

**JOINT MEETING OF THE JASPER COUNTY COUNCIL AND COMMISSIONERS
JULY 13, 2021**

The Jasper County Council and Commissioners met this date at 5:00 P.M. at 910 S Sparling Avenue, Rensselaer, with the following members present: Rein Bontreger, Stephen Jordan, Gary Fritts, Paul Norwine, Brett Risner, Jeff DeYoung, Brian Moore, Kendell Culp and James A. Walstra. Also present was Auditor Donya Jordan and Deputy Auditor Tina Porter. Let the record show that Dick Maxwell was absent. Mr. Bontreger called the meeting to order and those present and on Zoom stood and recited the Pledge of Allegiance led by Mr. Bontreger.

EMS FUNDING: Mr. Culp stated that the County has been working on EMS funding for a few years and have not come up with a solution. For 2021, the Council approved a ten percent increase in the budget line item. Half of that was passed on to the townships and the County kept the other half to try to help Marion Township get started to provide EMS to the central part of the County. Marion Township is still a work in progress. He said that the County received some CARES ACT funding and has set aside \$300,000.00 for EMS. Since then, Keener Township has requested that the County pay for three new heart monitors for their ambulances at a total cost of approximately \$94,000.00. The County has agreed to reimburse Keener Township for the monitors since the County now has the additional \$6.4 million. Mr. Eastridge will facilitate getting Marion Township up and running if it pans out. He said that he's spoken with Wheatfield EMS and they are needing some power cots that cost around \$105,000.00. Mr. Bryan has told Mr. Culp that he thinks their subsidy needs to be at \$1.3 million for them to be able to carry on. Mr. Culp thinks the County needs a dedicated funding source. Currently it's being paid for out of property taxes. There are two installments left before the Jail is paid off. Once the Jail is paid off, the rate goes away. He said that it would not be an option to turn that rate in to an EMS rate; however, Attorney Beaver has a few other options and Auditor Jordan has an option worth discussing as well. Attorney Beaver stated that he was tasked with finding out if the expiration of the bail bonds would create a funding source for EMS. The special local income tax that the Council passed in 2016 does not allow for it to be used on emergency medical services but it does provide an opportunity for county expenses to be covered. Attorney Beaver stated that there are two options. The first option is for the Council to pass a new ordinance that allows for maintenance and operating expenses at the Jail. The second option is to pass an ordinance that will provide for operation and maintenance of all of Jasper County's criminal justice facilities and optionally to provide for future construction and remodeling projects. The maximum tax rate allowed under the statute is 0.25 percent. That has averaged about \$1.1 million dollars coming back to the County. The bi-annual Jail bond payments amount to a total of approximately \$900,000.00. The County Council can have the same tax that's been paid by the taxpayers be applied to expenses that are related to the criminal justice facilities of the county. This would relieve some pressure from the General Fund that would in turn free up money to be used on emergency services. He explained what constitutes a facility and what constitutes operating and maintenance expenses. He said that the State Board of Accounts provided some information that he deemed helpful in determining this. The Jail, Community Corrections, the Sheriff's Annex and the Prosecutor's building would all constitute a criminal justice facility but the Courthouse would not since it houses other offices. The main thing to consider is what the main purpose of the building is. Even though Emergency Management has an office in the Prosecutor's building, it represents a very small portion of what that building is for. Operating and maintenance expenses would include utilities and payroll (janitorial, security and custodial). Construction expenses can also be used. He was provided with an abundance of information from the Auditor's Office that enabled him to determine that there's an average of approximately \$250,000.00 per year spent on utilities for these facilities. It does not account for the solar field and does not take in to account the energy savings projects at Community Corrections and the Jail. He said that he spoke with Sheriff Williamson who indicated that over \$800,000.00 is spent per year in salaries for the custodial and correctional employees at the Jail. Attorney Beaver explained that the first ordinance is very generalized and he thinks State Board of Accounts would want a more detailed ordinance. Mr. Bontreger asked what the timeline would be to enact a new ordinance and Attorney Beaver replied that he hasn't had time to research the processes. The statute does set out that when the final bond payment is made, that tax rate will go away without a new ordinance from the County Council. The most expedient way to do this would be to adopt the ordinance so that the tax rate will start immediately when the other rate ends so there is no lapse in the tax or questions from taxpayers. Mr. Culp asked Ms. Sansone when the last payment is due and she replied that she believes it is in January. She further stated that she was under the impression that the tax would expire. She was not aware that the Council could pass an ordinance to extend it. She said that another option would be to adopt a Public Safety Local Income Tax.

