

**MINUTES
WORK SESSION
WARE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
MONDAY, JUNE 9, 2025
3:30 p.m.**

The Ware County Board of Commissioners held a Work Session, Monday, June 9, 2025 at 3:30 p.m. in the Ware County Commission Chambers, 305 Oak Street, Suite 201 Waycross, Georgia 31501 with Chairman Elmer Thrift presiding.

CALL TO ORDER	Chairman Elmer Thrift
COMMISSIONERS PRESENT	Commissioner Barry Cox, Commissioner Leonard Burse, Commissioner Jon Tindall, and Commissioner Timmy Lucas
COMMISSIONERS ABSENT	None
STAFF PRESENT	County Manager James Shubert; Assistant County Attorney Jennifer Herzog; County Clerk Melinda Brooks
PRESS	None
INVOCATION	The Invocation was given by Commissioner Tindall
PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE	The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Chairman Elmer Thrift

GUEST SPEAKER(S):

Chris Kingsbury – Atlas Technical Consultants – Comprehensive Traffic Study

Mr. Kingsbury addressed the Commission to give the last update before giving the formal recommendation. According to the responses received to the online survey, people are wanting biking/walking/running lanes added. Citizens are also wanting a bypass to help with truck traffic, roundabouts in the city, and potholes repaired. He added that roundabouts can take from six months to a year for people to get used to using them; however, they minimize the severity of accidents, especially T-bone crashes. The bottleneck ranking analysis showed several places on Hwy 84, US 1, and Hwy 82 where traffic gets congested. It was noted that the trains are involved in the longer bottlenecks and that the average daily duration of bottlenecks can be from several periods in a day, not all at one time.

Mr. Kingsbury noted that all alternatives will have to be considered as there are several sidewalks that do not connect. There are 9 posted bridges, and there is a need for pedestrians to have a way to cross railroad tracks. He also noted there are two major East/West, North/South routes. Six percent of all trips in the bypass study area travel eastbound on US 84 to US 82. Five percent of all trips travel north on US 23 to US 23. A lot of trucks would a bypass route, so there should be no problem selling that idea to GDOT. His next step is a phasing and cost benefit analysis, and he noted portions of the bypass could be separated. He will send a draft to GDOT, including a bypass feasibility, so the final plan can be adopted.

Jason Rubenbauer – Waycross-Ware County Development Authority

Mr. Rubenbauer gave an update to the Commission on the progress of the WWDA. Ware is lagging behind in workforce participation at 50%, behind Georgia in general and behind Coffee County. Coffee is ahead in wages due to the number of industries located there. Ware has a high incidence of no high school diploma among eligible workers. He gave a list of recent job additions: GATX had a \$17.6 million expansion, adding 38 new jobs; Jax Box had a \$1.2 million investment and added 8 new jobs; Rural King came in and added 90 jobs; Ace Hardware came in and added 30-40 new jobs. Some other new companies that have built stores here, which added to the revenue base and tax collections as well as added jobs. Those include: Chipotle, Wawa, Fairfield Inn and Dollar General.

In order to increase the economic development, Mr. Rubenbauer said we need to engage those workers who are capable and able, increase training, improve housing, add to the infrastructure by adding utilities and clearing land. He noted that the industrial park has a lack of buildings. The minimum is 50,000 square feet, but most companies are looking at 100,000-150,000 square feet in a spec building. They are also looking for other incentives.

He noted that to develop the workforce, the local high school teachers are teaming up with the local industry and learning what new skills they could be teaching students and adding them to their curriculum. Commissioner Burse said he would like to commend the Development Authority for its efforts and asked about the County and City helping out where possible. Mr. Rubenbauer noted that Coffee County is currently constructing a spec building for \$2.4 million. This is their third one, and it should sell pretty quickly. He noted it would take 30 years at his current budget to pay off a building at that price. He did say the wetlands study is good for five more years. They have a \$25,000 credit per acre.

Chairman Thrift asked if he had any prospects on the Simmons building. Mr. Rubenbauer said he gets six to eight prospects per month, but the configuration of the building is a hinderance. The expense to reconfigure it would be pretty high. Most of the companies looking at the building are new start-up companies, so they don't have the funds for that. The Commission thanked Mr. Rubenbauer for his presentation.

AGENDA ITEMS:

A. MOU: Ware County and OKRLS

The library has a \$1,010,000.00 grant that requires invoices to be paid upfront before being reimbursed by the grant. Once the library receives money from the State, the money will come to the County. The MOU is to assure that the County is reimbursed for any invoices paid. Commissioner Burse asked about the ten percent (10%) local match. Assistant County Attorney Herzog noted that paragraph five of the MOU shows the County committed to a ten percent match through the previous purchases made by the County and that all parties acknowledge that has been accomplished. County Manager pointed out that the MOU states that Ware County will serve as a "pass through" by paying initial invoices and then being reimbursed.

