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ALERT TOP STORY

'We are being held hostages': Crowd blasts Bedford council's land annexation vote

Justin Faulconer

May 24, 2023



An opponent to Bedford Town Council's annexation measure that will bring more Bedford County residents into the outside the town's municipal building on Tuesday.

Justin Faulconer

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BEDFORD — No annexation.

Those two words have adorned signs in areas on the outskirts of the town of Bedford for several weeks, a campaign of opposition many residents have to expanding the town's boundary lines as part of a reversion agreement that changed Bedford from a city to a town in July 2013.

That outcry boiled over at Bedford Town Council's meeting Tuesday as a crowd overflowed the meeting room. Roughly a dozen residents protested the Phase II boundary adjustments that will fold in a number of areas of Bedford County land into the town limits, among those a stretch of Forest Road, the Town and Country subdivision and the North Hills neighborhood near Centra Bedford Memorial Hospital.

Following an emotional public comments session, council voted 6-1 to approve an ordinance that annexes the county areas into the town limits effective July 1, a measure that according to town officials will bring in 800 to 1,000 new residents. Councilor Bruce Hartwick voted in opposition, drawing applause for a decision he said is the most important he has made on council and one he prayed over.

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Bedford County Sheriff Mike Miller, among those who will be annexed into the town, said he was told years ago when the city reverted to a town there was nothing residents could do to halt the settlement agreement voluntarily made by then-city and county officials.

“Tonight, you seven can stop it. Or was the statement I heard 10 years ago true — there’s nothing the citizens can do about this,” Miller said.

The sheriff said 99% of those affected by the annexation oppose it and the agreement states the boundary adjustment is not mandatory. He said the Phase I area that folded into the town a decade ago has seen little to no business activity and questioned why the Phase II move is necessary.

“Tell us — what is good management with our money? How many red flags do you need to stop this?” Miller told council. “If you can show us what you have done with Phase I and how you maxed it out, I would have a different opinion.”

Many residents are struggling to make ends meet and will be negatively affected by paying 28 cents of town real estate tax per \$100 of assessed value on top of 41 cents of the county tax rate, according to Miller and other speakers.

“This vote, if you vote to do this, devastates them and it devastates the working class of this county, is what it does. What we can’t wrap our heads around is if you know your community is hurting why would you go for more, to inflict more pain, to inflict

more hurt, more worry and more taxes on your neighbors?” Miller said. “If you vote for this, what you are telling us is: we are government and we know what’s best for you. Really? If you pass this, you are telling us it’s greed over your neighbor.”

Tammy Parker, the District 7 member of the Bedford County Board of Supervisors, said the county has had changes in circumstances financially, including areas of debt service for the recently opened Liberty Middle School and solid waste disposal, since the reversion agreement became effective. She said the council has an avenue to not go through with the second phase of boundary adjustments.

Judy Hylton, a retired county resident on fixed income, said if annexed she will pay at least \$2,000 in added taxes per year and believes it serves no purpose.

“We are being held hostages because of poor financial management of this town over the years,” Hylton said. “Now we have to bail out the town knowing that 99% of the residents said no to annexation.”



John Ketwig, a retired Bedford resident also affected, blasted the increase in taxes.

“This thing stinks to high heaven. This is highway robbery,” Ketwig said. “If you vote yes, don’t say ‘yes,’ say — ‘stick ‘em up’ — because that’s what it amounts to.”

A few other residents said they couldn't afford the extra expense, one calling the added taxation "tyranny" and the reversion "a horrible deal."

Forest Road resident David Hardey, speaking on behalf of his parents, retired teachers and senior citizens who will have an 87% increase in taxes, asked council how they would feel if he showed up at their door demanding an extra \$1,400 from each of them.

"I'm asking you do the honorable thing and vote this down," Hardey said. "My parents were here way before this thing went down, this agreement from city to town. Honor them."

Ed Miller, a Daleville resident who owns land on Forest Road, said no one in America should have to choose between paying for their medication and taxes, imploring council to "consider the people."

