

Tubbs: County inherited financial problems

By ED HOWELL
Eagle News Editor

Walker County Commissioner Dual Tubbs said Tuesday the current commission inherited a number of financial problems, including some resulting from the construction of the Walker County Jail, and that some people in the community are trying too hard to tear down the county.

Tubbs spoke during and after Tuesday's 10-minute commission meeting as a result of a suggestion made by C.J. Powell of Jasper.

When Powell said at one point that people are "getting the wrong impression somehow" about the commission's operations, Tubbs said the commission inherited many of its problems.

"A lot of things happened years ago that put us in the shape we are in today," he said.

"We were elected to serve the people. We need everyone's support," he said. "We've got so many people wanting to knock each other down. We need to pull each other up."

Immediately after adjournment, Tubbs continued on the subject, saying the commission inherited the situation on constructing and funding the county jail.

"These guys had nothing to do with that jail," Tubbs said, pointing out the other current commissioners. "We had to do what we could do to pay for a jail that was already here."

Tubbs said the situation was made harder by the finances that the commission inherited, as there was "nothing there to build with." He said one commissioner had trouble meeting payroll when the current commission took office, but that commissioners have been able to resolve many problems over time.

He added that economic situations have sometimes been an additional factor, as coal tax revenue has also decreased over the years.

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Tubbs

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Tubbs said that in spite of the lack of revenue to work with, the commission has been able to provide a lot of services in a timely manner.

"There is not a person on a waiting list. I remember a time you could call and they would say, 'You'll have to be put on a waiting list. It could take as long as six months,'" Tubbs said.



Dual Tubbs

"We work six to seven days a week. We don't just go to the house," he said.

The majority of the short meeting focused on a suggestion from Powell to meet more often with the Jasper City Council. Powell said he and Tubbs had talked the day before the meeting.

"I've got a problem about communication between the city and the county," said Powell, who regularly attends city council meetings.

He said he would like to see more information exchanged between the city and county so that each side would be more informed about situations. He later said there is "too much misinformation" circulating about the commission.

Powell said an example of that involved the county's financial situation involving the jail, which was built because of a consent decree signed in late 1994 by past commissioners and ordered in early 1995 by U.S. District Judge Sharon Lovelace Blackburn.

"You guys didn't have much choice," Powell said.

Commissioners have recently requested department heads look at making up to 10 percent in budget cuts for the coming fiscal year to help with the county's finances. The commission is faced with a need for more cash in part to pay debt, and Tubbs said during a recent meeting the commission is "working with a lot less money than eight years ago."

A \$21.5 million bond issue taken out in 1998 for the then newly-constructed county jail also led to a 2003 issue that will cost \$1,201,725. The commission took out the 2003 issue when it had trouble paying a scheduled \$635,000

increase in payments that December for the 1998 issue.

The county also took out a \$27 million bond issue in 2002 that paid for items like road paving that might not last the full life of the bond. That issue runs through 2032, while bond issues for the jail will be paid out by 2018.

Commissioners recently revealed the annual budget of the county jail jumped overnight from \$800,000 to \$2.5 million when the federal court-ordered jail opened in September 1998. The 278-bed jail holds about 230 to 240 prisoners now, where the old jail was capped at 59 beds.

Responding to Powell, Tubbs said the commission was willing to talk to council members, and were open to hearing suggestions from them. While he said many people don't come to the commission meetings in general, the commission would be willing to discuss any matter.

Chairman Bruce Hamrick said Powell raised a good point in that the city councils and the commission don't sit down often enough to talk.

"I think it would be great to have just a work session," Hamrick said.

Powell suggested meetings could be held quarterly at night, while Tubbs said a larger location could also be secured if needed. Powell also said he plans to tell the Jasper council at its next meeting that there should be more interaction.

In other action, the commission appointed Horace Warren and M. Eugene Abbott to serve on the Curry Water Authority and Edd Frank Barnes to the Boldo Water Authority. The commission appointed James Richardson and Wendell Rigsby to the county 911 Board.

The commission also passed a resolution requesting the Congress block President Bush's proposed budget cut for the Resource Conservation and Development Program. The resolution, which addresses the ALA-TOM Resource Conservation and Development Council but also addresses 188 other RCD councils that could lose all funding, was requested by Clarke County Commissioner Rhondel Rhone, the second vice president of the Association of County Commissions of Alabama. Hamrick currently serves as president of the group.

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