

Giles County Annual Report – 21 August 2023

1. Throughout this annual county report I'll be highlighting several accomplishments over the last year. It's important to emphasize up-front that these are *team* accomplishments. Many good things are happening in county government, but they all require good people working together toward common goals.
2. I'll start the report with an overview of the county budget. I've heard many opinions on how we should better manage our budget - some say we have a revenue problem. Others say government is too big; others say government needs to do more. And still others say we can't possibly continue operations without a tax raise. My considered opinion is that a lot of these opinions are off-the mark ... here's why:
 - a. For FY 23-24, we're projecting roughly \$18.3M in revenues
 - b. We ended last FY with a roughly \$718K surplus
 - c. Our General Fund is holding steady; today it's about \$10.6M of usable fund balance.

So to sum up - Operating funds to sustain county government are roughly the same as our revenues – that's a good thing. At the end of each fiscal year we tend have a remaining surplus –also a good thing. Our usable fund balance is at \$10.6M – generally, this is all good.

We made some moves this year that provided additional savings, particularly in the Emergency Services Department. So if we just talk about sustaining the status quo, we don't have an acute revenue problem, and Department Heads have earned a reputation for returning unspent funds to our fund balance. From a personal standpoint, every day I observe good stewardship and spending restraints from our various departments. As a result, we're consistently spending less than our revenues *and* we're debt-free, so at least for the short term I can't fathom why anyone would be discussing a tax raise, certainly not to simply sustain the status quo.

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But before anyone gets too enthusiastic about turning on the spending spigot, let's all remember there's more to county government than sustaining the status quo. That's called standing still. We have needs that have been mounting for years – big needs – and when we start moving forward on those needs we're going to quickly outstrip our revenues. And candidly, our needs are pressing in closer and closer – playing kick-the-can in 4-year increments hasn't worked well for Giles County. At the end of this report I'll wrap up on what I think we have to accomplish on our watch.

3. Now I'm going to shift gears to ongoing projects:
 - a. First TACN – the Tennessee Advanced Communication Network – is a \$6.6M project that we approved last fall. Today we have massive communication holes for our first responders. This project will provide countywide digital communications for every Giles County public safety agency. We anticipate bringing this system online in Oct 2024.
 - b. Next, our courthouse. As we've been discussing for several months now, our courthouse needs immediate attention. Courthouse renovations are going to be a multiyear, multiphased project. In the short term we need to get Schematic Design underway. The initial goals for courthouse renovation will focus on repairing the external façade, correcting structural issues, and upgrading security, fire suppression, mechanicals.
 - c. Next, our Ambulance Service – Headway has been slow but at least we've started crawling. Money has been allotted for a site assessment survey and that work is underway. I'm expecting a report within 3 months, at which point we can make a site decision, and then we can go forward with designing and building.
 - d. A smaller-scale project I'm working on is a Website Refresh – I anticipate a new site online in spring 2024. A new website will vastly improve public access to county services, along with more accessible meeting agendas, minutes, & a comprehensive calendar of events. This is overdue but the fix is coming.
 - e. Next – our Strategic Plan is a work in progress:

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- i. As I've said many times, a failure to plan is a plan to fail. We can't dream progress into existence. We need a comprehensive county strategic plan to help chart our course.
 - ii. Thanks to input from the Commission, EDC, the Planning Commission, and Dept Heads, we're developing a Strategic Plan that charts a course for county government out to 2030.
 - iii. A Strategic Plan will give us broad goals broken down into objectives, responsibilities, and resource needs.
 - iv. A key element of this is our need for a Capital Investment Plan, which is a plan to sustain the county's infrastructure – namely 15 buildings – all of which need to be maintained and assessed for future uses and eventual recapitalization. A start on that plan is in today's budget amendment.
 - f. The last project that deserves an update is the animal shelter; we recently completed the project to add 12 kennels. Additionally a new storage shed was added and a camera system installed. Thanks to Morgan Sutton for her leadership which ensured enduring improvements; thanks to the Highway Dept for their assistance in prepping for all the shelter upgrades.
4. Now a quick review of the various grants and their status:
- a. TDEC Water/Wastewater – Resolution 2022-54 of 28 Sep 2022
 - i. This \$2.7M grant is split 4-ways amongst Fairview, Minor Hill, South Giles & Tarpley Shop Utility Districts for asset management plans and water system improvements.
 - ii. A separate \$964K was granted to Ardmore for their wastewater improvement project.
 - iii. No money has been received, thus no grant obligations at this time.
 - iv. Our challenge is getting construction date extensions from Congress before receiving funds, otherwise projects are potentially in jeopardy. This issue has been escalated to state and federal representatives.
 - v. Another potential \$500K in TDEC funding to Minor Hill Utility District for a “regionalization” study.
 - b. Next - Broadband - \$4.5M of ARP funding was set aside and apportioned to United, PES, and Ardmore Telephone – design/construction underway.

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Utilities are promising updates to their websites so the public can see project timelines and get estimated dates of service availability. It's important to highlight that this is not a county project – it's three utilities working three different timelines – but projections are that we'll have countywide broadband within the next couple of years.

- c. Food Insecurity Grant – We passed a resolution in February to request a \$500K grant from the TN Dept of Economic and Community Development to assist local food banks; we're now awaiting grant determination from SCTDD.
- d. FEMA SAFE building – \$4.4M @ Agri Park - This proposed project will provide a 9500 sq ft safe space for severe weather & long-term sheltering. This proposed project lingers as we continue to await FEMA's final determination.
- e. And last on the issue of grants - \$4M has been allocated by General Assembly for statewide Courthouse Security – the Sheriff's office is working on Giles County's application which is due 15 Sep.