Bedford town resident Cindy Gunnoe was the only speaker in favor of the boundary adjustment, pointing out that since reversion most of her tax dollars have gone to the county — not staying in town to pay for the town's needs.

"I'm very sorry that your taxes are going to get raised ... basically we are all set up as pawns in this annexation game that was set up with the whole reversion agreement and that's an unfortunate situation," Gunnoe said.

Councilors Robert Carson and Hartwick each said they have lost sleep over the decision.

"When I took this seat, it was not about hurting anyone, it was about helping everyone I could," Carson said.

Carson said some people have cussed him out in anger rather having a conversation and he feels the situation could have been avoided if better dialogue and discussion had gone into a process that was outlined years ago.

“We’re not trying to do anything underhanded or illegal. I have prayed and have asked God to help me make the right decision,” Carson said. “However this goes, I certainly hope some of you will do some soul searching because we did not deserve the cussings we got. If you’re going to hate me when this is over, however it goes, you go ahead because I have already ... felt the hate. For all of you who did that — I forgive you. I know where you are coming from.”

Councilor Darren Shoen added: “The bottom line is I was elected by the current residents of this town, and I have to do what is best for the current residents of this town and there’s no question this is.”

Under the reversion agreement the county and town each received things that were mutually agreed on and two government bodies signed off on it, Councilor Stacey Hailey said.

“We didn’t create this wheel,” Hailey said of the current council while addressing the backlash: “We’re all grown adults. We all have to live together in this community.”

Vice Mayor C.G. Stanley was the only member of the former city council serving when the reversion agreement was reached and went into effect. He said city leaders more than a decade ago got word that lawmakers in Richmond didn’t want small independent cities such as Bedford at the time and the late Lacey Putney, a high-ranking state legislator at the time, planted the seed for reversion talks between city and county officials.

“It is not anything the council came up with. We did not brainstorm it, not a bolt of lightning that came out of the sky. It was from Richmond. That’s where it got started,” Stanley said. “We’re taking all the name calling, the daggers, the incoming fire — I get it. I’m fine with that. But I just want you all to know there were two sides to this.”

Councilor Bruce Johannessen said town residents pay \$5 million per year to Bedford County in local taxes since the reversion and the town is frugal in how it spends, and residents 65 and older can apply for tax relief under certain conditions.

“We don’t just throw money around and walk away from it,” Johannessen said. “We don’t waste money.”

Mayor Tim Black said the county has benefited tremendously from the reversion deal.

“Three words: voluntary settlement agreement,” Black said. “No one was forced to enter into this agreement.”

Black said \$6 million the county receives for a 15-year period that has gone toward schools and \$5 million to the county through town residents’ taxes would add 11 cents to the county’s real estate tax rate if reversion hadn’t occurred. The town has nothing to do with how that influx in state money and added tax revenue has been handled on the county’s and schools’ sides, he said.

He further added he has been in talks with developers about hundreds of housing units coming into the town and residential growth is a linchpin for more commercial development as well. The reversion-related growth is part of improving the town’s demographics, Black said.

“It’s a known fact national retailers are not going to look at a community unless you have 10,000 people in it,” Black said.

Black said he’s sorry there is anger and tensions in the community and he respects everyone who spoke on a decision that was not easy.

“This town will be committed to providing you the same level of service to current town residents,” Black told those who will be annexed. “As a taxpayer I know I get value for the 28 cents from the Town of Bedford. I don’t know I am going to get that for the 41 cents from Bedford County.”

By Justin Faulconer

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/bedford-commission-recommends-denial-of-halfway-house-in-goode-residents-voice-concerns/article_f193ed30-e9ce-11ed-951f-f32c9aad2b7b.html

FEATURED TOP STORY

bedford county

Bedford commission recommends denial of halfway house in Goode, residents voice concerns

Justin Faulconer

May 3, 2023



A large crowd overflows the public meeting room of the Bedford County administration building during a May 2 pu operation in Goode.

Justin Faulconer

Justin Faulconer



BEDFORD — A proposed halfway house for substance abuse treatment on Lowry Road in Goode was met with heavy opposition from a packed crowd at a public hearing Tuesday, an emotional zoning review process that resulted in a 4-2 recommendation of denial from the Bedford County Planning Commission.

