

Making tough, conscious decisions for the budget

In one of my columns earlier this year, I gave citizens an alert that unless the tax digest, issued annually by the county tax assessor's office, showed some incremental improvement in total value, which translates into increased revenues from property and vehicle taxes, that the City of St. Marys would be facing a serious funding gap in providing expected city services.



John Morrissey
Guest columnist

Unfortunately, we have now received that report from the tax assessor and it shows the seventh consecutive year of declining tax revenues. While the shrinkage is less than some years, it is still a loss.

When we combine that loss of revenue with the loss in Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax funding — remember that this year and in future years, we will dedicate \$1.64 million of SPLOST funds to pay the

water and sewer bond debt — it means we have reached the point where we must compensate for the significant drop in available revenues and take this action now.

The city has an obligation to citizens to provide a certain level of basic public services. One of those is adequate fire and police services. For the last several years our fire department

has warned that because our two major fire engines are 26 to 28 years old just finding parts for repair is an ongoing challenge. Each year we told the fire department there are other priorities and as soon as revenues improve, we will replace them. The city council made a tough but conscious decision two months ago that to wait any longer to purchase new fire trucks could endanger our citizens. It was an expensive but necessary decision.

At the same time, we instructed the city manager to update a five-year equipment replacement plan to replenish the critical equipment needs in the public works, fire and police departments. The list includes basic maintenance equipment items like the street sweeper that is on its last leg.

These are not luxury items. They are essential equipment to meet our obli-

gations to provide basic city services.

In 2006–2007, the city reduced the millage rate — the rate taxpayers pay for city services — from 6.7 to 5.6 mills.

In 2009, it was reduced again to 5.351 where it has remained for six years. The city managed very conservatively during those lean years, and we were able to do so in part because SPLOST funds were available to help us fund necessary public works projects and unexpected problems.

With the “loss” of \$1.64 million in SPLOST funds to pay the water and sewer bond incremental increase, those funds are now limited for many years in the future.

Having scrutinized our budget line items, as we always do, we see the only option, after holding the line for six years, is to increase the millage rate. We

are proposing a raise from 5.351 to 6 mills. To put that in dollar terms, it means that the tax increase for a home with a fair market value of \$100,000 would be approximately \$25 a year.

We will still be conservative. We will still focus on preventive maintenance to keep aging equipment alive as long as possible.

We will still challenge employees to use new technology to reduce costs and improve services. This increase, combined with the small amount of SPLOST funds still available to us, will permit us to fund a very conservative budget for the coming year and to implement a more thoughtful equipment replenishment plan in the future.

The council and I are prepared to answer any questions citizens may have and have scheduled three public

hearings to discuss the millage rate increase.

The first two sessions are scheduled for Monday, Aug. 10, with one at 10:30 a.m. and the second at 6 p.m. at city hall chambers, which is located at 408 Osborne St. in St. Marys.

A third hearing is scheduled for Monday, Aug. 17, at 5:30 p.m. at the same location just prior to the regular city council meeting when this matter will be on the agenda for action.

I encourage all St. Marys citizens to review the charts, graphs and financial analysis. It is your tax money and your services and you can expect answers to any of your questions.

I look forward to seeing you at one of these hearings.

John Morrissey is the mayor of St. Marys. He can be contacted at john.morrissey@stmarysga.gov or (912) 510-4041.

LAST WEEK'S RESULTS

What do you think about tax allocation districts in Camden County? Kingsland approved districts for a proposed adventure park development in recent years. Now St. Marys is considering a district encompassing downtown, the mill site and the airport.



WE WANT YOUR OPINION

Do you feel safe in your neighborhood in Camden County?

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Celebrate Swimmable Water Weekend

Water is central to our lives in America, and nowhere more so than here in Georgia. Our waterways sustain all aspects of our lives. We rely on them for water to drink, to grow our food and to sustain our businesses. Without water, there is no life. And without clean water, there is no healthy life.

We enjoy swimming, fishing and relaxing in our local waterways; they bring us together and enrich our lives. As Céline Cousteau and Wallace J. Nichols highlight in their book “Blue Mind,” being near water can calm and connect us, increase innovation and insight and even heal what is broken. They write that healthy water is crucial to our physiological and psychological well-being, as well as our ecology and economy.

It is because of these reasons that the Waterkeeper Alliance established the Swimmable Water Weekend initiative. Since 2012, the Waterkeeper Alliance has been engaging with communities across the country and around the world to celebrate the important role water plays in our lives by encouraging people to get out and enjoy their local waterways.

By creating this connection to a waterway, people



Ashby Nix

Guest columnist

become more impassioned to protect it and fight for its future. This has been proven time and time again. A prime example is a group of fishermen who banded together in 1966 to take back the majestic Hudson River from the hands of the polluters who were destroying it.

These concerned blue-collar fishermen, who later formed the Hudson Riverkeeper, forced the cleanup of the Hudson River and turned it into an icon of ecosystem revitalization. They demonstrated the power of deep personal connections to waterways and the power of citizen action.