Added to Regular Meeting Agenda

B. Approve Contract with Craft Development for Library Renovation

County Manager Shubert explained that this is a typical AIA contract for completion of work. The architect, Chip Sasser, and the County Manager will oversee the project with the County Manager making weekly inspections. Due to the contract coming under budget, the extra funds can be used on items like furniture and landscaping. The staff is looking at replacing the cloth furniture with vinyl as a way to keep it clean. County Manager Shubert noted that there should be enough funds to have the parking lot sealed and re-stripped. This would have to be bid out. The last time this was priced, it was around \$50,000.

Added to Regular Meeting Agenda

C. Approve Hofstadter Contract with Thrift Brothers for Dirt Street Paving

Chairman Thrift handed this item over to Vice-Chairman Cox to read due to conflict of interest. Assistant County Attorney pointed out on page 01000-36, there is a portion that reads, "Superior Court of Toombs County". County Clerk Brooks spoke up, saying the Hofstadter contact had just responded to her via email stating that was an oversight and should read Ware County instead of Toombs.

County Manager Shubert noted that the scope of work does not include a 60-foot Right of Way. Some of it is designed on a 30-or 40-foot ROW. Commissioner Burse asked how this would affect the bid. County Manager Shubert stated it would not. He explained that there is only 20 feet of paving and 1 foot of shoulder, which would not affect the cost of the project. The difference is on the edge, so the only increase in cost would be through ROW acquisition or by digging deeper ditches. None of the design is for 60 feet ROW.

Commissioner Burse asked about the design all the way to Wadley Road. He stated he did not like the idea of ending at the cattle gap with a cul-de-sac. County Manager Shubert stated there is only an easement from the cattle gap to Wadley Road. Commissioner Burse asked the attorney if the County could pave an easement.

Assistant County Attorney Herzog responded that an easement can be paved, but it would be better to at least have a fee simple title which states that you own the property. A fee simple title comes from the property owner deeding the land or through purchase. A prescriptive right easement just means that all are in agreement. However, someone could challenge it in later years. Some counties establish a "best practice" and may only require a fee simple title. She said to answer Commissioner Burse's question, that legally the County can pave either. The County Manager was directed to check during the break between the work session and regular meeting to see if an easement exists.

Added to Regular Meeting Agenda

D. MOU with City of Waycross for Public Safety Training Center

County Manager Shubert explained to the Commission that the attorney recommends removing paragraph 7 regarding indemnification. He explained this is the same MOU that was signed with the City of Waycross in 2020.

Added to Regular Meeting Agenda

E. Board Appointment: Department of Family and Children Services

This item is to reappoint Mrs. Linda Booker to the Ware DFCS Board. Her term expires on June 30, 2025. The new term would run from July 1, 2025 through June 30, 2030.

Added to Regular Meeting Agenda

F. Resolution 2025-11: FLOST Referendum

County Manager Shubert asked Tax Commissioner Roger Collins to present this item. Mr. Collins explained this is a one percent (1%) sales tax that will go directly to reduce property tax (off the bottom) to reduce the millage rate. He gave each Commissioner a printout of their property tax bills and explained what their bill would have been if a FLOST was currently in place. For example: Chairman Thrift's current bill for his Griffin Road address (before homestead exemption) was approximately \$1,993.00. If the FLOST had been in place, his final bill would have been around \$1,310.00, which was an additional \$310 reduction of his tax bill.

Tax Commissioner Collins explained that tax bill collections go to General Funds, so FLOST money would go to GF. \$9 million was returned to Waycross and Ware County in 2024. Last year the millage rate was set at 11.736. With FLOST, it could be rolled back 4.757, which would the millage rate at 6.979. The City's millage rate was set at 8.748 in 2024. With FLOST it would roll back 8.125 mills, which would set it at .623. He explained that this would help every person on every tax bill; personal property, commercial property, industrial property, rental property, etc.

Commissioner Burse asked if this November would be the best time to put this on a ballot. Tax Commissioner Collins said yes because it would allow the tax to begin on January 1, 2026. He explained that the FLOST does not have an amount limit. It will run a full five years. Chairman Thrift asked if the FLOST is for all taxes and if it is ready to go. Commissioner Collins said the money collected through FLOST comes in to reduce property taxes, so it cannot be used for special projects and has to be deposited into General Funds. The FLOST referendum has the green light.

While he was in front of the Commission, Tax Commissioner Collins brought up HB 223, the TREES Act. Ware County gets a lot of money through timber tax. Where the rate had been \$25-\$35 per ton, it has dropped to \$1-\$5 per ton for chip and saw trees. This is because the market has been flooded with weather damaged trees. There is a \$7.3 million grant coming that waives timber taxes and allows citizens to apply for a refund. The citizens must properly complete the forms and submit. The grant funds will be disbursed between March and December 2026. The Tax Commissioner will need to be appointed as the point of contact.