Sobrius Curea, LLC is requesting a special use permit to establish a high intensity chemical dependency program with 16 residents for 30-day inpatient treatment on two acres zoned Agricultural Village. Jason Stevens, CEO and founder of Sobrius, said the Galax-based operation has been running for just more than two years and looks forward to trying to have a home in Bedford County.

“Our mission is to create a place for recovery with love, compassion, understanding along with accountability, responsibility and self-discipline for each person entrusted into our care,” Stevens said. “We really take pride in the fact that our home is not an institution. We want these folks to come in and be in a home environment. What we have found is that when they are in that environment, they can really work on themselves.”

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A standing-room only crowd of more than 100 people filled the meeting room Tuesday, with residents spilling into the hallway and Bedford County Sheriff's Office security more heightened than usual, as 20 spoke during the hearing, all but two in opposition. Opponents voiced concerns mostly centered on safety, as multiple speakers said the planned facility presents too many unknowns for neighboring areas and is too close to Otter River Elementary School on U.S. 221.

The Bedford County School Board wrote the planning commission and Bedford County Board of Supervisors stating its opposition based on the planned home being within a mile of Otter River Elementary. School board member Chris Daniels, who lives on Lowry Road, said residents have sympathy for those wanting to recover from substance abuse but the utmost obligation is protecting the community's children.

"Anyone who thinks that this facility here is a good idea, I think, it's because they don't live in the neighborhood where this would be," Daniels said.

The proposed use is a noble cause, but careful consideration is needed in regard to location, Daniels said. His daughter runs by the proposed location daily, older people in the neighborhood walk by it and schoolchildren get off at a bus stop there, Daniels said, adding the operation's potential presence is "completely distressing and disturbing."

"We all want people to get better and we pray for them, but they need an area that has complete access to medical care, regular patrols and is very visible," Daniels said.

"This facility will not work here."

Sobrius is licensed through the Virginia Department of Health and provides resident care for substance abuse treatment. Stevens said the goal is to provide treatment for those with substance abuse, mental health and trauma diagnosis, and provide a homelike atmosphere while creating a safe and secure environment.

“We’re not a drop-in program. We want the residents to truly want help,” Stevens said. “We believe in the full continuum of care. We believe that’s what it’s going to take to help people get out of the realm of alcoholism and drug abuse.”

Most of the program’s participants are ages 22 to 35, Stevens said. “Those are young people — they are people who need help,” he added.

The program only wants those staying there who are truly committed to recovery, Stevens said. He told the commission the planned facility would be for women only.

“We take security extremely, extremely serious. We know the movement at our facility,” Stevens said, later adding: “The residents are never ever left unattended. We know where our people are at all times ... They’re just not wondering around.”

Daniels voiced concern the site would be unsecured and no amount of “we will take care of it” comments from Sobrius will suffice.

Thomas Neal, a county resident, said he has two young daughters, one of whom will go to Otter River Elementary. “It belongs nowhere near our school,” he said.

Debbie Hoback, a former Bedford County School Board member who lives on land her family has farmed for generations, spoke against the home locating across from her property.

“We are trying to give our children a gift by keeping them safe in their homes,” Hoback said.

Ashley Weeks, a concerned mother who lives in the area, said she fears residents may come on to her property and steal.

“I don’t [think] this is a good location,” Weeks said.

David Hardey, who lives on Forest Road, said his grandson will attend Otter River Elementary and expressed concern with unpredictable and potentially dangerous situations where a halfway house resident could lose it and grab a weapon. He and a few other speakers mentioned school shootings across the country in expressing their fears.

“Now I’m sorry, but history does have a nasty habit of repeating itself ... They can’t guarantee that that won’t happen ... but they’re going to raise the level of risk that it can happen again in our community,” Hardey said. “If my grandson is one of those victims all holy hell will break loose.”

