

## **FEBRUARY 27, 2007- SPECIAL MEETING/WORKSHOP**

The Board of County Commissioners, Walton County, Florida, held a special meeting to discuss strategic planning at the South Walton Courthouse Annex on February 27, 2007, at 1:30 p.m.

The following members were present: Kenneth Pridgen, Chair, Commissioner Larry Jones, and Commissioner Sara Comander. Ms. Shirl Williams, Assistant County Administrator, and Mr. Michael Burke, Interim County Attorney, were also present.

Chairman Pridgen called the meeting to order.

Dr. Dan Beeman was present to facilitate the meeting. He reviewed the following strategic goals set by the Board on February 14, 2006, which are listed in order of highest priority. He asked that the Board review the list and decide if any changes are desired. A Staff Status Report and copy of the goals were submitted.

1. Develop a comprehensive program for paving, bridges, and other infrastructure;
2. Direct growth away from natural resource areas;
3. Promote the development of more diverse and higher paying jobs;
4. Provide equitable recreation facilities for the different areas of the county;
5. Improve public relations and instill confidence in county government;
6. Continue to redefine and refine Walton County government services.

The Board concurred that their goals and priorities remain the same.

Mr. Lyle Siegler, Public Works Director, Ms. Pat Blackshear, Planning Director, and Mr. Ken Little, Citizen Services Director, discussed the efforts by their respective departments to meet the objectives set by the Board.

Dr. Beeman briefly reviewed the Walton Excels program. He asked that the Board to consider how the budget will impact the strategic goals if impending legislation affecting ad valorem taxes passes.

Commissioner Pridgen discussed the impending legislation. He opposed the proposed rise in sales tax and felt that the Board should consider a cap on the homestead exemption increase. Commissioner Pridgen also felt that the Board should consider placing a cap on the budget increase allowed by constitutional officers. Commissioner Jones concurred and suggested a 10% or less increase in accordance with state statute.

Commissioner Brannon felt that the Board should be proactive and possibly involve the County's lobbyists.

Commissioner Jones discussed the mileage rate in relationship to the funds necessary to run the County.

Commissioner Comander suggested a hiring freeze.

The Board directed Mr. Ronnie Bell, County Administrator, and Mr. Bill Imfeld, Finance Director, to explore the appropriate budget cap while determining the budget needs of the department heads and constitutional officers.

Ms. Bonnie McQuiston, President, Walton County Taxpayers Association, stated that the association has taken the position that the County should increase the budget by no more "than the total of population increase plus inflation". She added that she would like to see the measurements and results obtained when working towards the strategic plan goals. A copy of a letter from the WCTPA to all tax levying organizations in Walton County was submitted.

Dr. Beeman stated that status reports are available.

Commissioner Jones stated that department heads are now asked to submit explanations for budget increase requests and that other means of measurements are being worked on.

Ms. McQuiston stated that the WCTPA has asked every tax levying organization in Walton County to apply the same method of budgeting that they are asking of Walton County.

She asked that the Board commit to “true principled conservatism” by implementing “fiscal discipline and limited government”.

Mr. David Kramer felt that the Board may be forced to raise taxes due to the decline in the real estate market and that capital improvement projects may need to be delayed.

Mr. J.B. Hilliard, resident, DeFuniak Springs, felt that a hiring freeze or reduction of employees by attrition may be necessary.

There being no further discussion on this matter, the Board recessed at 2:20 p.m.

At 3:40 p.m., Commissioner Pridgen called to order a workshop to discuss the Nokuse Plantation. Mr. Ronnie Bell, County Administrator, and Ms. Martha Ingle, Clerk of Courts, arrived at the beginning of the workshop.

Mr. M.C. Davis, Mr. Matt Aresco, and Ms. Meg Nelson were present to discuss the functions of the Nokuse Plantation. They discussed their objective of returning the land to the condition it was in prior to settlement through various conservation techniques.

Mr. Aresco presented a slide presentation and discussed the current state of the land, species living there whether indigenous to the region or otherwise, works being done on the land, and of how they hope the area will look after the restoration is complete. He explained how controlled burns aid in their conservation efforts. A copy of the slide show was submitted.

Mr. Davis commented that Walton County was found to be one of the most biologically rich finds in the United States.

Ms. Nelson discussed efforts to house a biophilia center on the Nokuse Plantation to use as a conservation education facility in coordination with all area schools and the public.

Mr. Lloyd Blue discussed the need for a burn policy to educate the public and adjacent property owners of the burning. Mr. Davis asked that the Board support such a policy.

Mr. Davis further discussed the cogon grass, which he advised is becoming an issue in Walton County. He stated that animals will not consume it and that it smothers other forms of ground cover, spreads quickly, and is hard to kill. Mr. Davis explained that they generally spray the affected area with herbicide, disk and burn the ground, and repeat as necessary until the cogon grass is killed. He asked that the County attempt to gain control of the growth of cogon grass before it becomes too impenetrable.

Mr. Bell asked if Mr. Davis would be willing to hold workshops to show others how to deal with the grass. Mr. Davis replied that he would.

Mr. Davis stated that the cogon grass is being spread by county equipment.

Chairman Brannon and Commissioner Pridgen were in favor of taking measures to prevent the spread and of educating the public.

Mr. Billy McKee, Environmental Planner, suggested that the public check with the County Extension Office for additional information. He felt that the cost associated with controlling the grass on county right-of-ways would be high, but agreed that it is necessary. He also discussed the limitations in controlling the growth on private property.

Mr. Kramer asked if Mr. Davis is in favor of a suggested route for a major corridor which would run from State Road 20 through the Nokuse Plantation to the proposed airport in Bay County. Mr. Davis stated that he was not in favor of that suggested route.

There being no further discussion, the workshop adjourned at 3:15 p.m.

ATTEST: \_\_\_\_\_  
Martha Ingle, Clerk of Court

APPROVED: \_\_\_\_\_  
Kenneth Pridgen, Chair