

2023Sept10 – Chairman's Update

Hello. For those who may not take the Seneca Journal, my update below ran in today's paper in response to last Friday's front page article: "Hart scoffs at Republican town hall..." Every member on county council is a card-carrying Republican. I hope everyone in the county shows up in October to support this event!

Questioning a public town hall in Oconee County? – Really?

First, there's been a lot of back-n-forth between parties and much legalese discussed at recent county meetings. Let me try to clear up some confusion. I did not personally speak with the county attorney. I did call the county administrator to ask about having a public town hall with the county council regarding the 2024 Budget and the Budget Approval Process. Her response noted that certain things must happen to make it legal. A town hall has been done before, and it can happen again. There was no need to talk with the county attorney. The SC Association of Counties confirmed that it was not a problem to hold a public town hall with all council members present, but noted that the County Chairman would be responsible for adhering to SC open meeting laws. Hopefully, everyone understands now that a public town hall can happen in Oconee County.

Unfortunately, public town halls are an aspect of the American political process that are mostly forgotten after the election is over. My position is that town halls are the most effective tool for insuring that voters, political parties, and politicians have an opportunity to gain alignment on current challenges and issues that confront us. Pushing the reset button to reinstate respectful accountability by holding regular public town hall events is just one duty of the local political party. Ultimately, restoring public trust in the American political system is a responsibility shared by all citizens, but it has to start at the local level.

If each one of us took the time to thoughtfully consider what's really changed in America, one huge difference is the diminished existence of personal character and integrity of both the voter and the politician. This change has not been good for our country. In more cases than we probably want to admit, voters grow up and become politicians who can lose touch with both their conscience and the needs of their constituents. Without intrinsic strong moral convictions, politicians can quickly succumb to the addiction of voting under the influence of self-serving motives.

Fiscal responsibility is about effectively managing the financial challenges facing the county. Good budgets don't have to be difficult to explain or understand, but they do require a lot of time & effort to develop. People make up any organization, so take care of them first by updating and maintaining a competitive pay and benefits package. Follow that up by making sure your people have the hard assets and resources required to do their jobs. From there it's just a matter of spending less than your annual tax base to maintain the current infrastructure and effectively plan for future growth.

Back to the 2024 county budget: When council members make claims that they reduced the budget by \$5M, then a month later vote to approve a \$25M general obligation bond, those actions do not fit the Republican Party's definition of fiscal responsibility. It makes me wonder who the real conservatives are on the county council.

To get everyone on the same page: A general obligation bond is backed solely by two things: The county's credit rating and the power to levy taxes on the population. NO assets are put up as collateral, and the bonding agency takes NO consideration of return on investment (ROI) for any specified projects – including Sewer South. If this \$25M bond goes through, then the taxpayers will be saddled with paying back the biggest bond (loan) in the history of Oconee County. Since bond dollars have not been assigned to any specific projects, there will be limited opportunity for accountability on spending. This bond is an underhanded approach to making general funds available now and deferring taxes required to repay the loan until a later date.

Regardless of your political affiliation, the county council has jurisdiction over all county business and makes financial decisions that ultimately impacts our tax bill for years to come. The OCRP will continue our work to make this public town hall happen. When it does, everyone in the county is welcome to attend.

Jim Mann, OCRP Chairman