Stevens said the program teaches its residents how to not act out in anger. If the home is approved, 14 to 17 full-time jobs are planned, he said. An executive director will be on site, two certified substance abuse counselors, one licensed professional counselor, five peer support personnel and rotating cooks who prepare meals would be employed.

“We try to create a family atmosphere,” Stevens said. “These are people. They made bad decisions, but they’re people.”

In the application, Stevens wrote the facility is planned as a “low-key, low visibility” site that provides peace, serenity and calmness to residents during treatment as part of the recovery process. The home would be staffed 24 hours per day, seven days per week with highly trained personnel and residents would be heavily screened and vetted before coming in, he said.

Mark Briers, a Lowry Road resident, said the home would bring a temporary transient flow of people in a location many nearby residents do not support.

“They’re my neighbors and they don’t want this,” Briers said.

County resident Donald Barlow said he applauds anyone seeking to bring a residential substance abuse treatment facility to the county and spoke of devastating effects drug use has had on his family.

“If it’s not in my backyard I’ll put it there ... submit the plan and you can put it in my backyard. I’ll put my money where my mouth is because I suffered that loss,” Barlow said. “We need it here in this county because it’s a problem — a big problem.”

Stevens told the commission the nation has 28 million documented cases of substance abuse and only 10% seek help.

“We’re trying to help,” Stevens said. “We’re trying to make a difference here. We want to give people a chance.”

District 7 Commissioner John Briscoe, who represents the district of the proposed use, said he understands the public’s concerns, and, in principle, he is in favor of substance abuse programs.

“We don’t have enough of them,” Briscoe said. “I like the idea of this. I don’t want it next to a school. These people don’t want it next to a school ... I cannot support something that the public obviously does not support, even if I want it personally, I can’t do that.”

Briscoe said people have a fear of the unknown more than anything else.

“I don’t think in any place in any community people are going to welcome it with open arms, the nature of the beast, but there are times when the good has to be weighed out versus fear,” Commissioner Jeff Burdett said. “I understand the concerns and have doubts in my mind about the viability of this location, but I also see the benefits of this location because of the nature of the program. I wish they had more years of success of operation to maybe allay some of the qualms I have and certainly the community has.”

Vice Chair John Moisa, who joined Burdett in voting against Briscoe's motion to deny the permit, said the public presented many fears of what possibly could happen.

"One of the fears I have is what will happen is some of the kids we are worried about protecting at this elementary school and in this area might be very much the same people who could fall subject to this type of addiction and need something like this in our community and if that ever occurs and we don't have it in our community to offer them, would we have failed them for that," Moisa said.

Chair Nick Kessler took a brief pause before casting the deciding vote to send the matter on to the Bedford County Board of Supervisors with a recommendation of denial.

"There is absolutely a need for this," Kessler said. "Is this the right location? That's the challenging part of it."

Briscoe said he feels the county needs residential treatment facilities and he hopes the dialogue continues.

"... I don't want the door to be closed on that," Briscoe told the crowd. "We're dealing with one situation right here, but this will come back up again and people that you know will get sick and people that you know will die ... so everybody keep an open mind."

By Justin Faulconer

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/government-politics/bedford-supervisors-narrowly-approve-tax-increase-after-emotional-hearing/article_d0254590-e3bb-11ed-b784-27b8340491f2.html

FEATURED TOP STORY

bedford county

Bedford supervisors narrowly approve tax increase after emotional hearing

Justin Faulconer

Apr 26, 2023



A packed room of Bedford County residents prepare for the public hearing on the fiscal year 2024 real estate tax rate. Justin Faulconer, the News & Advance

Justin Faulconer



Isaiah Knight, Forest resident

BEDFORD — Facing a divided crowd against and in support of a real estate tax increase, the Bedford County Board of Supervisors voted 4-3 Monday to adopt a tax rate of 41 cents per \$100 of assessed value.

While technically a 9-cent drop from the current rate of 50 cents per \$100 of assessed value, the county is coming off a reassessment year where property values increased 31%, according to data provided by County Administrator Robert Hiss. A 38-cent rate would bring in the same amount of tax revenue and not levy an effective increase, a measure many residents voiced support of during a public hearing Monday that drew more than 20 speakers.

