

LEADERS SEEK PUBLIC INPUT ON CONTINUING SPLOST IN 2019

- An aquatic center.
- Renovations and expansion of the Dalton-Whitfield County Library.
- More street lights.
- Connecting the new Haig Mill reservoir park to downtown with walking trails.
- Landscaping of the two major exits off I-75.
- Quiet zone for trains downtown.
- Completion of the restoration of the Crescent City train car.

Those are just a few of the ideas for future Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax projects submitted by local residents at the second SPLOST Community Input Meeting held Aug. 16 at the Mack Gaston Community Center.

Since the current four-year SPLOST expires June 30, 2019 after collecting a projected \$64 million, the Whitfield County Board of Commissioners is considering asking voters to continue the SPLOST for six years, a decision that would bring in an estimated \$100 million. That election, if approved by the commissioners, would be held in March 2019.

“I want to make sure everybody looks around this room and sees the pictures,” Dalton Mayor Dennis Mock said at the meeting, pointing to several tables holding photos of many of the projects completed with the 2015 SPLOST. “I could tell you the list is long, but you see the pictures, you’ll know that we’ve done some good things with the SPLOST.”

The 2015 SPLOST funded a new communications system for public safety departments, new fire trucks for the Dalton and Whitfield fire departments, new bridges and other road improvements, library renovations, a new community center at Edwards Park, a new fire station in Cohutta, and a new park that will open in September at the Haig Mill reservoir, among other projects.



Commission Chairman Lynn Laughter said she is proud of the improvements made for the fire department, pointing out that the work has helped lower the ISO insurance rating to a 3 from a 5, resulting in significantly reduced premiums for local residents.

“I was told today that with the situation that happened at Dalton High with the teacher that shot out of his classroom, that it would have been a much different situation if we had not had that new communications system,” Laughter said, “so a lot of good things can happen” with a SPLOST.

While government officials aren’t allowed to promote a new SPLOST, they are allowed to talk about projects completed with previous SPLOST funds and give information about future projects.

Laughter said continuing the SPLOST could pay for a 12th fire station on Riverbend Road in the southeast part of the county, renovations to the old part of the courthouse, a new animal shelter, and a new administration building next to the parking deck.

“Did you know that Southeast Whitfield High School won the state soccer championship and Dalton High won the state soccer championship, and we do not have one, not one, regulation soccer field in this county?” Laughter said. “Does that not blow your mind? I mean, we’ve got that kind of ability here, so I’d like to see some soccer fields on the 2019 SPLOST.”

Dalton Mayor Dennis Mock said his city would “like to do a good bit of the same we did this time” if the SPLOST continues.

“We’ve got bridges, we’ve got roads, we’ve got infrastructure that needs to be taken care of,” he said. “It’s important to all of us. Sidewalks, continuing the revitalization of downtown, Streetscapes, train whistles came up again. We need more capital for police vehicles, fire vehicles, public works vehicles. We’ve got some old garbage trucks, some very old dump trucks – we’ve got some very old equipment out there that desperately needs to be replaced.”

Mock said a friend told him he’d like to see more trails. “He’s a big biker – he said I want everything connected, I’d like to ride a bike from one end of the county to the other if I could and never touch a road. That may not happen, but we can get closer. We need some amenities like the trail at Hail Mill Lake; that is a SPLOST project, and we have other options to improve some of our other parks. That’s kind of our philosophy at this point. We don’t have anything in concrete now. The suggestion box will help us a lot.”

Mock was referring to a box set up at the meetings, where residents could fill out a form and give their input on the projects they prefer.

Two such residents were Southeast Whitfield High School students Rafael Avila and Ronnie Walker, who spent much time talking to local officials to help meet requirements of a leadership class at their school. Avila said he was interested in finding out about the new park at Haig Mill reservoir because he attends St. Joseph’s Catholic Church, which is next to the park.

Darla Chambliss, director of the Northwest Georgia Regional Library System, was also on hand. Funds from the 2015 SPLOST helped with a new roof and other renovations at the Dalton-Whitfield County Public Library, and she offered a list containing \$2.155 million worth of more work that could be done with a 2019 SPLOST.

Future library projects, she said, could include expansion of the building, a genealogy local history department, an outdoor multi-use space addition (reading patio), exterior structural repairs, and a running/walking trail to connect the Senior Center, library, and Creative Arts Guild, including a bridge over Waugh Street to increase connectivity and shared parking for large events.

Chambliss also said the funds could be stretched further since the library can receive state funds to match any SPLOST dollars it receives.

Dalton resident Kathryn Sellers, meanwhile, pushed for completion of the Crescent City train car and beautification of the two major exits off I-75.

“I’d like to see us finish the work on the Crescent City train car and to landscape the two major exits off I-75 into Dalton,” she said. “They don’t look nice, and we need to give people coming into Dalton a good first look at the city.”

The Crescent City dates to 1949 when it was a luxury passenger car for Southern Railway's Southern Crescent passenger service that connected New York City and New Orleans. Once passenger service came to a halt in the 1970s, the car ended up in Dalton, used as office space, before being donated to the city in 2011. Since it was moved to its current location next to the freight depot at 305 S. Depot St., the car has been renovated by the city of Dalton but still isn't open to the public because it has no floor.

Tunnel Hill Mayor Ken Gowin said his city would use future funds, if approved, for sewage extension, sidewalks, and other "things that we couldn't afford to do" out of general funds.

Cohutta Mayor Ron Shinnick can point to a big project in his town that was paid for with 2015 SPLOST funds – the new fire station on Cohutta Varnell Road.

For small municipalities, Shinnick said, the SPLOST "is just a godsend because there are so many things we can't do with the limited funds that we have in our small budgets. A lot of things you'll see in the pictures around this room, they are really quality of life things for our citizens, and that's what most of this is going for, is things that improve the quality of life."

Greater Dalton Chamber of Commerce President/CEO Rob Bradham pointed out that the SPLOST "effectively gives us a 30 percent discount on every project ... because 30 percent of our SPLOST tax is paid for by people who don't live here, who come off the interstate or whatever the case may be and spend their money here. So if you like 30 percent discounts, you gotta vote for the SPLOST."

"I can say that, but y'all can't," Bradham said to the government leaders in the room, drawing laughter.

Anyone not able to attend the meeting is still encouraged to share ideas for the SPLOST by sending suggestions by email to splost@whitfieldcountyga.com or by calling 706-275-7500.