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EMS FUNDING CONT'D: The only problem is that the current tax is .15 percent. If the Council adopts a .15 percent public safety tax, the County would not get as much. The County is currently getting \$1.2 million for the Special Purpose but the Public Safety would have to be distributed to the County and the municipalities. The tax would need to be higher than .15 if the County still wants the \$1.2 million; however, this may not be necessary if the tax could be extended. If the Council decides to enact a new tax, the statutory deadline is October 31st. She's unsure what the deadline is if a tax is being extended. Mr. Culp explained that the rate would expire but the Council could adopt a new ordinance with the same rate to replace it. He said he was under the impression that the rate was .25 and Auditor Jordan replied that the Council decreased it. She further stated that the County already has a Public Safety rate. Mr. Culp asked if there is a limit on Public Safety and Ms. Sansone replied that there is a limit on Expenditure Lit. Within Expenditure Lit - Certified Shares, Public Safety, Economic Development and Correctional Facilities combined cannot exceed 2.5 percent. The county is currently at 1.8640 so there is room for an increase. The Public Safety rate is currently .25 percent. Mr. Culp asked Auditor Jordan what the balance of the fund is that has the .15 percent rate and she replied that the balance as of June 30th was \$678,997.20. The County receives approximately \$100,000.00 in to that fund every month. Ms. Sansone stated that the final payment is due January 15th. Mr. Culp stated that Attorney Beaver has detailed out some funds that the County can replace that would free up funds within County General; however, he does not see that as a permanent funding source. When the Public Safety rate was originally adopted at .25, it was split between EMS and the Sheriff's Department. Then the Sheriff wanted a pay increase for his deputies so the pay increase came from that rate. Then all the Public Safety rate ended up going to the Sheriff's Department which was \$1.6 or \$1.7 million. EMS then just relied on the budget.

Auditor Jordan stated that the law changed in 2018 or 2019 allowing the County to take a portion of the LIT Levy Freeze Rate in the Stabilization Fund and apply it to one of the other LOIT funds. Her suggestion is to take the freed rate of .1289 and put it in Public Safety. This would amount to an extra approximately \$400,000.00 per year. Ms. Sansone stated that increasing the Public Safety Rate makes sense since the County is trying to find funding for EMS. Mr. Culp stated that the County also needs to find more money for the Sheriff's Department. She suggested increasing the Public Safety Lit rate and the Special Purpose Lit rate. Mr. Culp asked what the balance in the Stabilization Fund and Auditor Jordan replied that it has a balance of over \$8 million. She said that some money will still go in to the fund but it wouldn't be the whole rate. There was a brief discussion regarding what the Stabilization Fund is for. The total rate is .3640 and the freed up rate is .1289. Auditor Jordan stated that she figured this based on information she was sent by Fred VanDorp. Ms. Sansone stated that a true levy freeze rate is supposed to be sufficient to cover increases in the property tax levy. There was a brief discussion regarding the County being "thawed". Auditor Jordan stated that any changes would need to be done by October 31st. Mr. Culp stated that the County needs to help Marion Township with their up-front costs.

