

St Johns County Civic Roundtable

September 12, 2011

Minutes of Monthly Meeting

9:07 – Meeting called to order

Pledge of Allegiance

Approval of Minutes from August meeting

Treasurers Report – payments made to Constant Contact and Old City Web Services
Current bank balance \$3847.82

Guest Speaker #1 – President Ed Houston of St Johns County Firefighters Union

Highlights from Mr. Houston's presentations included a brief history of the department and its evolution from volunteer to professional status, improved training, education and equipment, local community projects and charities supported by the union including Firefighters for Families. Mr. Houston also reported that there has been a changing in the guard and attitude among the leadership of the union, The union is now more in tune with the financial condition of the county and is working to repair the damage done to the relationship between the union and the county in recent years. It was announced that there is a tentative agreement between the union and the county and that agreement would be presented to membership soon. Mr. Houston pointed out that while a tentative agreement is a good thing, the county still faces some challenges. Declining tax revenues, increasing population and service gaps in some areas especially Flagler Estates and Nocatee will continue to challenge both the county and the firefighters.

Discussion followed that included two concerns from Mary Khonke. First was the presence of fire engines at shopping centers and restaurants. According to Mr. Houston it's good for the trucks to be driven and for the firefighters to be out in the community. Efficiency is a priority as the firefighters try and include the food stops as while they are already out either on runs or attending to other errands, Second question regarded firefighters campaigning for political candidates. Mr. Houston advised that yes the Union would continue to seek out candidates that were interested in public safety issues. Finally Merrill Roland suggested the Union offer free smoke detectors.

Guest Speaker #2 – Jessie Phillips of Anastasia Mosquito Control wanted members to know of the many educational programs available for HOA and Civic Club Meetings. Ms. Phillips also reminded everyone that in the peak of the season Anastasia Mosquito Control is working hard to keep our county free from West Nile and other disease associated with mosquitoes.

Guest Speaker #3 – Dr, Joseph Joyner – Superintendent of Schools

Dr, Joyner presented his thoughts on the current state of our schools. Dr. Joyner highlights included some good news and bad. Expectations and demands on students and teachers is

higher than ever while funding is down \$100 per student since 2006. Teacher layoffs around the country in conjunction with the outstanding reputation of our schools and county has equated into over one thousand job applicants for each open position in our classrooms. Less local control is a problem and the implementation of a new national Common Core Curriculum lead Dr. Joyner to the conclusion that at some point a new national test is imminent. Good news... the use of science and technology has resulted in a two million dollar energy savings while eliminating some bus routes and transportation options has made some citizens unhappy. From an operations standpoint the system is running very lean and efficiently. The capital budget is in pitiful shape and the school system is out of the construction business until either the economy or funding mechanism changes. Currently the County is in the process of rezoning. Obtaining agreement among parents on the issue of rezoning also offers a significant challenge. The schools website offers 24/7 access to citizens who are interested in looking closely at budget and finance. Dr. Joyner took great pride in the financial transparency button and the information associated with it. KeepItLocal.org is another great source for information regarding all things local.

Question and Answer for Dr Joyner –

Q -How many school districts are growing A- 10 systems are growing but can't get much political traction because growing districts like ours are in the minority. Assistant County Administrator Jerry Cameron added that St. Johns County is currently 4th in for new building permits. Dr Joyner added that this growth will spur a need for more schools and we simply don't have the money to build.

Q – What about Charter Schools? A – According to Dr. Joyner there is no real head to head measurement between our public schools and charter schools. Accountability or lack thereof creates an unlevel playing field. If charter schools want to go head to head, Dr, Joyner believes in the end our students would win in the long run.

NEW BUSINESS –

Linda Oakley expressed concern about the Budget and the millage increase. Shw was concerned that the increase in millage was not needed due to a 19 million dollar carry forward that was reported in The Record. Jerry Cameron explained that the 19 million dollars is for projects that are already approved and underway. These capital projects and the money to pay for them will be carried forward. It was made clear that the County did not have an extra 19 million dollars just sitting around.

There were concerns regarding the JEA payment that may be delayed. The delay, due to a potential lawsuit raised the question about disclosure. It was suggested the County should have disclosed this lawsuit. BCC Members, Cyndi Stevenson, Jay Morris and Chairman Ken Bryan all contributed to an explanation that there is only an extensive public records request from a law firm that is usually involved in these types of suits. At the time of the budget meeting and as of our September 12 Roundtable meeting, the County had not yet been served. There is only speculation that a suit is forthcoming.

Fred Hall of the South Creek HOA reported that JEA had a 20 year agreement with United Water to maintain the water system. According to Mr. Hall JEA is now trying to get out of the agreement. The system is in need of major repairs and JEA is unresponsive and seems uninterested. Chairman Bryan asked that Mr. Hall contact his office so the County might get involved.

Ellen Whitmer advised that JEA is not a big fan of franchise fees and she was concerned that some of our franchise monies were leaving our county for Jacksonville.

Merrill Roland suggested that more due diligence needed to be done on the 800 megahertz radio system. He stated that cell phone interference is a problem in some municipalities utilizing the system. Mr. Roland was also concerned that traffic ticket surcharges designated to purchase the new radio system had been spent elsewhere. Jerry Cameron was quick to point out that the surcharge money collected for the radios system are in the hands of the county and statute prohibits the county from spending tha money anywhere else.

Meeting adjourned 11:10 am