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City of Lake Park
PUBLIC HEARING Minutes
September 19, 2024
9:00 am

Members Present were Mayor Jena Sandlin, Mayor Pro Tem Oscar Griffith, Council Members Carl Spano and Busby Courson.

Appointed Staff Present: City Clerk Lisa Johnson

Mayor Jena Sandlin called the meeting to order.

Mayor Pro-Tem Oscar Griffith led the Invocation.

Mayor Jena Sandlin led the Pledge.

Mayor Sandlin thanked everyone for coming and stated that this would be the first of three Public Hearings to discuss the millage rate for this year. Because there have been a lot of changes and needs that have come their attention, the Council has decided to take the time to review the costs associated with those things and hold these Public Hearings to allow members of the Public to ask questions and give their input. Mayor Sandlin asked if any Member of Council wanted to say anything before the Council opened the floor for Public Comment.

Council Member Carl Spano spoke, introducing himself as the newest member of Council, since January of 2024, and stated that he was the appointed Budget Officer and had been the one to make the recommendation to review the millage rate to go no higher than 6.5 mils. He has worked weekly if not daily with the City Clerk to monitor the budget and understand where the City's money has been coming from and where it is spent and to make sure that the City's funds are not mismanaged. Part of the issue encountered is inflation: like residents, higher costs impact the City, and the City needs to make an adjustment for inflation in order to provide services and meet the needs of the City, especially now that the City is growing. He stated that he would start with where the City is, and what they have done in the past:

- Since 2015 or 2016, the millage rate had been set at 7.392 and had been held by the City every year. This was only a gradual increase in revenues. Basically, this means that unless there were increases in the value of homes, property taxes have remained pretty much the same and the City's revenues have remained the same as well. Last year, due to the sharp increase in property values, the City rolled the millage rate back to 6.219 mils

and gave everyone a tax break. The result was that the City realized approximately a \$7,500 increase from property taxes over the previous year. From 2019 to 2023, the property taxes received have gone up approximately 19%, while the rate of inflation for the same time period has been 23.1%. The amount of money coming in to pay the bills has not kept up with the increase in the bills. Therefore, the City is requesting an increase to 6.5 mils. The recommendation from the County is to roll back to 5.328 mils, but upon reviewing the budget, it has been determined that this will not meet the City's needs. Council Member Spano then moved on to what the City would be doing with the money:

- **General and Administration:** Over the last two years, the City's employees have received an average of 2.5% pay increase, and the cost-of-living increase has been a little over 4%; he is asking for a 3% increase for employees, so the City can retain them. In addition, there is a need for increased staff, as the City is growing. The amount of money the City can offer new hires is not competitive enough for those applicants to consider the City. This makes it exceedingly hard to find the talent needed to meet the City's needs. Finally, several of our employees need training to do the jobs they have and some of them are required to obtain that training to maintain the certifications they are required to have.
- **Fire Department:** the City recently had to purchase 6 new radios for the Fire Department, although the Fire Chief did recommend 12. The County has announced plans to upgrade the communication and dispatch system, and the City's radios were too old to accept the upgrade, so they needed to be replaced. This is an increase of \$15,000 per year in the budget; the total increase requested is about \$150,000, so this represents 10% of the increase.
- **Police Department:** The vehicles are aging. Usually, we buy used vehicles, for instance from the Sheriff's department, but when you buy used vehicles with several tens of thousands of miles on them already, they are prone to need repairs. Those costs come out of the budget. We would like to purchase new vehicles when needed so they come with factory warranties, and we don't have to pay for repairs out of the General Fund budget due to high mileage. The City has a goal to increase coverage for the City. We have a part-time position scheduled for 20 hours per week and would like to increase that to 32 hours per week, which would need additional resources.
- **Maintenance:** has similar issues. The vehicles are aging, and in addition to this, we have generators, pumps and other infrastructure that needs to be maintained or replaced. If we have the SPLOST funds, we can replace these, but otherwise, repairs come out of the General Fund. He referenced an outage in November when the City had to go over to County Water at a cost to the City of approximately \$4,000. More efficient maintenance will reduce these types of events.
- **Public Works:** Council knows there are public works projects that need to be done in the City: there are drainage problems and other engineering projects that need to be completed. To do this, the City needs to pay the Engineer to evaluate the project so that a cost can be calculated, at which time we can look for the funds or grants to pay for it. These grants and other funding generally require a match from the City, and to be able to provide the match, we have to have the funds available. The hope is that we will be able to address these issues in a timelier manner.

