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Jail expansion listed in county SPLOST plans

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CLAYTON — Next year, Rabun County residents will vote on a new cycle of the Special Purpose Local Option Sales projects. The county has a variety of plans for how to use the funds, including jail expansion, water infrastructure and fire station improvements.

A SPLOST is an optional one percent county sales tax used to fund capital outlay projects proposed by the county government and participating qualified municipal governments.

Among the county's plans for future SPLOST funds is a pod to be added to the Rabun County Detention Center.

County Administrator Darrin Giles said the jail is currently constantly filled to near capacity, a statement also made by Jail Administrator Chris Bartolomey during the Rabun County Sheriff Office's budget workshop with the Board of Commissioners in April.

"It's a double-edged sword," Giles said. "You obviously want your sheriff to make arrests and keep the county safe, but the flip side is that there needs to be enough space. We're just running at capacity right now."

To add more inmate capacity, Giles said the county plans on installing a "pod" alongside the detention center that would be able to house approximately 100 additional inmates. When the RCDC was constructed, it was built to allow additional units to be added later, Giles said.

The cost of installing the pod would likely be around \$8 million, Giles said.

Another high-priority project involving law enforcement is moving the Rabun County Sheriff's Office to a new location.

"The basement (of the Rabun County Courthouse) is cramped and old and getting rundown," the county administrator said. "They need something better."

Giles said the cost of a new sheriff's office would be approximately \$2 million.

As in the previous SPLOST cycle, Rabun County also hopes to use funds to renovate multiple Rabun County fire stations.

Over the upcoming years, the county hopes to upgrade the Valley (Dillard) Fire Station and the Satolah Fire Station. In recent years, the county has provided upgraded stations for the Tallulah-Persimmon, Lakes, Chechero and Warwoman fire stations.

Giles said the county will likely budget less for fire station improvements in the upcoming SPLOST than was budgeted in the current one, in which \$1.5 million was allocated for it.

Giles said the county also hopes to use SPLOST funds to expand water infrastructure along Highway 441.

"If you want to have any type of development along that corridor, you obviously are going to need water," Giles said.

Though the county has not officially set its proposed SPLOST project list, Giles said he hopes to come up with an official list in the days to come.

When a list is settled upon, it will need to be publicly voted on by the Board of Commissioners, said attorney Ken Jarrard, who represents the county on SPLOST matters.

After the commissioners settle on the list of SPLOST projects they want to present to the voting public, the local governments will need to sign an intergovernmental agreement, Giles said. If an agreement between all local governments can't be reached, the county and its municipalities would need to resort to a five-year SPLOST instead of a six-year plan, which would cost the governments millions of dollars in total.

Giles said that although an official list and cost estimate has not been voted on yet, he expects the total to be comparable to the current SPLOST, in which the county received \$18.1 million. Of that, \$9.1 million was spent on water and sewer, \$2 million was spent on parks and recreation, \$300,000 was allocated for solid waste management infrastructure, \$200,000 was allocated for the Rabun County Senior Center, \$5 million went to roads and bridges and \$1.5 million went to fire improvements.

Jarrard said Rabun uses broad categories when establishing a project list to grant flexibility later.

"Once you approve and pass your project list, you need to adhere to that," Jarrard said. "Rabun County, and many other local governments, have decided to use broad categories so that they aren't limited by unexpected circumstances that can pop up."

Giles said he hopes people vote to approve the tax, saying it's a vital part of the local governments' funding for improvement projects.

"There are several reasons (why the people should approve the SPLOST)," Giles said. "We're a destination, and also have a lot of people that pass through. Seventy five percent of that SPLOST dollar is from people outside our community... It's a continuation of an existing tax, and SPLOST dollars are key to economic growth and jobs."

How this story was discovered: Beat reporting Who our sources were: County Administrator Darrin Giles, previous SPLOST worksheet, Jail Administrator Chris Bartolomey

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