Here in Georgia, we are fortunate to have the Satilla River as a crown jewel of our state, and this is one of the prime seasons to fully appreciate living here. But the Satilla River and other water-

ways like it across the country are facing threats like never before. Aging infrastructure that contributes to sewage pollution, storm-water runoff, discharges from numerous industrial facilities and encroaching development are some of the daily assaults our bodies of water face every day.

Adding to this are the effects of a changing river and coastal region such as sea level rise, warming ocean temperatures, increased flooding and drought and reduced native fish stocks. Georgians can also feel these impacts in their wallets every time they pay for crop insurance, the rising insurance premiums on homes, etc.

We need an army of advocates to tackle these threats,

or the day may soon come when we can no longer enjoy the Satilla River the way our community has for generations.

This coming weekend, we invite you to become a voice for the Satilla River by documenting your own swimmable water moments via social media using the hashtag #SwimmableWater. As simple as it may seem, taking the plunge can be the first step in realizing how vital and important clean water is to all of us, and can serve as the motivation to take action to protect it. With the right knowledge, everyone can help their local waterways to thrive well into the future.

Ashby Nix is the Satilla riverkeeper.

Fall Registration

New Students · August 4 & 5 · 3:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.
Returning Students · July 28 & 30 · 3:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.
All others by appointment.

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NOTICE OF PUBLIC MEETING FOR ADOPTING A 2015 MILLAGE RATE

The Camden County Board of Commissioners does hereby announce that the millage rate will be set at the Commissioners Meeting Room, Government Services Building (Woodbine), on August 18, 2015 at 6:00 PM. Pursuant to the requirements of O.C.G.A. 48-5-32, the following presentation of the current year's tax digest and levy is published along with the history of the tax digest and levy for the past five years. The Public is invited to attend and comment at this public meeting.

CURRENT 2015 TAX DIGEST AND 5 YEAR HISTORY OF LEVY						
COUNTY WIDE	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Real & Personal	\$ 1,792,050,018	\$ 1,688,539,996	\$ 1,529,263,169	\$ 1,408,971,293	\$ 1,381,032,177	\$ 1,343,194,415
Motor Vehicles	97,399,250	96,080,110	97,987,400	105,078,580	91,639,450	66,465,060
Mobile Homes	10,030,895	8,374,803	8,723,809	8,474,048	7,947,223	9,094,997
Timber - 100%	3,805,404	5,398,389	4,995,205	6,729,999	10,208,012	18,390,671
Heavy Duty Equipment	9,358	-	-	-	-	-
Gross Digest	1,903,294,925	1,798,393,298	1,640,969,583	1,529,253,920	1,490,826,862	1,437,145,143
Less M& O Exemptions	272,462,340	262,640,026	220,551,598	202,308,124	198,606,103	185,149,068
Net M & O Digest	1,630,832,585	1,535,753,272	1,420,417,985	1,326,945,796	1,292,220,759	1,251,996,075
State Forest Land Assistance Grant Value	993,774	1,035,836	1,242,071	2,206,563	2,933,818	3,478,146
Adjusted Net M&O Digest	1,631,826,359	1,536,789,108	1,421,660,056	1,329,152,359	1,295,154,577	1,255,474,221
Gross M&O Millage	13.940	13.960	14.150	14.320	14.600	14.720
Less Rollbacks	2.240	2.260	2.450	2.620	2.660	2.780
Net M&O Millage	11.700	11.700	11.700	11.700	11.940	11.940
Total County Taxes Levied	\$19,092,368	\$17,980,433	\$16,633,423	\$15,551,083	\$15,464,146	\$14,990,362
Net Taxes \$ Increase	-\$1,331,016	-\$1,111,936	-\$1,347,010	-\$1,082,340	-\$86,937	-\$473,783
Net Taxes % Increase	-6.52%	-5.82%	-7.49%	-6.51%	-0.56%	-3.06%

Additional Millage Information :

The incorporated fire tax millage rate is 1.40 mills and the unincorporated fire tax millage rate is .67 mills. unincorporated area.
Countywide Rollback consists of Local Option Sales Tax of \$3,493,447 (2.78 mills).
Unincorporated Rollback includes Life Insurance Premium Tax of \$785,605 for Unincorporated Fire and Recreation (PSA) Services. Total unincorporated rollback is 1.92 mills.

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This week: Penguins of Madagascar (PG)

Times Good Fri 7/10 thru Wed 7/15

***MINIONS IN 3D (PG)**
2:15 6:45

***MINIONS IN 2D (PG)**
12:00 1:00 3:15 4:30 5:30
7:45 9:00 10:00

***THE GALLOWS (R)**
12:30 3:00 5:00 8:00 10:15

***MAGIC MIKE XXL (R)**
1:25 4:20 7:20 10:05

***TERMINATOR GENISYS IN 3D (PG13)**
12:45 9:45

***TERMINATOR GENISYS IN 2D (PG13)**
3:45 7:00

TED 2 (R)
1:30 4:45 7:25 10:10

***MAX (PG)**
12:50 4:10 7:15 9:45

INSIDE OUT (PG)
12:15 2:45 5:15 7:35 9:55

JURASSIC WORLD (PG13)
1:10 4:00 7:10 9:50
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