

Treasurer: County's money is tight, tough decisions lay ahead

By Tommy Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER — "Our money is tight. People wonder why can't you do this and why can't you do that, well, this is why," Treasurer Alice Carol Smith told the County Commission at the April 2nd meeting.

Smith was pointing out in detail the county's worsening financial condition and said that unless the rapidly dwindling general fund gets some relief — and soon — it will be a miracle if the county makes it to the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30th without layoffs or deep cuts in other areas.

"This is the main fund from which the county operates," she said. "The Sheriff's Department, the Jail, Choctaw County Commissioner's Court, Revenue Commissioner's Office, and others are funded from."

Smith said that through February of this year, approximately \$5.1 million in ad valorem (property) taxes had been collected.

"But, just because \$5 million comes in doesn't mean we get it all," she said. For example, of that amount, the state gets 20 percent, roads and bridges

27 percent, schools 48 percent, fire departments three percent, and cities get a little over one percent.

When it comes to tax revenue from the sale of vehicle tags, the state likewise gets the lion's share — 53 percent — while the county gets 20 percent, cities three percent, schools 19 percent, the ambulance service five percent, with other agencies sharing the remaining funds.

"In other words, we keep about \$418,000 from tags and about \$1.2 million from the ad valorem tax," she said.

The General Fund budget is about \$3.5 million.

"The Sheriff's Department and Jail alone take about \$1 million of that," she said.

The Commission uses \$483,000; electricity for the Courthouse runs to about \$52,000 a year; the Probate Judge's office has a budget of approximately \$291,000. Maintenance and Housekeeping costs about \$125,000, and, she said, the 2006 elections "cost us dearly."

Revenues from the county's oil production tax are "iffy" at best, she said, and probably won't exceed \$500,000 this year.

Smith said that the only way she was able to balance the FY 2007 budget was to carry over \$672,000 in "unreserved funds" left over from the previous year to the current year.

"I don't have that for the upcoming fiscal year, so you all can just get ready," she said.

Salaries and associated fringe benefits alone account for more than 55 percent of the drain on the General Fund, she said.

"I'm glad for this to be told," Commissioner Dandy Brown said. "A lot of citizens call on us to do things and they don't understand why we can't do it. People are hollering about potholes but I don't have anything to patch potholes with."

Commissioner Henry Lovette said that all of the information is public record. "People can come and check on it if they think we aren't doing our jobs," he said.

And on top of all of the "known" expenses are the "unknowns", Probate Judge D'Wayne May said — those unexpected, unforeseen emergencies that take big chunks out of the budget.

"That's why it is so important for us to stay in

touch with the budget throughout the year on a continual basis," he said. "We have to look at every penny, every dime that is spent."

And, at some point, he said, the board is going to have to ask the people for a tax increase.

In budget-related matters Monday, the board heard from several department heads regarding what can be done to reduce or eliminate unnecessary overtime.

"Now that we have our two new deputies out of the Academy, I'm hoping that we can cut back some of our overtime," Sheriff James Lovette said. "But, you never know when an incident is going to come up when have to work somebody overtime."

May agreed that the safety of the citizens is of utmost importance, and said that he felt sure Lovette would use good judgment in working his men overtime.

May suggested that overtime at the Jail might be reduced by allowing part-time deputy Harrell Lafferty to work one eight-hour shift per week that is currently not covered — a shift that is now being covered by another deputy on overtime pay.

"That appears to be a constant problem on Sun-

days," May said.

Commissioner Dixon said the sheriff's duties are much like those of his own department.

"Things happen that are beyond your control," he said. "In my department, I can't help it when a storm comes through and blows down trees. I have to send somebody."

And, Commissioner Lovette added, "people don't break the law on a regular shift."

"It eats up budget, we all know that, but we have to pay overtime when necessary," he said.