G. Intergovernmental Agreement with City of Waycross for FLOST Referendum

This agreement is divided into eight sections as follows: Fund Allocation for FLOST Capital Outlay Projects; Excess Fund Allocation for Funds Exceeding \$55 million; Procedure for Distributing Proceeds to Qualified Government Entities; Schedule and Priority of Funding; Fund Accounting, Record Keeping, and Audit; Agreement; Severability and Completeness; and Ballot Language.

This agreement has the estimated distribution rate at the percent based on the 2024 property tax levy of the government entities which is Ware County at 58% and City of Waycross at 42%. Commissioner Lucas brought up that SPLOST had Ware County at 60% and the City of Waycross at 40%. He recalled sitting in negotiations and agreeing to give the City the additional two percent (2%). He wants to be sure that the FLOST is

distributed based on the correct numbers. After much discussion, the Commission asked Tax Commissioner Collins to check on the percentages and report back to them.

H. Purchase Request: ADG Software License Upgrade

This item is to purchase ADG Electronic Requisition software in the amount of \$26,000, and Building Permit/Code Enforcement/Business License software in the amount of \$54,750. Accounting Supervisor Beverly York explained to the Commission that the total for all software would be \$80,750m which includes the software license, staff training, and one year of software support. The requisition software is to improve efficiency by cutting out some steps. Also, department heads will be able to see the current balance of their budget. The annual recurring fee will be \$4,000.

Dave Hanson from Code Enforcement explained to the Commission that the Planning and Codes version of the software upgrade automatically generate notices for business license renewals or updates so that no one is operating with an expired license. Currently this a manual process to figure out which licenses or permits need to be renewed. ADG will streamline and automate the process. The annual recurring fee will be \$7,000. Currently Planning and Codes is using iWorQ System, which is not as user friendly as ADG. The annual fee for iWorQ is \$12,362.00. This item can be purchased with 2022 SPLOST funds.

Added to Regular Meeting Agenda

I. IT Purchase Request: PC Units

This purchase request for 20 PC units is to replace computers that are at the end of their lifespan. These units are running Windows 10, which Microsoft will not support after October 2025, and they could not be updated with the recently purchased updated Microsoft software. The cost per computer is \$1,091.64 for a total of \$21,832.80. This purchase is covered by 2022 SPLOST funds.

Added to Regular Meeting Agenda

J. Approve Subscription Renewal: CodeRED Public Alerting System

EMA Director Jonathan Daniell explained to the Commission that this is an annual subscription. It is a budgeted item and half of the cost is paid by the City of Waycross. The CodeRED system is a way to share weather and emergency alerts with the public. The total annual cost of the subscription is \$18,190.43.

Added to Regular Meeting Agenda

K. Approve CrowderGulf Contract for Debris Removal

County Manager James Shubert told the Commission that this contract is for the bid that was awarded last month. The contract is with CrowderGulf for debris removal and would only be activated during a Declared Natural Disaster. The contract period is for one year with the option to renew for four additional one-year periods. This contract is does not cost the County unless it is activated.

Added to Regular Meeting Agenda

L. Approve Thompson Consulting Contract for Debris Monitoring

County Manager James Shubert told the Commission this item is the same as the previous. The bid award was done last month. This item is to approve the contract which

is for one year, with the option to renew for two one-year periods. This company monitors CrowderGulf during debris collection to ensure the trucks are full, weight tickets are correct, etc. The contract will not cost anything unless activated during a natural disaster.

Added to Regular Meeting Agenda

M. Resolution 2025-12: Private Property Rights – United Nations

This item is in response to the request of a few citizens regarding the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge being nominated as a World Heritage Site. The resolution basically states that the Board of Commissioner is the sole governing authority of Ware County and affirms that it will not adopt or enforce any rules or regulations of the United Nations which infringe upon the private property rights of Ware County citizens.

Added to Regular Meeting Agenda

MANAGER COMMENTS:

County Manager Shubert asked the Commission for direction on the property at 378 Ossie Davis Parkway. It was previously rented to a visiting nurse company that used it for file storage, but that lease was terminated over a year ago. It is currently sitting vacant. The Commission agreed to surplus the building, so the item is to be added to the regular meeting agenda.

COMMISSION COMMENTS:

Tax Commissioner Collins said the actual percentages for billing out were 75% for the County and 25A% for the City. The sales tax was 70% for the County and 30% for the City, including the digest and LOST until 2033.

ADJOURN:


Commissioner Lucas made a motion to adjourn the Work Session, with Commissioner Tindall seconding the motion, which passed unanimously. The Work Session adjourned at 5:53 p. m.

Date proposed to be approved: July 14, 2025


Elmer Thrift, Chairman

ATTEST:


Melinda L. Brooks, County Clerk


Date

