

# Half-Cent Sales Surtax Citizens Advisory Committee

## Meeting Minutes

Monday, September 16, 2024

### Opening

The regular meeting of the Half-Cent Sales Surtax Citizen Advisory Committee was called to order at 4:03p.m. on Monday, September 16, 2024, St. Johns County School District, The Fullerwood Training Center, 10 Hildreth Drive, St. Augustine, FL by Mr. Lewis, Chairman.

### Attendance

CAC Members--Present: Ed Albanesi, Damian Cook, Alice Flores, Richa Jeetah, Amy Lasswell, John Lasswell, Jason Lewis, Kim McManus, and Jen Stevenson. Alternates: Heather Barnes and Virginia Morgan. Absent: Kate Dowdie, Jack Hardman, Elana Laguardia, Barbara Little, Terence Mahoney, Norvie Veracruz, Javelyn Arvay, Derek Barrs, and Dr. William McCormick.

School District staff--Present: Nicole Cubbedge, Mike Degutis, Brennan Asplen, Paul Rose, Cathy Weber, Logan Lowery, Kevin Sweeney, and Judith Harvey.

Public Attendees—Charlie Hunt.

### Approval of Minutes

Minutes from the June 17, 2024, regular meeting were then approved with a motion by Ed Albanesi and seconded by Richa Jeetah. A vote was taken, and the motion was approved.

### Financial Reporting

Mr. Degutis presented the financial report. The total receipts for the 23-24 year was \$38.1 million. Mr. Degutis stated they would keep projections conservative at 3%. He explained that the increase over projections was \$14.3 million. He reviewed the interest earned as well. He stated that it was better to under-project than to have a shortfall. He noted that the monthly trends went up and he also explained the quarterly receipts. He stated that the only anomaly was the year of Covid. He said December typically peaks because of the Nights of Lights in St. Augustine. He also stated that March has lots of festivals so that month peaks as well. He reviewed the monthly/quarterly reports. Next, he reviewed the Summary of Funds.

## **Project Reporting & 2024-2025 Half-Cent Sales Surtax Budget**

Mrs. Cubbedge presented the project reporting as well as the 2024-2025 Half-Cent Sales Surtax budget. She informed the committee that the South Woods Elementary School (SWES) project went out to bid and the bid will be opened this Wednesday, September 18<sup>th</sup>. After that point, construction will begin. She stated that the School Board approved the budget last week. She stated that all the promises made were kept and the planning, funding and/or completion were in process. She then reviewed the budget beginning with an explanation of the debt service, and she then stated that extra funds were needed for SWES due to construction costs going up. She also explained a retrofit of LED lights which was an upgrade. She also stated that everyone is asking where the new elementary school in the southern part of the county will be. She stated that they are very close to announcing this location, possibly within the next month. The lockers at Bartram Trail High School (BTHS) and Pedro Menendez High School (PMHS) were being reviewed with an architect. She stated the district borrowed for the first schools but now it is on a pay as you go basis. She stated that the district will continue to maintain the facilities with roofs, the field at Ponte Vedra High School (PVHS), site improvements at Webster Elementary School. The road through Webster ES needed to be vacated so they could fence in the school to allow students to move freely. She reviewed the new technology category with student computers on the list. Last year there was the teacher refresh. Next, she reviewed the safety category which includes items such as small maintenance projects, Centegix, districtwide school security improvements, Zonar, security cameras and access controls as well as evacuation chairs. These chairs will be used to evacuate students in wheelchairs. They are a motorized chair to come downstairs and will be in schools with multiple floors.

## **Referendum Presentation**

Mrs. Cubbedge explained that she received clarification, and the CAC can state their opinion on the referendum, i.e. they are not limited as members of the committee.

