



Lincoln County Property Taxes

Since I was voted in as a member of the Lincoln County Commission in August of 2022, one of the most talked about issues has been property taxes – and rightfully so! Few issues have a more direct impact on the citizens than the property tax rate. Taxes of any kind, but especially property taxes, are particularly invasive, allowing a Government entity to step in and simply take money from a citizen, almost right out of his or her pocket! In Tennessee, a County Commission has very little that it is legally obligated to do. The State constitution and the Tennessee Code Annotated require that County Commissions establish a budget for their respective counties and set the associated property tax rate. Although this is one of the few requirements of a Commission, it is one that is vitally important and especially consequential.

On August 1, 2023, at a special called meeting, the Lincoln County Commission was presented with a budget and a corresponding tax resolution that included a significant property tax increase. Anyone who has been paying attention is aware that it passed. Although I am as fiscally conservative and anti-tax as anyone you will meet, I voted for it. As bad as I hate to say it, and as unfortunate as it was, that choice was the better of two very bad options. The other choice – the one that I absolutely could not support – was to continue to spend down our County's fund balance (think of this as our savings account) to cover recurring expenses that were already incurred. Ultimately, that path was unsustainable and irresponsible.

The previous Commission had voted to give County employees a 10% raise. For the record, I do not disagree that our County employees need raises. Data shows that as a County, our employees' salaries are significantly below those in surrounding counties as well as throughout the state. The issue was the lack of offsetting revenue to pay for the increase in spending. Once a spending level for salaries is included in a budget, it is almost impossible to cut it. In many cases it is actually against State law (some departments operate under a "maintenance of effort" provision). Because about 83% of our County's budget consists of labor costs (salaries and associated benefits), and because we have certain minimum levels of service that we are legally mandated to provide, there is not much left in any given budget that is "discretionary" and available to cut. Of the two bad choices, I chose the "least bad" one. However, to help ensure that we would not get ourselves in this situation again, I offered an amendment (which passed) to develop a Comprehensive Plan for our county that would help us begin to think strategically about how we can increase our tax base through economic growth rather than continue to burden our property owners with higher taxes. We cannot put ourselves in a similar situation in the future. I am happy to report that, although it has been no easy task, Lincoln County's Comprehensive Plan is essentially complete. This document will provide guidance on how to plan infrastructure and resources to grow a larger residential, commercial, and industrial tax base.

I would invite you to watch the actual discussion that occurred on the floor of the Commission during that special meeting. The video at the following link (see time 15:30 and beyond), will show my complete discussion: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-X0n7NvWWU>. As your County Mayor, I will fight to keep property taxes low by strategically increasing our tax base.