5. Now an overview of several Resolutions & Accomplishments

- a. I think we did the right thing, and I think it's what the public wanted, when we amended our meeting times, at least the ones during daylight-savings months, to 5pm. This move will sunset on 30 Nov so we'll have to decide on whether the public wants to make this change permanent.
- b. Second, a year ago the Agri Park was being run as an extension of county government. After a month of digging I learned that the Agri Park was actually an independent incorporated non-profit – it always had been, but there were no bylaws and no rules to speak of. So we established Bylaws, tightened up the lease, and developed park rules that protect both Agri Park and County interests. There's more work to be done on that front but we've come a long way.
- c. Also a year ago we learned the E911 Board and its bylaws weren't operating in accordance with state law; we reconstituted the E911 Board and they're now making headway on upgrading their equipment and renovating their building.

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- d. Also a year ago we had 3 great county outfits doing great things: the ambulance service, emergency management, and fire & rescue. However, there were redundancies, and there were minimal opportunities for cross-training or interoperability. That all changed when we stood up the Emergency Services Directorate. As a result we're seeing greater efficiencies, more operational synergy, and fantastic cross-training opportunities. Real-life emergencies require an integrated, team focus; now our emergency services are *organized* as an integrated team.
 - e. Another win was our commitment to improve health insurance benefits for county employees. Compared to neighboring counties we had a weak benefits package that was adversely impacting recruiting & retention. So we tremendously improved these benefits, and that had a ripple effect by invigorating similar improvements for school employees. Note that we accomplished this within existing budget parameters.
 - f. Last I'd like to thank the Finance Office for their work to allocate state funding and develop a vastly improved salary schedule for teachers. The Finance Office was a part of several of the accomplishments already addressed, and they were instrumental in making these improvements for our teachers. Our Finance Office doesn't just get clean audits, they're also the creative force behind many of our accomplishments. I can't imagine where county government would be without the Finance Team.
6. I'll wrap up this report with a 5-point to-do list for 2024:
- a. By this time next year we should be ready to break ground on a new ambulance building.
 - b. We need a better handle on our capital assets, and we must begin chipping away at the maintenance and repair needs, particularly for the courthouse.
 - c. Related to capital assets – we need a daisy-chained plan for infrastructure replacement; e.g. the schools need a new bus garage and BOE building ... where should they go and how much is their existing land worth? How might we repurpose our old ambulance building? The first floor of the Annex is currently leased – is that the best use of this county asset? We

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need to make a myriad of smart business decisions. These are all questions to be addressed in a Capital Investment Plan.

- d. Related to the Courthouse and Capital Assets – we need to financially prepare ourselves for debt and how that debt will be serviced. I mentioned earlier that we don't need tax increases as long as we're standing still. But if we're going to tackle multimillion dollar projects, let's be frank - debt is inevitable. I know this is controversial and many like the idea of remaining debt free. But if you're confronted with \$20million in pressing needs while you have \$10million in the bank, it's going to require borrowing. The question is what must we do in preparation to *minimize* the debt burden.
- e. Economic Development - Many talk about the need to develop the interstate and bring more industry to Giles County. But this needs to be balanced with what we're hearing from our existing industries – they're having a hard time finding skilled workers. As we discuss economic development we have to better define what progress looks like. Beyond workforce development we must think about other community needs such as affordable housing and how to encourage and retain small retail businesses. Economic development is vital to our future – but since county government isn't in the development business, we've got to partner with our EDC on these issues. Thankfully, Mr. Phil Reese is leading the economic effort, and he's been busy reestablishing relationships with state partners and local stakeholders. A key lesson is that economic opportunities don't simply drop in our lap ... opportunities come through relationships and partnerships. With good leadership and a team approach, which we now have, the EDC can achieve successes that are far beyond the capabilities of the Commission or County Executive.

7. And finally, a brief political analysis.

Over the course of the last year we've done a fairly decent job at putting salve on our political resentments and resolving to work as a team. I'm a tough grader and I give us a C. We don't rate any higher because some still nurse political resentments. Others presume an authority they don't have,

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clearly wanting to micromanage other elected officials. And still others have such a deep cynicism of federal government – which is understandable – but then transfer that cynicism to local government – which is not only groundless but wholly destructive. A year ago I naively thought a solid majority of commissioners could get a lot accomplished. But what I’ve learned over the last year is that a very small minority with a chip on the shoulder can paralyze the majority.

As Chair of the Commission over the last year I’ve tried to emphasize three things – decisiveness, results, and professionalism. But when I see our potential for excellence slowed to a crawl by pointless conflicts, I have a responsibility to answer two questions;

- a. Might we better transcend the trifles if I was not chairing the Commission?
- b. Could I be a more effective County Executive if I disassociate myself from the trifles?

I’m going to answer those questions for myself by the end of the month, and there’s only one criteria I’m considering: **What is in the best interest of Giles County and getting the people’s work accomplished?**

8. I’ll close with this. Progress comes when a team of people commit themselves to doing hundreds of small things very, very well. Those small things, by themselves, aren’t glamorous. The small things aren’t dramatic. Oftentimes the small things are hard, and when they’re finally done, nobody notices. But as leaders we better figure out how to work together, how to put our little sensitivities and petty differences aside and persevere in the small things, the ordinary things. If we can consistently do the small things well, and we keep doing it daily, the small things always add up. The small things always add up to great things. So for any public servant who wants what I want - great things for Giles County - we need to be a great deal more selfless, and a great deal more diligent in the small things, every day.

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9. May God continue to richly bless Giles County.