

Subject: Town Budget, Roads, Sewer System and Speeding
April 3, 2023

Last Friday marked the resumption of the “Community Coffee with the Mayor” at the Hudson Library. These coffee sessions are usually held on the last Friday of the month, from March to October.

I want to thank the staff and board of the Hudson Library for coordinating and sponsoring these sessions between the residents and the mayor. Our Hudson Library is a legacy community institution that we must all support. It has always been a place to obtain knowledge and information and has open dialogues.

I did an overview presentation about the impending new town budget and the priorities that town staff have identified. After my presentation, I opened the floor up for questions. Let me highlight the ideas and information that some of the questions brought up.

One resident asked about sewer connections. About half of the town is connected to the sewer, and the other half is not. Heavy rock formations have deterred the development of the sewer system throughout the entire town. Nevertheless, I do believe the town needs to revisit this issue and determine how much it would cost to extend the sewer system throughout the entire town. I know the price tag would be high. Given the investment, the board would have to consider making it mandatory that residents connect to any new extensions.

Another question was whether the town received room occupancy tax funds to offset the increasing costs associated with expanded tourism. My response was no; the town does not directly receive those funds. The Macon County Commission and the Tourism Development Authority (TDA) control the funds and allocate a substantial portion to the Highlands Visitors Center. Under the 1985 state enabling legislation that the county operates under, these tax revenues can only be used for tourist promotion. A new piece of legislation passed in 1997 permitted one-third of the room tax revenue to be used for tourist infrastructure initiatives and two-thirds for tourist promotion. The county would have to request to be put under the 1997 enabling legislation for room tax revenues to support anything other than tourist promotion. The Magellan Strategy Group published a comprehensive report in 2022 that covers all aspects of how room occupancy taxes are allocated in the state. This report identifies several options for managing and allocating occupancy taxes.

Another question was raised about motorists speeding as they pass through Highlands. The question was asked if cameras could be installed to issue speeding tickets. Tallulah Gorge and Sky Valley are already doing so. My position on the ticket cameras is very clear. I am against them. While we have security and tourist cameras located in limited places in town, I do not want to see us rely on some “robot” police camera to enforce traffic laws. People have the right to face their accusers. On the other hand, I favor using more radar speed signs that let motorists know when they exceed the speed limit at a certain level.

Another question was about limiting growth in the town. My response is that we have zoning and related development ordinances. If a property owner can meet these requirements, then the town has no authority to tell the owner they cannot develop their private property.

Finally, a reporter asked how the town determines road paving priorities. The answer had two parts. The town has been aggressively paving unpaved roads for a number of years. Paving these roads actually curtails maintenance costs. Paving unpaved roads also helps mitigate erosion and sedimentation issues. For resurfacing paved roads, the town engineer maintains a schedule list of roads to be resurfaced. Depending on the deterioration severity of any particular road, this list may see changes in priority.

There will be a slight change in the time for the April Community Coffee, it has been moved up to Friday, April 21.