Council Member Spano finished by stating that the Council Members are trying to do the best they can for the City and get nothing out of this, noting that he personally donates his paycheck from the City back to the City. He noted that during the 9 months he has served on the Council and as the Budget Officer, no one has ever called him about the budget, or asked about it in meetings, and to his knowledge, in that time only one person has even asked for a copy of the budget. He invited members of the public to reach out to him at any time outside of the meetings if they have any questions or suggestions and he would be happy to answer any questions they have, stating that if he did not have the answer, he will get the answer. Council Member Spano went on to say that Members of Council were very aware that they are stewards of the residents' money, and they don't want to waste that money. Just like the residents, Members pay taxes, so if the millage rate goes to 6.5 it affects him as well, and he doesn't want the money mismanaged either. He stated that he takes his responsibility and Council Member and Budget Officer very seriously to make sure that he and the rest of the Council are not misappropriating the resident's money and spending it on things that they don't need to spend it on.

Mayor Sandlin asked if any other members would like to speak. As no other member wished to speak, the Mayor announced that the floor would be opened for public comment, asking residents to please limit their comments to three minutes and to speak clearly when they state their name and address.

- John V Sansberry, Jr - 331 Jackson Circle – Stated that he has County Water and Sewer and that in his neighborhood. He stated that they need police coverage at night, and the ditches need to be maintained so they drain adequately. He asked about the money that would come from new houses. He asked what services the City provided out at Jackson Circle, stating that his neighborhood also had no sidewalks, and that the City's services were focused on the older part of the City. He stated that he has seen two and three police officers on duty at the same time who are running radar, but they do not have patrol in their area. He stated that it is time that either they start receiving some services or stop paying taxes. Mayor Sandlin stated that she would address the issue of patrol in that end of town with the Police Chief. He noted that the grass at the mailboxes at Pointer's Ridge had not been properly maintained and the City has not enforced the requirement for the contractor to do so. Mr. Sansberry went on to say that he had been asked to run for Council and had refused, because the City is an absolute mess, not by the current Council who have been in office a short time, but by those who served previously. He finished by saying that he wants to do whatever he can to support his community and will continue to do so and has never complained about the services that have not been received from the City.
- Arthur Keckle – 4H Club Rd – reiterated what Mr. Sansberry had said, specifically regarding the drainage, stating that he has been requesting attention to this since 2015. He asked how many miles were on the cars that the police department has; he has worked for State Law Enforcement, and they buy new cars at 148,000 miles. He stated that the City was overcharged for the radios, and he had checked into that as well. He noted that the officers had parked in their neighborhood for 2 days and it didn't slow down the speeders, had put down the smaller speed bumps and that didn't slow them down, but they were slowed down with the new ones, which residents appreciated, but they have noted people going around them. He asked why the City didn't hire another officer rather than pay the County for additional assistance for law enforcement or just let the County cover law enforcement. Council Member Spano responded that the City is

