

October 2018

## Letter from the Walker County Sole Commissioner

Fellow Walker County Citizens,

I want to take a moment to update you on the progress we've made over the past year, as we steer Walker County down the road to financial recovery and prosperity.

One of this administration's top priorities was to assemble a leadership team ready to meet the challenges and hurdles facing Walker County. We needed individuals of integrity, ethics and morals with the skills and experience to chart a new course. We are blessed to now have this leadership team in place. Each member has demonstrated these core values, and all have performed at a high level, resulting in immediate and sustainable long term results.

You may recall last year at this time, I came to you with troubling news. The county was in financial crisis and faced pending legal action stemming from efforts by my predecessor to prop up Hutcheson Medical Center. Those actions placed every taxpayer in harm's way and required immediate and effective resolution.

We addressed the financial crisis head on by tightening our belt and cutting \$2.4 million in expenses from our General Fund. Our entire county government team committed to operate leaner, ensuring we spend every dollar wisely. In addition, we improved efficiencies in every department and approved a balanced budget, something that had not been done in Walker County for many years.

We lived within our means and didn't take on any new debt with bonds or leases in 2018. Since my last letter to you, we also reached a settlement with Erlanger Health System on the Federal Court summary judgement against the citizens of Walker County. We negotiated interest-free payments over the course of three years on the Erlanger-Hutcheson Medical Center debt, saving taxpayers nearly \$580,000. Since the first of this year, we have paid Erlanger \$2.6 million of the \$8.7 million owed. The "Public Health Facilities and Services District" fee will end after next year's tax cycle in 2019, and this debt will be paid in full. A commitment was made to you to remove the fee after three years and that commitment will be honored.

I am pleased to report these efforts, along with the sacrifices we have all shared, have reduced our inherited debt of \$70 million to \$52 million, as of August 31, 2018! We are getting our financial house in order and Walker County is earning its credibility back.

I know paying off debt may not be the most glamorous topic of conversation, so I also want to share with you some other positive developments from this team, that is currently happening in our great county.

**Improving Our Roads:** Voters approved a Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (TSPLOST) in November 2017, that took effect on April 1, 2018. Keeping with our mission to not take on any new debt, we are only giving projects a green light when money is available in the TSPLOST fund. Now, with several months of growth in that fund, we are able to move forward. We approved our first paving project, Nickajack Road and Nickajack Lane in Flintstone, that will be completed by November 2018, and we will accelerate roadway improvements in 2019. Keep an eye out for TSPLOST signage announcing forthcoming projects.

We also hired an engineering firm to study all of our roads and assign them a grade, based on Georgia Department of Transportation specifications. The study covers both surface quality and safety of our roads and bridges. The process will provide valuable data to determine where to invest our limited TSPLOST dollars. In

addition, we will use this data to apply for state and federal grants to make additional road and bridge improvements over the next several years.

**Attracting More Outside Money:** Over the summer, we launched *Walker Rocks*, in partnership with the Walker County Chamber of Commerce. This fresh new focus for tourism and civic pride highlights the scenic and stunning destinations available in our community for rock climbing, caving, kayaking, hiking, biking, horseback riding and other outdoor adventures.

The tourism industry supports 640 jobs in Walker County and generates over \$63 million in direct tourist spending, according to the Georgia Department of Economic Development's Division of Tourism. By comparison, a U.S. Travel Association report, prepared for the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development, shows visitors spend \$1.1 billion just across the state line in Hamilton County, where some 9,000 people work in tourism-related positions.

We continue to grow organically as a destination for outdoor adventures seekers. By embracing the assets associated with the *Walker Rocks* brand, we can draw more visitors to our community and expand our retail tax base. Those who venture here to go rock climbing, hike to waterfalls or trek through our caves will spend money here and increase demand for new businesses. Furthermore, these assets are available to all of us, not just tourists. The next time you're looking for something to do in Walker County, visit **walkerrocks.com** for some ideas.

**Investing in Public Safety:** Walker County Emergency Services responded to 3,492 calls in 2016, 4,742 calls in 2017 and are projected to respond to over 6,000 calls in 2018. Under the new leadership team at WCES, we realigned services to meet these demands. By relocating existing staff and equipment, we increased the number of career fire stations from three to six, improving response times and saving lives and property.

Our Sheriff's Office has seen growth in its call volume too. There are some real concerns about the age of their fleet and whether some of their older vehicles might break down en route to an emergency. So, we're investing an additional \$274,000 in the Sheriff's Office this year to upgrade equipment, including the replacement of nine patrol vehicles.

**Stay informed:** This is just a snapshot of what your county government team has accomplished this year. I invite you to play a more active role in your government. Commissioner Meetings are open to the public and held on the second and fourth Thursday of the month. If you cannot attend, join our Youtube Channel to watch the meetings or Facebook page for news updates by searching for "Walker County Commissioner." In addition, **walkercountyga.gov** now provides citizens with mobile access, more transparency with current resolutions and ordinances, monthly department statistics, a meeting calendar and a photo gallery of adoptable animals at the shelter, among other resources.

It has been a great honor to lead our team and serve as your Sole Commissioner over the last 22 months. We will continue to work to eliminate the debt burden and improve county services.

Sincerely your County Commissioner,

*Shannon K. Whitfield*