Sheriff Lovette asked for permission to give a cook at the jail a 50-cents per hour raise, with funds to be paid from the jail's work release program or pistol permit fund at no additional cost to the county's general fund.

The issue of the raise was tabled until next week's meeting.

"We are not 'jumping on' our department heads," he said. "We understand there are times when this is necessary, but we would like to ask you to do your best to not use overtime unless it is absolutely necessary."

Commissioners Brown and Ruffin suggested looking at overtime issues again in three months to see if further adjustments

need to be made.

"We don't have overtime," Treasurer Smith said when asked about her department.

May said his department had two hours of overtime recently when a matter arose that required an immediate answer to a question that had to be researched.

Revenue Commissioner David Sparrow was not present because of illness and will discuss his department's overtime with the board on April 9.

Jimmy Elliott, representing the Maintenance Department, said that department head Jeff Keeton wasn't there Monday and that since he (Elliott) did not do the time sheets, he could not speak to the issue of overtime.

Commissioner Brown said his overtime came over the Christmas holidays when he had a family blocked in by fallen trees and had to clear the roads.

Commissioner Dixon said he sometimes has overtime because of storms that blow trees down in the roads, and wrecks where loads of sand are requested to soak up spilled oil or fuel from the road.

May urged department heads to give employees "comp time" off

SoundOff

From page 7-A

and other bad weather. This doesn't even cover the hours spent cleaning and doing repairs around the fire hall. They also hold several fund raisers to buy equipment they need and take time to raise money for Relay for Life and other fire departments around the country. People need to stop complaining and support their fire departments!

According to the Butler Chief of Police, people are not supposed to drive off-road vehicles

of ANY kind on the road. Doesn't this include the little "farm" vehicles, too? Just because you have a business and think that the law doesn't apply to you, IT DOES.

To the *Sun* staff, thank you for providing the best, most detailed paper in the county. Dee Ann, your article was beautiful! Thank you folks for coming home and opening the *Sun*. Concerning the school issue, why would the school board consider firing custodians when they could save money by cutting out some of those "made up"

jobs? The Board members make a big salary and they already have other jobs. Why not just let them work on a voluntary basis and save those other folks' jobs? Some of the board members won't even call you back when you try to get in touch with them.

I think the same thing about teenagers not being in the paper just because their parents own a business or have money. That doesn't mean they can drink and get caught and that the law can call a parent to pick them up so that their name doesn't get listed in the jail log.

Dee Ann

From page 7-A

those who give their lives for the very right to speak those opinions in the first place, they spit in the face of every man and woman who has ever given the ultimate sacrifice for America.

The truth is, our men and women in uniform are the most well-trained, intelligent, and skilled military on the face of the earth, and we should treat them as such.

Regardless of what is thought of the reasons for our current conflict, regardless of our political differences in policy,

and regardless of what arguments we have here at home, there is nothing more shameful, nothing more cowardly, nothing more utterly anti-American than for those of us sitting comfortably in our safe, warm homes to put down those who fight to give us the right to do so.

That, my SoundOff friend, means that you are much more deserving of a little saliva in your face than the brave military who are fighting for YOU.

So, the next time you want to speak against the men and women who wear our uniform, remember that the spit that you sling in their faces may come back to haunt you when the wind changes.

Tommy

From page 7-A

I understand that lives are being lost. But I also understand that America didn't cause this mess. America, my friends, is NOT the problem.

The problem is, we live in an imperfect, sin-infested world, and as a result of that, wars are sometimes necessary to reign in the forces of evil, terror and oppression that seek to destroy and dominate.

Wars are ugly. People get hurt and killed ... on all sides. But wars are also a very real fact of life if we intend to continue to enjoy the freedoms that we have been blessed with. Freedom is not free. It comes with a high price, and those asinine resolutions passed by the House of Representatives and Senate are politically-motivated piles of horse hockey that send a pitifully muddled message to our troops in the Middle East and make a mockery of what they are trying to do there.

