

State of The County  
2020

The State of the County is an opportunity to reflect on the present position of Ben Hill County. It is also an opportunity to review our achievements, our challenges, and where we need to concentrate our future focus. Less than three years ago, we began efforts to restore the county's financial strength and establish policies to promote a strong and sustainable government. I am honored on behalf of the Ben Hill County Commission, constitutional officers, management, judges, support staff, and employees to announce the state of Ben Hill County is significantly sound in the areas of finance, operation, and organization. We have made substantial gains in updating and improving our assets. Policies to control spending and optimize revenue have resulted in our replenished fund balance and increased reserve. In fact, a representative from the county's accounting firm stated that it was exceptional for a county government to experience such a large financial turnaround in such a short time.

We as a commission recognize that in everything we do, or every decision we make, we must be focused on investing in the people of our community. Our people are our greatest resource for our future. The tomorrow of Ben Hill County depends on the choices we make today. We build our future based on the foundation we establish now, because we understand a strong foundation will stand the test of time. We consciously made the effort to move beyond the current or existing state. Although maintaining the status quo is the easy way, we take the position that it is not the best for our community or our future.

I am excited to share with you the following highlights of 2019:

- Renovation of E-911. The E-911 department was completely renovated and restored. Modern and updated equipment was purchased and the physical building interior was renovated to provide a professional environment for the operators. The majority of these expenditures were paid for using SLOST funds. Now your Ben Hill County E-911 center is considered one of the best in Georgia for a community our size.
- Continued upgrades to the Sheriff's fleet of vehicles and computers as well as needed safety equipment including cameras, vests, tasers, and radios. Through the use of SPLOST funds and leveraging these funds with USDA grants, the Sheriff's department physical assets are now in the best condition they have been in for many years. Sheriff Cone continues to work closely with county management to improve operations and provide a safer environment for our citizens.
- The purchase of an existing building at 602 South Grant Street that will be the new location for Ben Hill County Elections. This will provide for a more user friendly location for voters, and a better alternative for housing as well as securing the new State of Georgia mandated voting machines.
- Upgrades in equipment for the road department and improvement in the physical plant.
- Saved approximately \$70,000.00 in interest expense by not drawing any funds

on the Tax Anticipation Note

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- Tax Commissioner Barry Foster continues to provide an exceptional service for the citizens by collecting taxes due. To date he reports 2017 collections at 99.5%, 2018 collections at 98.5%, and 2019 collections at 90.5%.

For the fourth straight year, our community has experienced a rejuvenation in capital investment which has increased employment in our manufacturing sector. As we begin 2020, unemployment rates have dropped to just below 5 percent. The lowest we've seen since the early 2000's, and a 33 percent drop since January 2019. Through the wise use of SPLOST funds and the initiative of Fitzgerald-Ben Hill County Executive Director Jason Dunn, vital infrastructure improvements and key decisions have been made which allowed existing manufacturers to freely expand.

Over the past 18 months 150,000 square feet of new manufacturing and warehouse facilities have been constructed and another 150,000 square feet of existing facilities have been repurposed to welcome three new entrepreneurial starts into the community. The old Delco property is under much needed redevelopment by Modern Dispersions. 2020 will see more of the same as new employers are entering the community and capital investment from existing employers will continue to strengthen our position and provide additional opportunities for our community. Along with new employment, these investments have helped us grow the county's tax digest and establish a much healthier county government.

2019 was a good year for Ben Hill County. County manager Mike Dinnerman shares the vision of the commission, and his exceptional performance continues to assist in advancing Ben Hill County forward. We continue to communicate and work with Mayor Puckett and the City of Fitzgerald. Also, I must recognize the hard work of our constitutional officers, judges, department heads, administration team, and all employees for believing in our direction and working to advance Ben Hill County. All departments commit to a true team effort in striving to improve Ben Hill County daily.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge your Board of Commissioners. Each commissioner contributes to the goal of making Ben Hill County a better place to be. Although we don't always agree, we listen to each other and work together for all citizens. We understand there are new challenges every day. Some of these challenges we are aware of and some are unexpected. The Commission is receptive to new ideas and we seek to promote the best solutions for the health, safety, and welfare for the people of this community. In closing, please know I am honored to serve this community. Allow me to share a quote from last years address: "management and commissioners refuse to be content with our current position, and we continue to explore ways to improve our services, assets, and resources for Ben Hill County". This statement continues to be true today for the tomorrow of our community.

May God continue to bless our country and our county.