Some of those speakers, however, felt the 3-cent tax increase is warranted to meet growing needs, particularly for Bedford County Public Schools. Edgar Tuck, the board's chair, and supervisors John Sharp, Mickey Johnson and Tammy Parker voted in favor of the 41-cent rate while board members Tommy Scott, Bob Davis and Charla Bansley opposed.

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Hiss said the value of one cent has jumped from \$895,000 to \$1.2 million as a result of reassessment and the budgeted tax revenues forecasted in the fiscal year 2024 budget, which begins July 1, is set to go from \$45 million to \$45.7 million, the positive difference coming from new residential and commercial growth in the county.

The \$3.6 million from the tax increase is going toward capital projects with a combined value of \$55.1 million. Those projects include \$14.5 million to close the county landfill, \$5 million to renovate and expand the department of social services offices, \$6.5 million in canopies for Liberty High and Staunton River high schools, \$13.7 million in auditorium renovations at those two schools, \$1.8 million for a new gym at Bedford Primary School, \$6 million for a bus garage for the schools and \$7.6 million in athletic facility improvements.

Robert Ashwell, a Staunton River High School teacher, said the Staunton River school community “ever mindful of the costs” has only asked for improvements promised many years ago from county officials.

Forest resident Isaiah Knight spoke out against the tax increase and speaking to the schools’ canopies project said it’s not the government’s responsibility to make sure children don’t arrive to school with wet hair from rain, adding it is parents’ responsibility to buy them an umbrella.

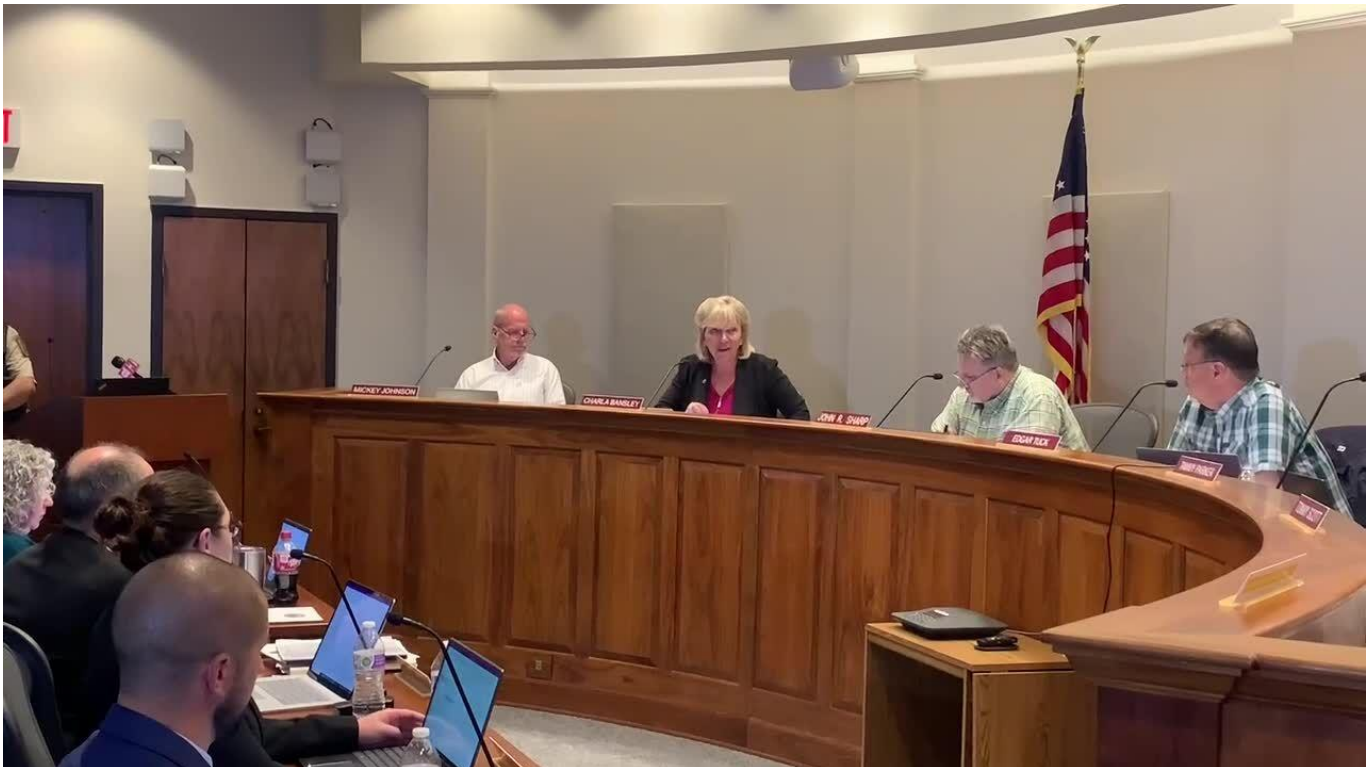
“In such grave economic times the folks in this community are all making hard financial decisions in their homes,” Knight said. “Why can’t this elected body emulate their constituents? Why can’t frivolous spending be curtailed?”

