



DRAFT Minutes
Cochran City Council
Tuesday, September 3, 2024
Special Called Meeting @ 6:30 PM

City Auditorium, 102 N Second Street, Cochran, GA 31014

City Council

City Staff

Billy Yeomans, Mayor	Richard Newbern, City Manager
Keith Anderson, Council Member <i>(District 1, Post 1)</i>	Candace Summerall, City Clerk
Gary Ates, Council Member <i>(District 1, Post 2)</i>	Jim Elliott, City Attorney
Carla Coley, Council Member <i>(District 2 Post 1)</i>	
Lonnie Tedders, Council Member <i>(District 2, Post 2)</i>	
Andrew Lemmon, Council Member <i>(District 3, Post 1)</i>	
Shane Savant, Council Member <i>(District 3, Post 2)</i>	

I. Call to Order

Mayor Billy Yeomans called the meeting to order 6:29 PM

II. Invocation

Council Member Shane Savant led the invocation.

III. Pledge of Allegiance

Council Member Lonnie Tedders led the Pledge of Allegiance

IV. Attendance

Present:

- Mayor Billy Yeomans
- Council Member Carla Coley
- Council Member Shane Savant
- Council Member Lonnie Tedders
- Council Member Andrew Lemmon

Absent:

- Council Member Keith Anderson
- Council Member Gary Ates

City Staff Present:

- Richard Newbern, City Manager
- Candace Summerall, City Clerk
- Jim Elliott, City Attorney
- Tiffany Bryant, City Staff
- Mercedes Sanders, City Staff

Also Present:

- Chris Laney, Government Tax Solutions

V. Agenda Items

1. Discussion and update on tax collection

Mayor Yeomans explained this was a special called meeting to gather information on the tax collection and get an update from the parties involved in information gathering. He stated there would be no executive session, no public input, and no votes taken. He outlined the order of speakers and procedure for the meeting.

Chris Laney, Government Tax Solutions:

- Introduced himself and his company, which works with counties and cities throughout Georgia on tax collection.
- Explained how GTS became involved with Cochran, starting with initial discussions several years ago that became more serious in April 2022.
- Outlined the process of reviewing Cochran's data and determining the approach.
- Provided details on the notices sent out:
 - 983 initial intent to Fi.Fa. notices sent, totaling \$815,345 owed
 - 393 Stage 1 letters for real property sent later, totaling \$354,310
 - 45 Stage 1 letters for personal property sent, totaling \$40,977
 - 213 parcels approved to move to levy process, totaling about \$210,000
 - Currently 62 parcels still in process, working towards October 1st tax sale date
- Explained how the numbers decreased through the process as payments were made and issues resolved.
- Discussed how tax sales work and the training gap that often exists for cities compared to counties.
- Answered questions from council members on topics including:
 - Timeline of GTS's involvement
 - Reasons for discrepancies in notices received by property owners
 - How property ownership changes impact tax liability
 - GTS's experience with data issues in other municipalities

Candace Summerall, City Clerk:

- Described efforts to research and match up records after taking the position.
- Explained some of the issues found, including GSI system glitches and discrepancies.
- Stated she may ask council to waive fees on parcels where ownership has changed multiple times.
- Provided an example of a 2020 tax notice showing no payment due, but GSI showing a balance.
- Outlined next steps in researching parcels and determining legitimate amounts owed.

Tiffany Bryant, City Staff:

- Gave an update on current numbers: 57 parcels remaining, 43 with multiple years owed.
- Described issues experienced with the GSI system, including unexplained added fees and interest.
- Explained how she has had to manually clear some accounts due to GSI issues.

Candace Summerall continued:

- Stated the problem seems to be a mixture of GSI issues, staff training gaps, and loose record-keeping processes in the past.
- Noted that starting in 2024, taxes will be collected by the county, which should help resolve many issues.

Richard Newbern, City Manager:

- Described his role in budgeting for and tracking property tax collections.
- Stated that over the past 7-8 years, collections have generally been in range of budget figures.
- Explained he has worked with city clerk on collections but they were primarily responsible for overseeing the process.
- Outlined the timeline of recognizing more serious collection issues and engaging GTS.
- Presented two proposals for reviewing tax procedures - one from Mauldin Jenkins (estimated \$35,000) and one from Rushton (estimated \$18,000-\$23,000).

Council members asked numerous questions throughout the presentations, particularly to the City Manager, about topics including:

- Historical tax collection rates and monitoring
- When and why tax levies stopped being pursued
- Decision-making around millage rates
- Processes for reviewing actual billings vs collections

- Timeline of recognizing and addressing collection issues

- Details on audit proposals and other firms contacted

Council Member Carla Coley's questions and comments:

1. Asked about the timeline of discussions with GTS, specifically when talks became more serious.
2. Inquired about who was responsible for culling the initial list of 983 parcels down to 393 for the first stage letters.
3. Questioned the process of tax payment tracking prior to deposit, asking for specifics on how payments were handled from the front desk to the bank.
4. Requested raw numbers from 2017 to 2022 prior to current collection efforts, stating this would help understand what GSI says is owed versus what the city has said is owed.
5. Asked about the decision to raise the millage rate in fiscal year 2024, questioning if it was related to uncollected taxes.
6. Expressed concern about the threshold for writing off uncollected taxes
7. Suggested that a more thorough audit might be necessary

Council Member Shane Savant's questions and comments:

1. Asked for clarification on the "limited time frame" Chris Laney mentioned regarding tax discrepancies.
2. Inquired about GSI's reliability, asking if Laney had ever encountered situations where GSI data went missing in large volumes.
3. Questioned the City Manager about the "acceptable range" for tax collections over the past 7 years.
4. Asked if anyone was responsible for comparing actual billings versus receipts year over year.
5. Inquired about efforts made between December 2022 and May 2023 to investigate tax collection issues internally.
6. Questioned the sampling size for the proposed audits, suggesting that reviewing only 40 transactions per year might not be sufficient.
7. Asked for clarification on the difference between a regular audit and a forensic audit, noting that the only answer provided so far has been the cost difference.

Mayor Billy Yeomans' comments and questions:

1. Asked Chris Laney if his process would have revealed any misuse or misappropriation of funds.
2. Asked for clarification on boat and personal property taxes, inquiring whether both the county and city charge taxes on these items.
3. Mayor Yeomans thanked everyone for attending and reminded attendees of the city's chain of command structure. "The city clerk works for the city manager, the city manager works for the council."

Meeting adjourned at 8:50 PM