required to provide a minimum of three services and if they stop providing law enforcement, they will not be providing three services. City Clerk Lisa Johnson noted that if the County had to increase coverage for Lake Park, they would need to hire more deputies, pay more in labor costs, purchase more cars and more fuel and would likely need to raise their millage rate to accommodate the change, and that it is actually more cost-efficient for residents if the City maintains its own department. Mr. Keckle asked what other services the City provides and was told Water and Fire Department. He asked what difference the new houses made to the millage, since this was new revenue coming in. Council Member Spano stated that the City does not receive revenue from those houses until people purchased them as new construction is considered unincorporated housing. City Clerk Lisa Johnson noted that the Net Digest includes the value of that new construction, and the recommended rollback includes those values in the millage rate. He asked what the difference in the millage rates means for residents from the current millage rate to the proposed rate. Council Member Spano calculated the difference between the current millage rate and the proposed rate on a \$300,000 home at a difference of \$36. Mr. Sansberry stated that his estimated tax bill was higher than that difference; Council Member Spano asked that he be allowed to correct his statement to clarify that the difference in the amount to the City would be \$36 per year, but the County millage rate and the School Board's millage rate would also be on the tax bill. Mr. Sansberry stated that a 22% increase was more than \$36, and Council Member Spano replied that the 22% represents the difference between what the recommended 5.238 millage and the proposed 6.5 millage, and his calculation was the difference between the 6.219 millage rate and the proposed 6.5 millage rate, and that the difference between the 6.219 millage and the 6.5 millage is actually a little over .2 mils. Mr. Keckle asked where the County's recommendation comes from. Council Member Spano answered that the formula assumes that the City can run on the same amount of property tax revenue as the previous year. Mr. Keckle asked if the City has a Savings account they can dip into the same way a residential home does. The Mayor responded that they do, and Mr. Keckle asked what happened to those funds and why the City couldn't dip into those funds. Council Member Spano responded that the City had been dipping into those reserve funds, noting the recent hurricane. Mr. Keckle noted that there was still debris on a neighboring property in his neighborhood.


- Savannah Carter – 210 West St – stated that she is very young but wants to agree that there is a difference in services in the two ends of town. She is happy to have the services, but she has noticed this end of town (south near City Hall) does have a better quality and quantity of services. Mayor Sandlin stated that she is very appreciative of the information that has been presented at this meeting. Ms. Carter stated that she is very aware that younger residents need to be more involved, and she is trying to understand more; she asked if there is a way to disseminate information rather than just the Facebook page. She was given information for the website and told that these were also advertised in the newspaper. Ms. Carter suggested a sign in front of City Hall that would note the dates of the Council Meetings as a reminder and expressed her appreciation for Members of the Council.
- Gloria Luke – 201 4H Club Rd – spoke in support of the other comments that have come forward, stating that she had learned today that she could come to Mr. Spano regarding the budget and had always come to the Clerk. She stated that she appreciated the police department and noted that previously the City only had two officers and other coverage was provided by the County. She stated that she doesn't want to see anyone's job lost, but she is concerned about the economics, as so many in the community are on a fixed

income. She noted that she had seen the complaints about the speed bumps, and took responsibility for coming forward, not for herself, but for the community. She expressed appreciation for the maintenance crew, and reminded Council that when Jeff was here, the Right of Ways down 4H Club Rd was mowed on both sides, in addition to checking on some of the elderly people. She noted that maintenance seemed to be picking up slightly, but there is a lot to be done. Mrs. Luke named several recreational opportunities in the County, and stated that she is not against recreation, but said that things needed to be reasonable. Her request is simply that the City dig deep and make sure that the cuts needed be implemented, because this really does represent a burden on the public.

- Mr. Keckle asked for 30 more seconds, in which he reiterated appreciation for Mr. Billy Jones in the maintenance department.
- Susan Keckle – 315 4H Club Rd – Thanked the City Clerk for her time in explaining and trying to help her understand the budget and some of the services. She stated that she has been coming to the meetings, trying to get the drainage issues addressed; she understands the position the City is in, but that residents really need the services if they are going to pay the money.

Mayor Sandlin asked if there were any other questions. Ms. Carter asked if it is permissible to bring children to the meetings, explaining that she has a toddler, who would sit quietly. City Clerk Lisa Johnson explained that the meetings are open to the public and she is welcome to bring her child. Mayor Sandlin reminded the members of the public that the second hearing later that day would be at 6:30. Hearing no other comments or questions, she asked if there was a motion to dismiss. Council Member Carl Spano made a motion to adjourn. Council Member Oscar Griffith seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously, 3-0, and the Hearing stood adjourned.


Jena Sandlin, Mayor


Lisa Johnson, City Clerk

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