

MINUTES OF THE PUBLIC HEARING
OF THE BEN HILL COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
HELD ON January 30th, 2025, AT 06:00 PM LOCATED IN THE 4H AND BEN COUNTY
EXTENSION SERVICE BUILDING LOCATED AT 321 DEWEY MCGLAMRY RD

Those present for the meeting were as follows:

Hal Wiley	Chairman
Hope Harmon	Vice-Chair
Daniel Cowan	Commissioner
John Mooney	Commissioner
Bennie Calloway	Commissioner
Pamela Turner	County Clerk

Chairman Hal Wiley called the meeting to order.

Commissioner Beenie Calloway gave invocation

Chairman Hal Wiley stated the purpose of this Public Hearing is to discuss the Intent to Opt Out Homestead Exemption House Bill 581

The County Manager stated as follows:

House Bill 581 was passed by the Georgia General Assembly during the 2024 legislative session and was signed into law by Governor Kemp on April 18, 2024.

HB 581 contains multiple provisions related to property tax and sales tax:

1. Grants a statewide homestead exemption that limits the increases in table value of homestead property to no more than an inflation rate to be determined by the Commissioner of the Department of Revenue.
2. Allows local governments to elect to opt out of this homestead exemption within their jurisdiction so that it will not apply to their taxable values.
3. Authorizes local governments with the new homestead exemption (or equivalent) to levy a new sales tax to be used for property tax relief. This does not apply to local school systems.

Reasons for the Board of Commissioners to opt out of HB 581.

1. You will **NOT** lose your homestead exemption as indicated in the notice. The cap related to the inflation rate will be removed. Note that the state has not yet determined which inflation index will be utilized.
2. This does **NOT** impact non-homestead property, including those for commercial properties, farmland, or investment properties.
3. Opting out allows local governments to maintain local control over their property tax policies, enabling them to tailor ax rates and exemptions to their specific community's needs and fiscal conditions. Statewide Floating Homestead Exemption, if we were to opt out, at a later date could this Board decide if they wanted a Floating Homestead Exemption for Ben Hill County, they could craft one for Ben Hill County, take that to the State for them to vote on it and approve for Ben Hill County, instead of this Statewide Floating Homestead Exemption that they have created.
4. Local governments can adjust property tax assessments and rates without being constrained by the statewide ap. This flexibility can be crucial for addressing unique local economic conditions and funding needs for public services.

5. If property assessments yield revenue that exceed the County's requirements, the Board of Commissioners has the option to reduce the milage rate accordingly.
6. If the County does not opt out of HB 581, we are in it permanently. We only have until March 1st to opt out. This includes the City and School Board.
7. By not participating in HB 581, the Board of Commissioners have the option to craft a floating homestead exemption for Ben Hill County at a later date.

County Manager Hampton answered a question in an early hearing “ How will affect my curent Homestead Exemption?” This does not affect your current Homestead Exemption. This is a new Floating Homesead Exemption, and it limits the anount that your taxable vaule can increase and decrease. Currently we do not know how much it would go up or down because the State has not told us yet, they will detrmine that rate at some point.

County Manager answered a question “How does this affect 65 years and older Homestead?”

It does not affect that, this is a new Floating Homested Exemption.

County Manager Hampton Raulerson also answered the question “ How does it affect the millge rate?”

Currently in short term does not affect the millaage rate right now, the millage rate will be levy based on the needs of the County, School Board and the City, depends on how the revenue goes, the millage rate can go up or down.

County Manager Hampton Raulerson also state that with the HB 581, the sale tax will have to be utilized specfically to roll back millage rate for property taxes relief, currrently State law allows for 4% sale tax cap within Counties and Ben Hill County has all 4, Education Splost/Transportation Splost/Special Option Sale Tax which is your specail projects/Local Option Sale Tax which is also the Property Tax relief. This would allow for the 5th which they are calling it Flost(Floating Local Option Salae Tax). ACCG lobbys on our behalf, and there is a groupp of Legislatives that did not realize that it incresed the cap from 4% to 5%, now they want to drop it back down to 4% and cut out tthat 5th penny. Currently we don't know what the inflationary rate is, where they stand on the sale tax, and there are some other unknowns from the State that does not give us confidence. If the City and the County stayed in, it will require both entities to stay in, the School Board it doesn't matter because they do not benefit from it. The Ciy and County would both have to saty in. It would go to a referendum, it would be good for five years, after the five years it would go back to the State Legislative asking them to reauthorize it, if they reauthorize it, it would go back to another referndum for another five years.

