fees, insurance premium taxes, and property taxes derived from the unincorporated area.

In recent renegotiations, county and city officials disputed funding sources for some services, including roads and economic development. To ensure a fair agreement is in place as quickly as possible, Bryan County representatives met in January with Pembroke and Richmond Hill officials to initiate SDS negotiations. However, according to Infinger, the City of Richmond Hill unexpectedly terminated the negotiations a few months later, “after the county had been led to believe progress was being made,” the chairman said.

Following the initial negotiations meeting, Bryan County prepared and provided Pembroke and Richmond Hill a first draft of the required SDS forms in February. County representatives then met with Pembroke and Richmond Hill leaders in March to review that first draft of required forms. In April, Richmond Hill officials provided their written comments on the first draft of the required forms, and the county thoroughly reviewed and considered those comments. Bryan County officials then provided Pembroke and Richmond Hill with a revised draft of the required forms and were prepared to review that revised draft when the three entities were scheduled to meet on May 25. Instead of a discussion, though, Richmond Hill representatives simply terminated negotiations.

The existing Service Delivery Strategy was then extended for four months to October 31 and, in accordance with the SDS law, officials from Bryan County, Pembroke and Richmond Hill agreed to participate in a mediation session. The entities agreed on a mediator, Susan Cox, who was available Sept. 6-7. Bryan County and Pembroke leaders agreed to the proposed mediation dates and awaited word from the Richmond Hill officials. Instead, though, the city’s lawyer told Cox on Aug. 2 that Richmond Hill could not commit to mediation.

According to County Administrator Ben Taylor, the next step will be court-ordered mediation. However, he said, getting the city to voluntarily agree to resolve the SDS conflict is ideal. In the end, though, there must be a strategy in place and it cannot be postponed indefinitely.

“At the end of the day, we have a job to do. Our residents depend on the county for important services that affect their quality of life and ability to care for themselves and their families,” Taylor said. “We take our responsibilities seriously and just want to serve our citizens efficiently and to follow the law, as it mandates our actions and proceedings. We appeal to the City of Richmond Hill representatives to continue with mediation so we can resolve this matter and move on.”

Without a Service Delivery Strategy verified by the Department of Community Affairs to comply with applicable requirements, a local government or respective authorities are ineligible to receive any state permits or financial assistance, and their Qualified Local Government status could be in jeopardy. Although the current SDS is good through Oct. 31, Taylor says it would be ideal to come to an agreement before another extension is required.

For more information about Bryan County, please visit www.bryancountyga.org.

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