

# LOCAL LEADERS SEEK PUBLIC INPUT ON POSSIBLE SPLOST PROJECTS

## Another public meeting scheduled at Mack Gaston Community Center on Aug. 16

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So what would you like to see accomplished in Whitfield County if the penny sales tax continues after July 1, 2019?

That was the overriding theme at a Public Input Meeting hosted by local governments on the continuation of the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax at Edwards Park Community Center on Tuesday night.

The current SPLOST is slated to expire June 30, 2019, and local leaders are planning to ask voters next March if they want to extend the penny sales tax to pay for capital projects.

"I am thrilled that all of y'all came out tonight," Whitfield County Commission Chairman Lynn Laughter told the crowd. "I want to personally welcome each and every one of you. Everybody keeps asking me, where's the list, where's the list? We have been talking about ideas for a long time, but hey guys, the list is not finished."

Around the room, local citizens had a chance to see tables covered with photos showing what past SPLOST funds have paid for - things like the courthouse, the correctional center, the county parking deck, many road improvement projects, a new emergency communications system for public safety, several fire trucks, an 11<sup>th</sup> county fire station, and several park improvements, including a new facility being built at Haig Mill Lake.

"We want public input," Laughter said. "We want your ideas of what things you would like to see accomplished in Whitfield County. As you all know, we cannot legally promote SPLOST, we're just providing this as an informational session in conjunction with the cities of Dalton, Cohutta, Varnell, and Tunnel Hill."

Residents also had the chance to talk with many leaders representing the five governmental entities, as well as department heads like Whitfield County Public Works Director DeWayne Hunt, Whitfield County Fire Chief Ed O'Brien, Dalton Public Works Director Benny Dunn, and Animal Shelter Director Diane Franklin, who was a hit with her little dog that tagged along.

"We want you to ask questions, and we want you to give us your input," Laughter said. "Like I said, nothing is written in stone. We have a box over here with a green piece of paper; if you have any ideas for what you would like to see on a SPLOST list, please fill that out and put it in the box."

Several residents did take the time to respond to Laughter's request and among the ideas they suggested were an aquatic center, a walking path from Haig Mill Lake to downtown, soccer fields, and downtown Streetscape projects, among others.

An aquatic center “has the ability to serve people of all ages,” wrote Dennis Climer. “The middle and high schools need it and would use it in a variety of ways. The benefits to the community are numerous.”

The 2015 SPLOST already provided funds to buy the land for a recreation park in the south end of the county. Cherri Robertson even suggested a name for the new facility when it is built: Riverbend Park.

A common theme also seemed to be some sort of system to quieten the train whistles as they pass through downtown Dalton, especially with the advent of the new Burr Park where concerts will be held on a regular basis.

One resident asked Laughter if the vote could be held at a primary or general election instead of a special election, so more people would be deciding the issue.

Laughter promised to check on that proposal, noting that the low voter turnout “even in big elections” was disappointing to her. She confirmed after the meeting, however, that filing the necessary legal paperwork, including approval by state legislators, would prevent holding the election as soon as this November.

The county commissioners – who are ultimately responsible for deciding what will be on the list of SPLOST projects and indeed whether to have an election at all to continue the current SPLOST – will likely meet in September with leaders from the four cities to talk about finalizing the list. Commissioners will likely approve the list of projects in October, then send it to the state legislators for approval to set up the actual election in March 2019, Laughter said.

One attendee at the meeting, who declined to sign the community input form, summed up his feelings by offering: “Continue investing in city and county – SPLOST is needed.”

Laughter called continuation of the SPLOST “a really important issue,” adding “all of you need to encourage your friends and neighbors to get out and vote.”

She also pointed out that another Public Input Meeting will be held Aug. 16 from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the Mack Gaston Community Center.

“Our citizens may have some ideas we have not even thought about,” Laughter said. “It could be fabulous ideas, so please give us your input.”

Anyone not able to attend the next meeting is still encouraged to share their ideas for the SPLOST by sending their suggestions by email to [splost@whitfieldcountyga.com](mailto:splost@whitfieldcountyga.com) or by calling 706-275-7500.