Knight concluded by imploring supervisors: “Please don’t take money from my neighbors.”

Sherry Given, a theater teacher at SRHS, addressed the board on limited space issues at the school. “... When you’re running four programs out of two rooms that you share with everybody else, you need more space,” Given told supervisors. “I ask that you consider funding for future students.”

Multiple speakers talked of heavy past investments the county has made in the Forest attendance zone, particularly for Jefferson Forest High School, while they said needs in the Liberty and Staunton River zones have gone unmet for years.

Jason Johnson, a former Bedford County School Board member who represented the Staunton River area, said his mother in upcoming weeks will be among those celebrating SRHS’s 60th anniversary and there’s many needs that need to be addressed for that school.



“The time is finally right to focus on the auditoriums at Staunton River and Liberty high schools,” Johnson said. “These are projects long overdue ... Now it’s time to support our students on the south side and the town of Bedford and the long overdue auditorium renovations would be a fantastic place to start.”

County resident Janet Robey spoke of the rising costs of groceries, heating homes, gas and insurance and asked the board to not raise taxes on behalf of those less fortunate.

“So when real estate taxes go up, business will pass on to us, the consumers, that additional expense,” Robey said.

Alysia Barrell Wood, who described herself as a proud 1991 graduate of Liberty High School, said the auditorium renovation at that school and new gym at the primary school are needs and not wants.

“They are essential,” she said in supporting the 41-cent rate. “Do it for our children. They are our future.”

Felicia Ray, a Staunton River parent, said Jefferson Forest is an "awesome" facility to visit and students at SRHS come back and wonder when it will be their turn for such nice facilities.

“It’s Liberty and Staunton River’s turn,” Ray said. “I’m a Staunton River girl but I am rooting for Liberty today ...”

Sarah Mayhew, who has three children in the Liberty zone, said times are tough for many financially but children are “suffering with subpar conditions” in schools.

“However, it is not my job to say whether our needs warrant a tax increase, but I am saying our kids, the future, are worth it,” Mayhew said.

She said the children are worth whatever it takes for the board of supervisors and Bedford County School Board to work together amicably to meet needs and determine what is essential. “The detail I do know is my kids’ success and safety is essential,” she said.

Moneta resident Wendell Johnson said he favors the equalized tax rate because many families are suffering economically during the administration of President Joe Biden. He added the \$6 million price tag for canopies is “crazy.”

“The government never has enough money,” Johnson said. “We can’t afford to keep giving the government money.”

County resident Jeff Secrest told supervisors many county residents have tightened their belts fiscally. “Our county government needs to do the same.”

Jennifer Shutt, a county resident, asked how long the county can keep kicking the can down the road when it comes to investments in schools’ capital needs.

“I think our students and their educators deserve the very best we can give them and if we can look these children and teachers in the eye and tell them that they don’t deserve to learn and work in a safe, attractive and up-to-date space because we were too cheap to provide it, I think that says a great deal about our priorities and our character,” Shutt said.

