

The Banks County Board of Commissioners held a work session May 18, 2021 at 6:30 p.m. in the Board Room of the Banks County Courthouse Annex. This work session was a question-and-answer time to development authority members concerning development.

**Members Present**

Chairman Charles Turk  
Vice Chairman Danny Maxwell  
Commissioner Bo Garrison  
Commissioner Sammy Reece  
Commissioner Keith Gardiner

**Development Authority Members Present**

Chairman Scott Ledford  
Vice Chairman Bill Griffin  
Member Jimmy Morrison

**Staff Present**

Assistant County Clerk Erin Decker  
Richard Brooks Executive Director

**Media Present**

Angie Gary Mainstreet Newspaper

**1. Call to Order**

Ch. Turk called the meeting to order.

**2. Q & A – Economic Development**

Scott Ledford Chairman of the Development Authority introduced himself and stated he had been a member for approximately 14 years and was appointed by the Board of Commissioners and was a volunteer. He stated the Development Authority had seven members that included himself, Jeff Lewallen, Jonathan Bennett - Treasurer, Huy Nguyen, Jimmy Morrison, Larry Sparks, and Bill Griffin – Vice Chairman.

Barbara Lindorme asked what sort of background do they have, how they were appointed and how they qualify to serve on the Development Authority and Kenneth Bennett asked what was the length of service for a member on the Board. DVA Ch. Ledford stated the board members were appointed by the Board of Commissioners for a four-year term and could be reappointed and there was not a term limit. Mr. Bennett stated so the term limit for a member was indefinite and at what point was the four-year term not indefinite if the same member kept on being appointed. Ch. Turk stated whenever a board member chose not to renew their term or the Commissioners chose not to reappoint them to the board. Ch. Turk also stated the Commissioners took applications for Development Authority board members and if no one applied and the current member was willing to continue to serve, the Commissioner reappointed the member for another term. Ms. Lindorme asked about qualifications of each member and she stated that she knew Huy and his background was hospitality. Ch. Ledford stated Jeff Lewallen was a banker, Jimmy Morrison had served on the commission board in the past years, Jonathan Bennett owned Pritchett Tire, Larry Sparks was a retired planner that had worked with the State in a 13 County region, Bill Griffin was a business owner that knew the water and wastewater of the County, Ch. Ledford stated he was a business owner that owned several companies. DVA Ch. Ledford also introduced

Richard Brooks as Director of the Development Authority of Banks County and that Mr. Brooks had been an employee for 6 months. Ms. Lindorme stated that it seemed Mr. Brooks position as Executive Director was a public facing role that included marketing, public relations, engineering and tactical duties. DVA Ch. Ledford stated that 5 to 7 years ago the role of the Development Authority was extremely aggressive trying to bring businesses in and create more jobs. He stated at the time that was how the Development Authority was tasked through the Board of Commissioners. Over a few years things had evolved, they are no longer in that role. They are now in a defensive role and trying to mediate the growth where it is sustainable and would not cause such a tremendous impact on the community. DVA Ch. Ledford further stated they had been accused of overmarketing the county but what they were really trying to do was create a picture of the County where high technology and higher paying jobs came and would bring a better atmosphere for our kids to grow in.

Mr. Bennett asked what was the advantage to the taxpayers for the Development Authority to issue bonds to a business. DVA Ch. Ledford stated it created an increased revenue base for the County. Mr. Bennett stated he had asked at the last Commissioner's meeting about sewer and when was the plant scheduled to come on line. He stated he got an answer that it was indicated that it was in the planning stages and may never happen. Mr. Bennett stated his point was that people of this County were fed up with not getting straight answers. DVA Ch. Ledford encouraged the citizens to come to the meetings. Mr. Bennett stated he was here and would continue to be here. DVA Ch. Ledford stated his meeting was right down the hall at 4:00 p.m. and he took off work to be there and had for many years and there was never a sole to attend the meeting except the members and the secretary. Mr. Bennett and several citizens in attendance asked if the meetings could be live streamed. DVA Ch. Ledford said no one had ever asked for that but it was possible.