The reason, the only reason, that America has not been attacked again since 9/11 is that we have a president who had the intestinal fortitude to take the war on terror to the doorsteps of these murdering, thugs.

Win the war on terror with diplomacy? No, we can't. Why? Because it is impossible to sit down and civilly and intelligently work out differences with people who have been lied to and brainwashed from birth to believe that it is OK to strap dynamite on a child's body and send him into a crowd of innocent people to detonate those explosives while hiding behind the radical, evil side of a "reli-

gion" that teaches hate, murder, oppression and an "eye for an eye" mentality.

No, I am certainly not naïve enough to believe that we are going to "win" the war on terror. That won't happen until the second coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. But we cannot, we must not, we dare not, sit back and do **NOTHING** and allow these hoodlums to re-group and become even stronger than they were before.

The best we can hope for is to take as many out of commission as possible and hope and pray that we keep them in enough disarray so that a second, even worse "9/11" doesn't happen.

President Bush didn't ask for this nightmare to be flung on the United States on that beautiful Indian Summer morning in September of 2001, but it happened.

And I believe that President Bush has done a heroic job of holding this country together in the face of what could easily have torn our nation apart.

Instead of crashing, instead of giving in and giving up, we have rebounded. Just look at the economy today!

You cannot win a war if you tell the enemy when you're going to quit, Cheney said.

I wholeheartedly agree.

And on that note I will end my column for this week. Thank you for reading. You may not agree with me, or with President Bush or Vice President Cheney, but that's your right ... it's your right because, at some point in time, a **SOLDIER** wearing the uniform of the United States Military fought and died to give you that right.

Think about it.

Council

From page 1-A

Dec. 31, 2007, the Pennington Town Council voted unanimously on Nov. 26, 2006 to adopt the Act effective at the first of the new year.

At a meeting on Feb. 26th, irate business owners packed the Council's meeting room to demand answers to why their license fees have, in some cases, soared to more than 1000% of what they were last year.

"I know it's legal," Norwood said Thursday, "but the Council said you all would look at it and see if you could go with a different rate. What you adopted was a sample sent here for you to go by, it wasn't written in stone." Norwood referred to a "model" ordinance which was made available for a town's reference by the Alabama League of Municipalities.

An attorney for the League confirmed to the *Sun* after that meeting that, under the Act, local towns still retain the authority to set the actual dollar amounts at whatever levels they choose.

attorney, agreed that the level could be adjusted as the town sees fit.

"This is such an increase, it's more than I can bear," Norwood said. "The Town of Butler is not adopting this schedule. They are not punishing their businesses."

Butler's council said last week that while it will have to adopt the new state law just like all other towns will have to do, it does not intend to make any radical changes in the amounts charged for business licenses.

"That's what we will be looking into," Council Member Al Hampton said. "We were waiting until we got a new attorney."

Fendley that he did not intend to give anyone the impression that the League or the State of Alabama set the rates.

"It's like a tax being put on us," Norwood said. "We'd just like to have something we can live with."

"We are looking at it and will do some cleaning up on it for sure," Fendley promised.

The Thursday meeting was rescheduled from Monday because there was not a quorum of council members present.

"I love working in the lab. At the end of the day, I know I've made a difference."

Betty Hambricht
Laboratory

QUALITY HEALTHCARE
RIGHT HERE AT HOME



Making sure our Bryan Whitfield Memorial Hospital patients get the tests they need is of major concern to Betty Hambricht, a phlebotomist in the lab.

"The lab plays a major role in the treatment of our patients and we are very conscious of that fact."

For the past four years, Betty's friendly smile and kind demeanor have helped to make BWWMH patients more comfortable when she's drawing blood for tests. Betty takes pride in that fact that the lab has a very patient oriented atmosphere where the patients are the top priority. Apparently, her coworkers take pride in her, too, as they have named her the April 2007 Employee of the Month.



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