



120 North Essa Street, Lake Park, Georgia 31636  
City Hall 229-559-7470  
Fax 229-559-7499

City of Lake Park  
PUBLIC HEARING Minutes  
September 19, 2024  
6:30 pm

**Members Present** were Mayor Jena Sandlin, Mayor Pro Tem Oscar Griffith, Council Members Michelle Lane, 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 second 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 residents 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.

- Council Member Busby Courson read an email from Alicia Beasley, stating her opposition to an increased millage rate.
- Rob Auger – 218 Harris Trail – stated his appreciation for the service of Council Members and asked what benefits there are to being in a City. Council Member Spano noted that one benefit is better insurance rates due to Police and Fire Protection. The City's ISO rating is 5.
- Arthur Keckle – 315 4-H Club Rd – Asked for the current millage rate (6.219) and the proposed millage rate (6.5). He stated that the Police Department should be able to get grants for any major equipment that they need.
- Susan Keckle – 315 4-H Club Rd – asked if all water meters are fixed now, and was told that they are, and that water is a different fund, not part of the millage rate process.
- Cynthia Holden – 7521 Enoch Lake Circle – Asked if the business district could be annexed. Council Member Carl Spano explained that the rules of annexation required that a certain percentage of the district would have to request annexation.
- Patricia Brown – 809 Main St – stated that speaking from her pocketbook, she couldn't afford another increase; the County is increasing taxes as well.
- Gloria Luke – 201 4-H Club Rd – reiterated the statements of others that she does not want an increase and stated that she has received no services in 25 years in Lake Park. She suggested cutting the Police Department back and depending on the Sheriff's Department.
- Arthur Keckley – 315 4-H Club Rd – a lot of residents have a limited income; many people are coming here to retire and increased taxes from both the County and the City will prevent people from moving in. Susan Keckley, his wife, stated that she and her husband have considered whether they will need to move because they can't afford to live here.
- Cynthia Holden – 7521 Enoch Lake Circle – stated that the County says they are considering removing school taxes but that would not happen until next year.

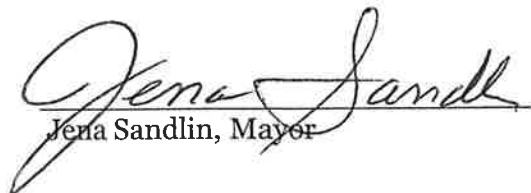
Council Member Michelle Lane spoke and told residents that she was born and raised here and understands the concerns; she herself filed an appeal to the increase in the County last year. However the City has not asked for a "raise" in a long time, but does need to be able to pay employees a living wage. She asked Mrs. Keckley what the City could do or needs to do better; Mrs. Keckley referenced mailbox issues at Pointer's Ridge, drainage issues that she has been reporting for the past year, and mowing in 4-H Right of Way, finishing by saying that she didn't feel residents can count on the City.

- Gloria Luke – 201 4-H Club Rd – asked if anything could be postponed to keep the millage rate from increasing so much.
- Pat Brown – 809 Main St – stated that she has looked into volunteer groups and the Area Agency on Aging. She suggested that the Council needs to be more approachable, and noted that the community is not as cohesive as they used to be.
- Sandy Hayden – 218 Harris Trail – asked if the City could partner better with the County to alleviate increases and still be able to meet the City's needs.
- Bob Alger – 218 Harris Trail – asked if the City could share responsibilities for law enforcement with the County, or allow the County to take over law enforcement here.

Council Member Griffith stated that this had been discussed, but the community did not feel safe with that solution.

- Arthur Keckley – 315 4-H Club Rd – stated the answer to Council Member Lane’s question is that the City needs to clean the ditches and culverts out, reporting that the City had done some work some years back and covered a drain it was never uncovered. He stated that there was still debris piled up in the neighborhood from Idalia.
  - Beverly Frost – 415 Main St – addressed Council Member Lane, stating that there are no services for senior assistance – this is something the City could do better.
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- ❖ Council Member Oscar Griffith spoke and stated he has spoken to the Police Chief and asked him to hit every street at least twice per day. Also, the Mayor has tasked him to look into correcting the problem with the culverts. He noted that the Police Department has been doing their jobs, but they get complaints when they do what they’re asked and complaints when they don’t.
  - ❖ Council Member Michelle Lane stated that the Police are doing a great job and contributing to the coffers. She does not feel that the City is looking to decrease staff or departments, stating “our hearts are in the best interests of the City” and the City needs to do the best it can for its employees as well. She thanked Council Member Spano for his work and who has borne the brunt of complaints.
  - ❖ Council Member Spano spoke, saying that ultimately, the City will need to look at what can be cut, regardless of the rate that is set. The proposed rate wasn’t pulled out of thin air, but we are looking at the best options for the City.
  - ❖ Council Member Busby Courson stated that as he is retired, he has gotten involved with Maintenance and is also trying to help get things sorted out.
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- Alan Holden – 7521 Enoch Lake Circle – stated that he has done the work that Council is now doing and expressed his appreciation for the Council’s work.

Mayor Sandlin thanked everyone for coming and for speaking so honestly, stating that the last Public Hearing would be the following week, September 26 at 6:00 at City Hall. 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 Busby Courson seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously, 4-0, and the Hearing stood adjourned.

  
Jena Sandlin, Mayor

  
Lisa Johnson, City Clerk

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