Ms. Lindorme stated that part of the purpose of this meeting was for people from different walks of life try to understand the process of approvals and then, we the people, know who to reach out to for any specific data that people want to know or find out about. She stated how the process worked was a fundamental question that would help a lot of questions being asked. Mr. Bennett asked what was the amount of the 1 Mill that the Development Authority received. DVA Ch. Ledford stated it was not received from property taxes but from an agreement with the Commissioners. The amount of 1 Mill was equal to \$594,754 in 2020.

Ms. Jodi Parks asked about MarJac and the operational time until the sewer was online and how much that would cost the taxpayers. Ch. Ledford stated that was a water/sewer question and not economic development. She stated it seemed like the more businesses that located here the more the taxpayers were having to pay.

Ms. Parks further stated that the building inspection company we used gets paid from the businesses that come in. Why would that inspection company not push development into the County so they could make a profit?

DVA Ch. Ledford stated that the vision was "to carry on the reputation as a great place to live, work and play while maintaining that rural feel and environmental pure landscape and development a high-tech production along the I-85 and 441 corridors" Ms. Ashley Fountain stated that looking at the County's Comprehensive Plan that stated the values that were to be emphasized were country life, rural character, agricultural, family atmosphere, key commercial growth in specific areas and sustainable infrastructure. She further stated she was looking at the roundabout and that wasn't sustainable infrastructure and that was SPLOST tax dollars and it would be hard to get voters to vote on a

referendum when we see the roundabout. She stated she thought the roundabout actually gave a lot of insight of what was to come to that area.

Ms. Lindorme stated that the economic development authority should have some members with agricultural backgrounds. DVA Ch. Ledford stated that three members have agricultural backgrounds. Ms. Lindorme stated that she was more confused then as to why the County was not looking at agricultural industries instead of manufacturing and automotive jobs since the County was mainly agricultural. She stated there were lots of other industries out there so if you have to have office space why don't you do something that would drive the income up for the residences. She stated currently North Carolina and Texas recently recruited Apple. Ms. Lindorme further stated, could the Economic Development Authority not do a study with the University of Georgia about new types of jobs for the people that are in the County, could there be ag businesses, could the kids in the school system have an ag program, could there be grants pursued in the County for the farmer instead of new industry.

Ms. Fountain asked if Mr. Brooks job was to slow growth because his job advertisement stated someone that could handle rapid growth. DVA Ch. Ledford stated Mr. Brooks' job was to follow the direction of the Board and the Boards' job was to follow the direction of the Commissioners. Ch. Turk stated the Development Authority's job was to manage what growth there potentially could be and to have higher paying jobs than just warehouse jobs. Ms. Fountain stated that there seemed to be a disconnect of what the boards want and what the citizens of this County want. Ms. Fountain also stated as easily as we could promote selling our land, we could promote holding onto our land and living here.

