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Burn Ban Approved Public Hearing Held to Discuss Proposed Tax Rate

With the Keetch-Byrum Drought Index at 785 and no relief in sight, Ellis County Commissioners enacted a new 90-day ban on outdoor burning during a regular meeting on September 12, 2011.

“We have a ban that is about to expire,” said County Judge Carol Bush.

Wildfires across the State have resulted in loss of life and property that cannot yet be fully calculated, and Ellis County has experienced its share of blazes in the last few weeks, leaving little doubt the ban is necessary.

Commissioners also held a public hearing on the proposed tax rate for the 2011/2012 fiscal year. The proposed tax rate would result in a tax increase of approximately \$28.42 per year, or \$2.37 per month, on the average homestead.

A record vote taken on August 22 essentially set a ceiling for the tax rate at \$0.413599 per \$100 of taxable value, two cents higher than the current tax rate of \$0.393599.

A public notice posted in two local newspapers and on the County website (www.co.ellis.tx.us) states, “The average taxable value of a residence homestead in Ellis County this year is \$136,801. If the governing body adopts the proposed tax rate of \$0.413599 per \$100 of taxable value, the amount of taxes imposed this year on the average home would be \$565.81.”

The notice indicates that the amount of County taxes imposed last year on the average home, then valued at \$136,533, was \$537.39.

“There has been some confusion previously about how these things are written, even our agenda items,” said Bush. “There has been some perception by some of the public that it is confusing or misleading. We take the wording straight from the tax code; it has to be done in that particular way or we have not followed the appropriate legal steps. There is no attempt to hide anything.”

Bush noted that the Court made budget cuts, including staffing cuts, in the 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 budgets; approximately eight additional jobs are proposed to be cut in the 2011/2012 budget.

Bush also encouraged citizens to review their tax bills to see where their tax dollars are going.

“If you break it down, you will find you are also paying taxes to schools and cities – we just collect it for the various entities,” she said. “A lot of times, people that do not avail themselves of the information that’s out there have the perception that all the money we collect goes straight to county government, and that is simply not the case.”

Several members of the public were on hand to comment on the proposed tax rate increase.

“Republicans don’t raise taxes,” said Jimmie Simmons of Waxahachie. “The best government is supposed to be local government. You are shooting yourself in the foot and people will remember that. We know the school taxes are the highest, but you are the tip of the arrow.”

Simmons also objected to recent press releases he felt were misleading.

Republican Party Chair Dan Davis also spoke against the tax rate. “The American people are flat fed up with politicians who see us as revenue streams in their distorted view,” he said. “We elect them to run some segment of government, then that’s theirs to work with and it’s our responsibility to cough up the cash.”

Davis highlighted items he felt were wrong with the proposed budget and told the Court he was sure they could find additional cuts that would prevent the need for the two-cent tax rate increase. He also took them to task on the subject of tax abatements for economic development.

“I’m not saying tax abatements are bad, if you are not having to cut budgets and raise taxes,” he said. “You have to look at the cost side of the thing. You can’t honestly project that’s not going to be difficult to support.”

“We are not giving away something we already have,” said Commissioner Dennis Robinson, pct. 1. “There’s a good chance if you don’t give those abatements, those companies aren’t coming here, and we would lose revenues. Even though we are not getting all of it, we are getting 30 to 40 percent of it.”

Ellis County and District Attorney Patrick Wilson spoke in favor of the proposed tax rate increase.

“Our population is 149,000 and change; Johnson County is at 150,000 and change – virtually identical,” he said. “They have 22 lawyers, and I have 15. My budget has an across the board decrease of over 12 percent, in all the line items, that includes an 18-year-in-the-making computer upgrade.”

Wilson said his office handles approximately 1,400 felony offenses and over 2,000 misdemeanor cases per year – which translates into a caseload far above that recommended by the State Bar Association.

“In Webb County, an individual on felony probation was stopped by police. He smelled of marijuana, and a search found methamphetamines as well as marijuana in the car, but he was not prosecuted,” Wilson said. “(Webb County) said it just wasn’t serious enough. I can’t imagine the citizens of Ellis County truly desire to reach that state and I sincerely hope that it never comes to pass in this County.”

A second public hearing on the tax rate will be held on September 21, 2011 at 10 a.m. in the second floor courtroom of the historic Courthouse. A public hearing on the proposed budget will be held during the same meeting. The Commissioners’ Court is scheduled to vote on the tax rate on September 26, 2011, at 6 p.m.

In other business, Commissioners:

- Approved a Notice of Intent to Participate in the Hog Out County Grants Program for participation in the Texas Department of Agriculture Feral Hog Abatement Technologies Program, with County Extension Agent Mark Arnold heading up the program;
- Approved a Joint Elections Agreement and Contract for Services for the November 8, 2011 election for the City of Mansfield;
- Approved a list of presiding judges, alternate judges, and the number of clerks to serve in the November 8, 2011 election;
- Approved the presiding judge of the Early Voting Ballot Board and the number of clerks to be hired for the November 8, 2011 election;
- Approved the renewal of an agreement with SimplexGrinnell for fire alarm safety inspections for the Wayne McCollum Detention Center from October 1, 2011 through September 30, 2012;
- Approved the contractual rate with Correctional Healthcare Companies for October 1, 2011 through September 30, 2012 for a monthly charge of \$95,306.87, representing no increase over last year's amount;
- Approved the renewal of a contract with the SPCA for animal services with contracted monthly payments of \$4,315 for the same period, down from \$4,630 per month for the current fiscal year;
- Approved a resolution authorizing the County Judge to execute an agreement for "Bridge Replacement and Rehabilitation Off of the State System" for precinct 2.