Dr. Asplen then presented the referendum with the presentation of Two Votes – One Decision. He stated that this presentation has been given to faculty, employees, Rotary and numerous other civic and community groups. Dr. Asplen reviewed the growth in SJCS D as well as the two funding silos for the district with the capital outlay budget and the operating budget. He also stated that funds cannot be transferred between the two funding sources. He explained that this is the reason for the two separate ballot items. He reviewed the promises made and kept with safety, growth, maintenance, and technology with the half-cent sales surtax. He stated that the sales tax has helped tremendously. He stated that if the half-cent sales surtax is not renewed then it would mean a \$37 million annual revenue loss to the district. Mr. Cook suggested putting #2 on the list as the #1 priority so emphasize that priority. Dr. Asplen said they would look at that change.

Next, Dr. Asplen reviewed the operating budget which is the second referendum item. He stated that SJCS D is facing operational challenges and that SJCS D is the largest employer in SJC. Mr. Lewis asked about adding in comparisons of salaries but Mr. Degutis and Dr. Asplen both stated that it would depend on years of service. Mr. Cook asked if this was for salary and not a bonus

and Dr. Asplen stated that it would be a supplement but would only be committed for four (4) years. He explained millage by stating that one mill equals \$1 per \$1,000 assessed value, less homestead. He stated that this millage was needed to recruit and retain teachers and staff. He said it would generate about \$60 million and 85% would go to salaries and benefits. Ms. Morgan asked about the homestead and Mr. Degutis stated that it does include the homestead. Mr. Hunt asked for clarification on whether it was residential only. Dr. Asplen explained that it is residential and commercial. Mr. Degutis further explained that the vast majority is primarily homeowners, but commercial property would be calculated the same way. Mr. Hunt stated that if you own rental properties or commercial properties then owners of those properties would see their costs go up which would then trickle down to the customer/renter. Mr. Lewis referred Mr. Hunt to the public comment section for further comment.

Next Dr. Asplen reviewed the summary slide which showed that the half-cent sales surtax would be for ten (10) years and the one mill would be for four (4) years. Mr. Lewis stated that there are fewer college graduates going into education. Dr. Asplen said that SJCS D is also not able to keep up with inflation and the state dictates the levy for the millage. He stated that the state lowers it, and housing prices rise so there needs to be a balance. He also stated that SJC cannot levy without a vote. So SJCS D has to take the issue to the ballot. He said it will help fix the gap between what is levied and inflation. Ms. Stevenson asked if the website is ready, and Dr. Asplen answered in the affirmative. He stated that there is also an area to sign up if you'd like the staff to come speak to your group. Mr. Cook asked if the ballot language was ready, and Mrs. Cubbedge stated in the affirmative. She showed the website to the committee and noted the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). Mr. Lewis asked how the committee can help, and Mrs. Cubbedge stated that she would send a list of public meetings to the CAC so they can attend.

### **Public Comment**

Mr. Hunt asked how the one mill would affect people in SJC, and he noted that it would be more than a \$1/day as it trickles down to citizens. He said it would make the cost of living higher and he was concerned that only the teachers would get an increase. He stated that bus drivers and maintenance workers need to be in this increase. He stated that most meetings were private and that there needed to be more public meetings. He was concerned with the emergency meeting held by SJC to pass this referendum to be on the ballot.

Ms. Lasswell stated that the trickle down would be on both sides and if there is no money, then teachers and families will move out. Ms. Flores stated that the salaries were above poverty line, but many were still not able to afford the basics. Mr. Lasswell stated that in the rent versus own discussion, that renters will not pay \$1/day but all will be impacted if it does not pass. Mrs. Cubbedge noted that the monies will be for teachers and all support staff.

**Next Meeting Date/Time**

The next meeting will be held on Monday, December 16, 2024, at 4:00pm, St. Johns County School District, The Fullerwood Training Center, 10 Hildreth Drive, St. Augustine, Florida.

**Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned at 5:16pm with a motion by Mr. Cook and seconded by Ms. Lasswell.

Minutes submitted by Judith Harvey.