WORKFORCE ISSUES: Mr. Culp stated that, five years ago, the Commissioners made the Food Inspector part-time. It's been a revolving door with that position since then. The Commissioners agreed to make the Food Inspector full-time with the understanding that, once the receptionist retires, the receptionist position will go to part-time. He thinks that all employers are having a hard time finding employees. He said that the County is losing road deputies and that it's going to take an increase in salary to retain the County's current employees and to attract new employees. He credited Auditor Jordan, stating that she hasn't replaced one deputy and has proven that you can get more done with less. He said that it's not out of the question to ask other departments to try to get more done with less employees. The Prosecutor's Office requested to move the Investigator from part-time to full-time and not long after, the Health Department requested to move the Food Inspector from part-time to full-time. The County is unable to compete with the government's unemployment compensation in regards to wages; however, he thinks this problem was coming even before the unemployment issue. He said that he attended a squad meeting at the Sheriff's Department and tried to explain to the deputies how property taxes work and how the County is frozen at that level and the growth quotient is the only additional money the County gets. The deputies are paid out of income tax. He said that he doesn't think the County can go two years in a row without a raise. Mr. Bontreger stated that last year was the first year since he's been on the Council that raises were not given. He said the Council acknowledges that raises are needed.

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WORKFORCE ISSUES CONT'D: He mentioned that they need to find a way to keep employees faithful through all of this and reward them for their services and at the same time entice new, quality employees to want to work for Jasper County.

AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN: Mr. Culp stated that Jasper County Government is set to receive \$6.51 million. The County has received half of that already. Mr. Culp stated that the County has four years to spend this money. He said that it's been stressed at every seminar he's been to that the money should not be allocated and spent in a hurry. The County should meet with other units of government such as the cities and towns and have a well thought out plan. Mr. Culp stated that he asked Mr. Eastridge to speak on this since he facilitated the NIPSCO Task Force.

Mr. Eastridge showed a slide-show presentation detailing how funds were allocated to the state and local communities. There is a state and local fiscal recovery fund. The County's allocation was \$6.51 million. Each of the municipalities were also given allocations. The Town of DeMotte will receive \$170,000.00. The Town of Remington will receive \$240,000.00. The City of Rensselaer will receive \$1.2 million and the Town of Wheatfield will receive \$180,000.00. That's almost \$9 million that will be coming to Jasper County as a whole. He thinks it would be good for the County to have collaborative conversations with the towns in order to best leverage the money coming to the communities. The following are categories in which the money can be spent: support public health expenditures, address negative economic impacts, replace lost public sector revenue, provide premium pay for essential workers, and invest in water, sewer and broadband. Beyond those loose definitions, the County and municipalities are free to spend the money how they see fit as long as it fits within one of those categories. He thinks that the federal government wants communities to make decisions on how to grow their community after COVID. Mr. Eastridge advised that the County not rush to spend the money. There is time to make really good decisions about how the money is invested, not only to address what's happened over the last year but to also try to figure out a way to grow to see exponential return on those dollars in the future.

Mr. Eastridge stated that, when NIPSCO announced they were closing, JCEDO hosted a series of monthly meetings from January to July, 2019 talking about what kind of impact this would have on the county and how the county could grow. The NIPSCO Taskforce was made up of representation throughout the county. He gave an overview of the things that the NIPSCO Taskforce recommended and the progress that's been made on those recommendations. Mr. Eastridge stated that he would be interested in hosting a meeting that includes leadership from all of the communities to talk about what's happening and what they are thinking about investing in. Each community could then build from that collaboration so they know what the others are doing. He thinks a committee should be formed with members of the Council, Commissioners and some non-profit partners to make good funding decisions. Any spending decisions should be deliberate and collaborative across all community partners. Creating a plan for these dollars allows Jasper County and their partners to best take advantage of the opportunity to grow for the future. Mr. Culp asked Auditor Jordan if a plan must be adopted before the money can be spent and she replied that that is correct. Mr. Jordan stated that a joint discussion would be a great start.

