



**OFFICIAL MINUTES OF THE OXFORD MAYOR AND COUNCIL
PUBLIC HEARING
MONDAY, July 27, 2020 – 6:00 PM
VIA TELECONFERENCE AND BROADCAST AT CITY HALL**

COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT: David Eady, Mayor; Councilmembers: Jeff Wearing, Laura McCanless, Avis Williams, George Holt, James Windham, Lynn Bohanan

Staff members present: City Manager Matt Pepper, City Clerk/Treasurer Marcia Brooks

OTHERS PRESENT: None

The public hearing was called to order at 6:00 PM by the Hon. David Eady, Mayor. Mayor Eady stated that the City is proposing the same millage rate as the previous three years. The City's revenue is just beginning to trend back toward its 2007 level but is not there yet. Maintaining the millage rate of 6.62 will help keep the City moving toward that level and will help offset revenue reductions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

George Holt pointed out that the property tax base in Oxford will never adequately cover City operations, no matter how much they are raised. There is not enough property in Oxford to fund the City's operations with property taxes alone.

James Windham proposed a study evaluating the feasibility of eliminating property taxes for a property based on the property owner's adoption of ecologically sound practices, such as on-demand water heaters and electric cars. Such a plan may include adding electric charging stations for City residents as an incentive. The revenue from the increased use of electricity would offset the decrease in property taxes levied against the property.

Mayor Eady stated the City could talk to the Municipal Electric Authority of Georgia (MEAG) or Electric Cities of Georgia (ECG) to find out the cost to conduct such a study. Another option may be students from the University of Georgia who must complete a practicum as part of their degree requirements.

Laura McCanless indicated she liked the idea of offering some type of rebate for property owners willing to adopt greener standards but would be concerned about eliminating property taxes altogether because doing so could encourage more rental properties that may be poorly maintained. Mr. Windham stated he agreed but clarified that he was talking about rebates to individual property owners. Mayor Eady stated a rebate could also go against the property owner's electric bill and keep it within the enterprise fund where the electric revenue is recorded. Mr. Windham acknowledged Mayor Eady's suggestion, but he felt a rebate against property taxes would be a more marketable idea.

Mayor Eady pointed out that the City has a margin built into its electric rates that for all intents and purposes is actually a consumption tax designed to make up for the shortfall in property taxes generated in Oxford each year. If the electric bill were smoothed out for customers with rebates, property taxes could be raised without such a negative impact on customers while mitigating the possibility of poorly maintained rental properties coming to Oxford because of relatively low property tax rates.

Ms. McCanless asked if there can be a business tax for rental property owners as a disincentive to them. Mr. Holt advised that in the past there had been discussion about increasing taxes but also increasing the homestead exemption. Homeowners would not see an increase in taxes, but rental property owners would.

Mr. Windham stated that each time he had looked at a comparison of electric rates between municipalities, Oxford was around the middle, not exorbitantly high. Policies are needed that discourage absentee ownership in Oxford.

Mayor Eady will discuss the options with Matt Pepper. He believes a graduate group at the University of Georgia (UGA) or Georgia Tech could perform the research needed and layout the options at little or no cost to the City. Given that he is an employee at Georgia Tech, he will need to check with their compliance officer to determine if there is any perception of or actual conflict of interest before engaging with them. Making Sustainable Newton the client may be a way to mitigate any conflict of interest if Georgia Tech's resources are used.

Mr. Windham asked if Mr. Pepper had spoken with the City of Covington regarding their procedures for customers to contribute toward other customers' utility bills. Mr. Pepper stated he did contact the City of Covington. They do not have an in-house program, but they do work with a group called H.E.A.T. He is awaiting information from the City of Covington about this program.

Laura McCanless mentioned budget billing to smooth out very high electric bills. Mayor Eady stated that the City will need to discuss this possibility with ECG and research whether our billing system can handle this type of invoicing. He asked Marcia Brooks to work on this research and bring the information back to the Council.

Mr. Windham asked for some data on average electric bills in Oxford. Mayor Eady also wanted to see poverty rates because it is important to also look at how much of a family's income is used to pay utilities. Mr. Windham agreed that some economic information about Oxford is needed to help the Council make more informed decisions about such things.

Mayor Eady observed that he had made some comparisons of different areas in Oxford, and it appears that the Newton County Tax Assessor has made an effort over the past few years to bring property valuations in parity with the market, and as a result taxes for some property owners have increased significantly. Mr. Windham stated that is further justification for conducting an economic study to arm citizens with the information they need to challenge their valuations if they believe they are excessive.

Jim Windham made a motion to adjourn the public hearing at 6:34 p.m. Avis Williams seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously (7/0).

Respectfully Submitted,

Marcia Brooks
City Clerk/Treasurer