Ms. Fountain asked about bonds and if there was another way to solicit business without offering tax abatements. DVA Ch. Ledford stated the authority does no longer approach abatements but were asked about them all the time. Ms. Fountain asked DVA Ch. Ledford if he thought S K Battery was a good decision for our area. DVA Ch. Ledford stated no and Ms. Fountain asked then why did Mr. Brooks say on the radio it was a win for the area. DVA Ch. Ledford stated Mr. Brooks made the statement in good faith and that we were not going to slam our neighbors because we were trying to build relationships with our neighbors. Ms. Fountain questioned that by asking if neighbors meaning the counties around us or Canada? DVA Ch. Ledford stated the counties around us and Ms. Fountain asked why were we holding a meeting with Canada? She stated that was again a disconnect. Ms. Lindorme asked if the Canadian meeting could be explained and why do you have to ask Canada to join the meeting. Ms. Fountain stated that the meeting agenda stated that the host was Ch. Charles Turk and DVA Ch. Ledford was moderating. She didn't understand why we were giving Canada the ability to do that. DVA Ch. Ledford stated it was being perceived that we are soliciting Canada but were not. This was a virtual meeting where Banks County was partnering with Ontario to have the meeting and then all the other counties up and down the I-85 Corridor and have similar type businesses network together. Ms. Fountain asked who organized the meeting. Mr. Brooks stated they created a partnership with the counties along I-85 from Gwinnett to Hart County. Mr. Brooks stated the purpose of that was to highlight the corridor to attract high tech companies. He stated they get calls all the time from development companies that wanted to purchase private property and locate businesses that were less than desirable for the County or for the wealth of our citizens. He further stated they were trying to look for high-tech companies. Ms. Fountain asked what was high-tech. Mr. Brooks stated to him high-tech was advanced manufacturing that created robotics for example auto manufacturing, recycling, etc. Ms. Fountain asked Mr. Brooks if he was working to establish more local connections. Ms. Fountain asked if Mr. Brooks would offer tax abatements in the future. Mr. Brooks stated it sounded like from what had been said tonight that tax abatements were not needed at this point and what they were trying to do was funnel businesses into the corridor. Ch. Turk stated we can try to slow growth and that

was one reason the Commissioners had been working on revising the zoning code. Ms. Fountain asked the Commissioners what were their vision for the County. Ch. Turk stated to be primary agricultural. Comm. Reece stated he had always thought Banks County was unique in having retail in one portion of the County and have manufacturing businesses over at Martin Bridge. Comm. Garrison stated he personally did not want to see us turn into Gwinnett, Forsyth or any areas like that and he would like to see us grow parallel with the I-85 Corridor and keep the rest of the areas rural. He further stated he would not like to see us turn into Jett Roberts Road in Jackson County with all the warehouses because he felt like it didn't fit here. Comm. Garrison stated we wanted to do it right the first time and not second guess anything. He further stated we were working diligently on putting steps in on our zoning. Vice Ch. Maxwell stated we can't stop growth but we can control it. Comm. Gardiner stated when he first met Mr. Brooks, the first thing he asked him was what do you see this County like in seven years. Comm. Gardiner stated that everything needed to stay down at I-85 within a mile radius. He further stated he loved this County and that if we all work together there was no telling what we could do and we need to keep pursuing our way of life. Ch. Turk stated that we would come to Commission meetings and no citizens were in attendance until the zoning issue in December, you came to a meeting and we listened to you. It's not like we are not listening to you, it's just that we haven't had any feedback but now there was. Ch. Turk further stated there was no need in hollering at us or accusing us, we were trying to hear what you want so that the Development Authority can find businesses that fit. Ch. Turk stated don't think that the Commissioners were trying to turn this into Gwinnett County because that was something he would never want because they want it rural. He stated the Commissioners have turned more stuff down consistently than any other board he had been on, even items that the Planning Commission had approved. Ms. Fountain stated that she had not hollered or made accusations and Ch. Turk stated that he was not referring to her. Ms. Fountain further stated that the citizens elect people that they feel will do the best job to represent their desires for the County. She also stated that it was impossible for everyone to come to every meeting so for that reason she would like to see all the meetings live streamed so people could be in the know when they couldn't be present.

Ms. Fountain asked if the Development Authority/Commissioners were going by the Economic Development Blueprint. Comm. Garrison stated they were working on the rezoning for subdivisions and housing.