Mr. Bontreger asked Mr. Eastridge what kinds of things he was thinking about in terms of better quality of life projects and Mr. Eastridge replied that there was discussion about a youth sports complex. He stated that many families go out of the county on the weekends for youth sports because Jasper County doesn't have the facilities. He said that DeMotte would be a good location where water was just installed. They looked at Remington because of the infrastructure that is there; however, Remington is lacking in population so they ultimately decided Rensselaer would be the best location for it. He said they have a conference call set up to speak with a community that has a publicly owned youth sports facility. There was a brief discussion regarding privately and publicly owned facilities. There was discussion regarding out of state residents moving to Jasper County, the projection on school population and the number of building permits being applied for. There was discussion regarding the I-65 Corridor on State Road 114. Mr. Eastridge stated that extending water to the other side of the interstate is not feasible because they don't even have the infrastructure for the businesses that are there currently. Mr. Schenk stated that the City of Rensselaer has applied for a grant for a water tower at the I-65 corridor. Mr. Culp stated that, when utilities were brought out to I-65, they only did enough to service what was there and did not plan for future growth. Mr. Eastridge stated that there is a gas supply issue in Rensselaer as well.

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AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN CONT'D: Ms. Hooker stated that the Jasper Newton Foundation would love to be a part of the meeting where all the communities get together to discuss plans for the Rescue Plan money. Mr. Culp explained that it's really hard to develop a vision and share that with each other. He further stated that the Commissioners try to solve current problems and that you must be very intentional about planning for the future. He said that the County does not have sewer and water so that gets rid of that category. The County is doing other things to help Jasper County REMC with broadband so the broadband category can be removed as well. The County does not own any parks. He thinks a lot of times, the municipalities look to the County for some leadership and guidance. He thinks it's up to the County to look at all the options and then sort through them as a group with the other municipalities.

DR. PULVER: Mr. Bontreger stated that the program with Dr. Pulver started approximately five years ago. The County found money to pay Dr. Pulver out of the Care of Inmates line. He said that the Commissioners usually budget approximately \$400,000.00 in that line. The initial cost was around \$150,000.00. Mr. Culp stated that he met yesterday with Dr. Pulver at the request of Sheriff Williamson. He said that, during the meeting, he asked Dr. Pulver about recidivism because the word on the street is that it's just a matter of time that those that complete the program are back in jail. Dr. Pulver's response to him was that, of those that get through the program, the recidivism is ten percent. The recidivism for those in the Jail population that have not been through the program is eighty-nine percent. The Jail population has been lower since COVID began so Mr. Culp said he's not sure if that has skewed the numbers. Also, he has no way to verify the numbers Dr. Pulver gave him. Mr. Bontreger stated that, towards the end of Sheriff Risner's term, the population was eighty to one-hundred but is currently in the fifties. Even prior to COVID, the population was on a downward trend. Mr. Bontreger stated that he's spoken with Dr. Pulver a few times and the point that was made to him was that Dr. Pulver goes over basic thinking and decision making processes with the inmates as well as how to think about consequences for your actions. These are things that the inmates did not learn through their family life. Mr. Bontreger stated that he was on the Valley Oaks board for many years and feels like the County is under some obligation to provide something other than just jail for the people that are struggling. He said he spoke with a gentleman who had a son with DUI's and was in and out of jail and the father made the comment that all Jasper County has is jail which is the time that Mr. Bontreger joined Recovery House. Recovery House is a faith-based option. He is aware that Sheriff Williamson is looking for grant funding. He said that he sees both sides of it. He said that the County doesn't want to have a line item that just spends money away. He further stated that the inmates are people and if they have kids, it becomes a perpetual cycle. He said that, even if it's not Dr. Pulver, he does see some value in offering something to try to help the inmates think things through other than the way they know.

