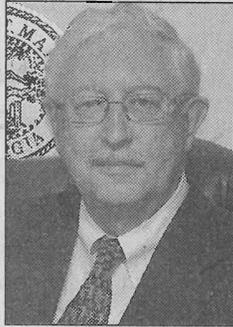


A city official's duties go beyond the city limits



John Morrissey

Guest columnist

As I have commented in previous columns and in the State of the City address last month, it is not enough for city officials to just tend to business within the city limits. We have to develop and foster relationships within the county, the region and the state for a multitude of reasons, not the least of which is bringing a stronger economy to St. Marys and Camden County.

Now that the General Assembly is in session in Atlanta, we have to be alert to any proposed bills that might impact our city or our residents. One bill currently in the House that is rightfully receiving a lot of attention in Camden County is House Bill (HB) 170, the Transportation Funding Act. County, city and school officials in Camden have joined forces and have actively opposed this proposed legislation. The letter, sent to our representatives in Atlanta, was a reasoned, direct and clear message that

transportation infrastructure improvements should not burden or short change local governments or school systems.

As mayor, I have specific concerns because it is very possible that every St. Marys resident could be negatively impacted if this bill makes its way through the session. Yes, there are constant revisions in process, but let's look at why we should be concerned.

This bill literally permits the state to re-direct fuel tax revenues we use in Camden currently to finance schools, transportation, infrastruc-

ture, public safety and other city and county services. The bill would funnel those revenues to the state to finance roads, bridges and transit.

The bill would switch Georgia from a series of local and state sales taxes on gas to a flat 29.2-cent per gallon excise tax. That figure is achieved by mixing existing excise tax, sales tax and local tax and would rise each year with inflation.

When local communities no longer have access to their current fuel revenue funding source, the state subtly suggests that local governments would be permitted to increase taxes locally. When voters complain, the standard answer from Atlanta would be "any tax increase is a local decision."

The total tax on gasoline in Georgia could range as high as 53.6 cents per gallon, well above the national average of 48.29 cents per gallon. If implemented, HB 170 could make gasoline sold in Georgia the ninth

highest taxed gasoline in the nation. That could potentially have a significant impact on Camden County as we sit right on the border of another state making it easy for truckers and tourists to bypass a Georgia fuel stop.

As I said, there are individuals and coalitions working in Atlanta this very day trying to rectify, modify or otherwise change this proposed legislation. But it is an excellent example of the reality that we cannot ignore what happens outside the city limits. We cannot hope that someone else will act on our behalf. We have to stay connected and in sync with other elected and appointed officials but we also have to be proactive.

We cannot sit back and wait for the wheels to turn. We have to speak up and speak out at the state level on issues that impact our citizens, our city services and our educational system. The responsibility of a city official often goes far beyond the city limits and we are beginning to experience

that reality more and more.

As HB 170, and perhaps others, meander through the General Assembly, there may be a point in time in which we ask every citizen to communicate directly with all of our state elected officials. We are not yet at that point, but I am confident if we reach that point, we will be able to count on the citizens of St. Marys and Camden County to speak up as well.

From the example above you can see why it is imperative that an active and engaged local government is necessary to guarantee the best interests of our citizens. Connecting with business leaders is a natural parallel to our efforts to engage and inform state leadership about the issues our cities and county must address. Only with intelligent communication, proactive networking and sound rationale can we create the stable economy that we all desire.

John Morrissey is the mayor of St. Marys.