Hiss said the county government has absorbed 6% operational inflation, or \$1.3 million, and the proposed budget is \$65,000 less than the current fiscal year. Citing the Virginia Commission on Local Government, Hiss said in the cumulative tax burden on citizens, including taxes and other locally sourced revenue, the county ranked the lowest out of 133 local governments each of the past three years and consistently ranked in the lowest six since 2011.

Bansley said she doesn’t think the county should “sneak in” a tax increase during a reassessment year and, while she knows the county has many needs, she doesn’t think the rate increase should be done when families are struggling.

“Let’s do the responsible thing, help people now, wait for some of these projects we have been working towards to bring in more money,” Bansley said.

Supervisor Mickey Johnson said he loves the county and won't do anything he doesn't think is in the county's best interest. He said he doesn't like paying more and his home has gone up \$90,000 in value.

"In this situation we've got needs," he said of why he supports the 41-cent rate.

Sharp spoke of the negative effects of inflation and said the Biden administration "handing out money like candy" has created an economic environment unlike any the county has seen in 40 years.

"We wouldn't even be considering it and we wouldn't have this discussion tonight ... if it wasn't for the Biden administration's inflation, but unfortunately, that's where we find ourselves," Sharp said. "We've tried to keep things in check. It's very few dollars we have any control over whatsoever."

Supervisor Tommy Scott criticized the school board's management of finances, adding: "They're the ones who are not doing the students right — it's not the board of supervisors." He spoke against the \$12.5 million combined for the bus garage and canopies at the two schools and he feels cost estimates are too high and could be lowered.

"I don't know why we're rushing to [raise the tax rate] unless we are trying to hide behind the screen of an equalized rate," Scott said.

Scott said the only way he would support a tax increase is if someone could show him there's no waste in the local government and no other route was available and it hasn't happened yet.

"You know as well as I do, when you grow the government you lose your liberties," Scott said. "The government is not your sugar daddy. I'd like to retract that and say the taxpayers are not your sugar daddy. ... I'm not going to ask these people to tighten their belt unless the government is ready to tighten their belt and I don't think we've done anything close to tightening our belt."

Supervisor Bob Davis said capital projects outlined are “grossly inflated” and also criticized spending decisions on the schools’ side.

Board member Tammy Parker said the rising costs of solid waste operations, which is exasperated by a growing population, has led to a general fund revenue transfer in recent years being used to absorb deficits in that area.

“Robbing Peter to pay Paul only works temporarily,” Parker said. “At some point you have to pay Peter back.”

Parker said so much of the county’s money is tied up in debt service and the county’s borrowing power has been negatively affected by past decisions. She added the gym at the primary school taking so long to be done is “ridiculous.”

“That should have been done years ago and I’m absolutely supporting a gym at Bedford Primary School and I’m going to support the auditorium at Liberty and Staunton River,” Parker said.

She agreed there with some residents’ comments of disparity in the school zones, to the benefit of the Forest area.

Tuck said the county has been fiscally sound for many years and is among the most effective localities in the state in making its dollars stretch.

“This low tax culture is not going to change if we vote not to equalize the real estate rate this year,” Tuck said. “We must look beyond the next 12 months in order to preserve this low tax culture we all enjoy in this county. If we do not anticipate the unfolding needs and prepare accordingly for meeting those challenges, I believe we would be derelict in the performance of our duties.”

County departments have worked diligently to absorb inflationary pressures on the cost to operate, Tuck said.

“The line of thought that we can cut our way to a financial position to afford these exploding demands on our finances is simply not realistic,” he said.

Tuck said he is not worried about the next election but rather where the county will be positioned in upcoming years.

“I cannot support an equalized rate knowing what we’re facing in the next four years,” Tuck said. “We have to take care of these issues now and cannot afford to keep deferring them until what we hope is a better time to deal with them.”

“In such grave economic times the folks in this community are all making hard financial decisions in their homes. Why can’t this elected body emulate their constituents? Why can’t frivolous spending be curtailed?”

— **Isaiah Knight**, Forest resident who spoke out against the real estate tax increase

By Justin Faulconer