Mr. Randall Ramsey stated he was a citizen of Banks County and he drove 21 miles a day to Athens and he was educated outside of Banks County. He stated he didn't mind driving outside the County. He asked how many people from Banks County actually worked at Selit or Kerry. He stated if Economic Development was to bring good jobs into the County for the people of Banks County, then we have two examples of no one from Banks County working there. Mr. Ramsey stated that if there was an opportunity to rezone the Dragway to a mega warehouse then he thought that was unethical. Mr. Ramsey stated if you want to stop this type of growth, we can be more selective and more selective in the zoning. Mr. Ramsey asked the Commission board where do you see Banks County in 3 years. Comm. Gardiner stated he hoped to see it about the same with just a little more growth around I-85. Ch. Turk stated he would like to see a grocery store and more retail. Comm. Garrison stated he would love to see more mom-and-pop businesses even some up the 441 Corridor.

Ms. Fountain stated she felt like citizens had an interest in the June 2, 2021 conference and would like to attend and have it livestreamed. She asked was that something the Commission Board could make happen. Ch. Turk stated that he didn't have a problem with that. Comm. Gardiner encouraged the Citizens to come to the public meetings held by the school board, planning commission, board of commissioners and development authority.

Mr. Bennett stated people have not participated like they should have but they don't know a lot of things until after the fact so they don't know what to oppose and what to support. He stated people want information and apologized to DVA Ch. Ledford for being abrupt to him earlier but sometimes you have to be abrupt to get a straight answer. Mr. Bennett stated that at the last Commissioners meeting he asked a question and didn't get a good answer. He stated it was by law that a person who was on the Economic Development Authority must reside in the County. He asked was there was a person on the Economic Development board that did not reside in the County. So tonight, he ask again, was there anyone of the Economic Development board members that did not live in the County. DVA Ch. Ledford stated that to his knowledge he had homestead exemption filed in Banks County. Mr. Bennett stated that homestead exemption was not where you resided. He said where you reside was where you laid your head down at night and spent the majority of your time. Mr. Bennett further stated if you knowingly have someone on the board that did not live in the County you are violating Georgia law. Ch. Turk stated as far as all five of them knew everyone lived in the County. Mr. Bennett stated it would pay you to find out. Comm. Gardiner stated he wasn't sure who they were talking about but if there was somebody not living in Banks County, they would be coming off the authority.

Mr. Bennett stated he understood that inflation would cause taxes to go up but he did not want industry to be the cause for higher taxes. He asked if the boards knew of one county that had increased industry and lower taxes than Banks County. DVA Ch. Ledford stated no. Mr. Bennett also asked what studies or plans had been done to protect resources environmentally. Was an environmental impact study done at MarJac. DVA Ch. Ledford stated that he was sure a Phase I & II environmental study was done but Mr. Bennett asked that this should be something that the County made sure happened before businesses came in. Mr. Bennett stated that he apologized if he was rude to the board and would be as quick to apologize as he would be to offend.. He further stated that we were all in this together.

DVA Ch. Ledford was asked about the hiring process for Mr. Brooks. DVA Ch. Ledford explained that a recruiting company was used and they received about thirty applicants and they were narrowed down from there. DVA Ch. Ledford further stated why did he want to hire somebody from Canada and the reason for that was because of the background of Mr. Brooks that had environmental engineering and developmental experience and also spoke several different languages.

Comm. Garrison stated he felt like the mutual agreement was they were going to try their best to slow the growth where it won't bring more people and that was why they were looking at changing the building and zoning codes and already had moratoriums in place for apartments and subdivisions. Ch. Turk stated the reason they were here tonight was to hear what the citizens want. Comm. Garrison stated both can be balanced out if we just set back and breathe and look at what and where we want it. He further stated that they were taking the feelings of the citizens to heart and he personally appreciated all the ones that had come out. Ms. Lindorme and Ms. Fountain stated thank you for the meeting tonight. Ms. Lindorme stated communication would be the key.

### **3. Adjournment**

Motion to adjourn the meeting: Bo Garrison

Second: Charles Turk

Vote: 5:0

All aye votes and the meeting was adjourned at 9:00 p.m.

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Chairman

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Assistant County Clerk

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