Mr. Norwine stated that he agrees that the County needs something. He said that he's spoken with Officers and they have some concerns about the program with Dr. Pulver. According to the Officers, the rate of recidivism is actually pretty high although they did not have exact numbers. There was one incident where one of the program's "poster child" inmates damaged St. Joseph's college and the County had to pay money for the repairs. Another incident where an inmate got arrested twice for domestic battery. He said that the County pays Dr. Pulver more than they pay employees that have been employed with the County for over forty years. He thinks that what the County pays Dr. Pulver is an awful lot of money for such a small population. He further stated that all road officers serve and protect one hundred percent of the population. All county employees work hard every day and not nearly at the same rate as what Dr. Pulver is being paid. He said that the County can help people but he asked "At what cost?"

Mr. Risner stated that there is a cost when the inmates keep going back to jail. There's also a cost if the offender has kids. He said that it's a drain on the community when habitual offenders keep going back to jail. Even though the program is expensive, he thinks the County should give it a shot because he thinks that, overall, it will help the community. Mr. Norwine stated that he would agree to give it a shot, but not for \$90,000.00 per year. He said that where he thinks these behaviors would be changed is in Adam Alson's program. The most important years for development and learning is under five years old. Mr. Bontreger asked if the County wants to invest in Applesed or another initiative like it. Early childhood development would fall under a quality of life issue. Mr. Bontreger stated that he thinks these are things that should be thought about in regards to ARPA money and budgets.

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DR. PULVER CONT'D: He said that he does give the Sheriff credit for trying to do more than just jail. He would like to be able to tell people when they ask that Jasper County has something to try to help people. He said these types of programs exist in Community Corrections such as "Thinking for a Change". The Sheriff's Department and criminal justice are the biggest parts of the County's budget. Mr. Walstra asked how many inmates Dr. Pulver works with per year. Mr. Culp replied that the inmate fills out an "application". He said that the Sheriff said Dr. Pulver told him that he sees one inmate per week. Mr. Culp said that he then asked how long they are in the program and was told that some are in it for more than a year. Auditor Jordan asked how many hours Dr. Pulver spends at the Jail and Mr. Culp replied that that is not a question he asked. He said that Sheriff Risner's approach was to detain individuals and Sheriff Williamson's approach is to rehabilitate them. Mr. Culp stated that what he was trying to get out of Dr. Pulver was at what point does the County's responsibility end since the County is paying for this. Mr. Culp said that the individual should go to the next program such as a half-way house or one of the various other programs that are available. Mr. Bontreger stated that it's his understanding that, once the inmate is released, they are allowed to receive counseling for one month. Mr. Moore asked if the program could be made mandatory as part of their detention and Mr. Bontreger replied that that becomes more of a judge issue. He then stated that, at one time, Dr. Pulver told him that he was performing marriage counseling because the husband and wife were both in jail. Mr. Culp said that he asked what kind of rapport they have with the judges and Dr. Pulver told him that the judges do not recognize the program at all. Mr. Bontreger mentioned that it might be a good idea to tell Sheriff Williamson that the Council needs some collaboration and recognition of the program for the Council to be able to fund this. Mr. Moore stated that it would be interesting to see how many hours Dr. Pulver is actually working for what he is being paid. He understands that everyone has strong opinions about subjects like this but when it deals with a small percentage of citizens, it is costing the county a lot of money.

COURTHOUSE 125TH ANNIVERSARY: Mr. Culp gave an update on the festivities they are planning for September, October and November to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the Courthouse.

COUNTY HIGHWAY UPDATE: Mr. Culp stated that the crews are currently paving. He said that the County received \$812,000.00 for Community Crossings. The County is eligible for up to \$1 million each year; however, the State denied converting two gravel roads to pavement on the initial application. He said that they are going to apply for additional roads to try to get the other \$188,000.00.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.

Rein O. Bontreger, President

ATTEST:

Donya G. Jordan, Auditor of Jasper County