Intent to Opt Out Homestead Exemption House Bill 581 Public Comments

Louise Easom 136 Buffalo Rd. Fitzgerlad GA. stated that she is new with all this information, I am concerned about the 65 and older, when you are on a fixed income and y'all are not for sure whether the taxes are going up and five years after that too. It's scary. We don't want to lose our house; we worked too hard. I really think we shouldn't have to pay taxes anyway after 65 it would be one less thing, we have to worry about. We start saving in January for December. I rather just leave my homestead exemption the way it is because I already know what I have to pay, I know where I'm at. I have been on a fixed income; I like the way it is.

Diana Pate 145 Meadow Lane Fitzgerald GA stated I was born in the old Ben Hill County

hospital, graduated from the old Fitzgerald High School, my family has been in Ben Hill County since 1927, my grandfather came here as a professional. My concern is that we tried two years ago, we were told by one group if we got enough signatures, we could put on the ballot people that is over 65 can be exempted from school taxes. There are quite of number of counties, plus 20 counties in the State that exempt people from over 65 from paying School taxes. We circulated the petitions, we had enough petitions, turned them back into our Legislators, he told us we had to go back tour Board of Education. Well, you know what the Board of Education going to say, "they don't want anything that is going to shorten their money. I did some demographic research on Ben Hill County, we have a population of 17,194, the medium household income in Ben Hill County is only \$32,000.00. Out of those people that live in Ben Hill County and out of the total properties that are taxed in Ben Hill County, there are only 57.9% living in property that they own. So only 57.9% of the 17,194 this applies to paying property taxes or receiving Homestead Exemption. If you look at the Counties around us, they have a higher number of occupied property owner. For example, Wilcox County has 73% property owners. I know we lost a lot of industries in Ben Hill County, but we had a lot of people coming in. So why is it about 34 Counties in Georgia that has a Homestead Valuation Freeze Exemption? The way that it was explained to me is, if you buy your property and live in it for 10 years or more, the assessment value of the property will never be raised after the tenth year you live there. So that puts a freeze on the valuation, it freezes the valuation the property taxes. I don't know what's all involved in getting that done, I haven't had a lot of time to research. I don't know if it is feasible in Ben Hill County. I do know that these other Counties have exempted people 65 years and older form School taxes. The problem is with inflation and property taxes going up, all of us that are retired our income doesn't go up, we don't have the same percentage of increase like everyone else. That concerns me because we are taxing a lot of people out of their homes. If ICE comes into Ben Hill County and deport illegal immigrants, that will decrease our population somewhat, and if that happens wouldn't that reduce the cost of operating the Schools/Law Enforcement and other things in Ben Hill County? If that happens would that be passed on to the taxpayers?

Larry Davis 145 Hiawasee Rd. Fitzgerlad GA stated I voted against it, the reason why I voted no is because I didn't want the State involved telling us what we can do in Ben Hill County. I don't like that; I never like that. The bad part about when I served on this Board, they would send things down here to us for us to take care of and say hey you're going to implemented. The other thing that I really dislike when I was on this Board was that we, you the Board would get kicked around about taxes, like we are the ones that made all these bills, you got to get money in here. People don't understand that the Constitutional Officers in Ben Hill County or any of the other 159 Counties set their own Budget. That's one thing the y'all are faced with and why the taxes are the way they are, but they want to look at the Board of Commissioners and say y'all are the ones spending the money, but actually all you're doing is taking care of the bills that someone else has created. I don't like the State being involved, because when the State is involved, more things come down. The other thing I didn't like about this is that there is a big unknown to begin with, we don't know what the inflationary rate going to be. Form what I understand from this morning from Vice- Chair Harmon that whoever sponsor this bill advising her and other Counties to opt out on it. That spoke volumes to me. I am asking you to vote to opt out on it. I am with

you on this, and if there are any repercussions we can deal with it when they come.

County Manager Hampton Raulerson responded to some questions that were asked, if we opt out everything stays where it is right now.

On the School Homestead Exemption and the 34 Counties that have the Homestead Freezes those communities have decided that it was the right thing for them to do that fits them. I do understand what you are talking about, that it would be rather difficult for a State Legislative out into the School Board, and they oppose it even though you got a petition going for it, that's politics.

As for as the ICE deportation I have no clue of how much or how many their will be in Ben Hill County. I don't have an answer currently. I would think that local Law Enforcement would work with the Federal Agency.

Chairman Hal Wiley also responded that the money must come from somewhere, and if we cap it with the Floating Homestead Exemption, its going to affect everything else, were going to pay for it somehow. There are so many unknowns with this HB 581, and I don't want to knee jerk and say we are in.

County Manager Hampton Raulerson responded that with a rural area like Ben Hill County and to Freeze your Homestead it would be difficult to lower the millage rate overtime, because the overall value will grow at a very slow rate. So, you would be looking at increasing millage rate more likely than not. If the value rate goes up the millage rate goes down, if the value goes down the millage rate goes up to offset.

Question was asked "Why can't Ben Hill County and other entities do like indivual, we know what our income is so we spend based on our income, why can't that be done, why spend more money than you have. I can't do that at home.

County Manager Hampton Raulerson responded that we do that every year, we are required to submit a budget to the State, and it must be balanced. The Splost I can project out 6-year life span, we budget for the full 6 years. I had a meeting with the Sheriff on how many vehicles he can buy every year. With building projects are budgeted out too. This County has done very well, taking on the policy of not taking out debt to complete projects, we do it on a cash basis.

Commissioner John Mooney expand on the language on the ballot the majority of Georgia voted in favor of this Bill. On the ballot it says, "Are you in favor of using sale tax as a way to reduce property taxes?" Now that's a concept that I agree with and most of Georgians agree with. I think 581 started initially as a way to do that, introduced new sale tax to reduce property taxes. After a year after this was created, and as local government we don't feel comfortable that the State doesn't give us enough ability locally to control the collection of that sale tax, to even be sure that we can collect that sale tax. And the opportunity for us to limit Homestead Exemption would lowers our revenues and does not give us enough control for us to collect that other penny either now or in the future to offset that loss in revenue. That's one of the problems that the State has not answered, even though they are still working on it. And trying to adopt it without having all the answers can potentially put

Ben Hill County in a bad funding position. It's not a tax increase we are not talking about right now; we are really looking into the future. HB 581 has been misunderstood by a lot of people. If we did opt in HB 581, most people are not going to see a difference in their Homestead Exemption or their property taxes in a short time. Ten years from now very few people would see a benefit in their homestead exemption, unless property values continue to increase like they have been doing. Not a lot of saving in the short term, in the long term it's possible.

The question was asked of what other hurdles do you have to go through with HB 581, he couldn't find during his research?

Count Manager Hampton Raulerson responded this is our third Public Hearing, next a Resolution will have to be voted on to Opt of HB 581 and we have to have that Resolution to the Secretary State Office by March 1., any later date than that you are automatically opted in, from tonight that is the only thing left to be done. The Board will have to vote, if not Tuesday night Regular meeting, then their will be a Special Called Meeting to vote.

Vice-Chair Hope Harmon stated that another hurdle is every time we ask questions, nobody can't answer them. The lady that wrote/sponsor Bill saying to opt out, because what she wanted to be turned out to be something different. Now they are doing a clean up of the Bill in the session they are in now, but this may take about two sessions to clean this up all the way, so we would be opting into something that they could change in just a few weeks and change again next year. There are no solid answers. I think the people in Atlanta would benefit more than we would.

Vice Chairman Hal Wiley thanked the public for another very productive hearing.

The meeting was adjourned.

Hal Wiley, Chairman

Pamela D. Turner, County Clerk