AGENDA
PUBLIC HEARING
Thursday, September 11, 2025
8:00 A.M.

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1. Call to Order

2. Invocation and *Pledge of Allegiance.*

3. To Hear Public Comment on the Proposed 2025 Millage Rate Increase

4. Adjournment

Board of Commissioners of Candler County
Public Hearing
September 11, 2025
8:00 a.m.

The Board of Commissioners of Candler County met for a Public Hearing Thursday, September 11, 2025, at 8:00 a.m., in the Commissioners' boardroom at 1075 East Hiawatha Street, Suite A, Metter, Georgia. Chairman Brad Jones presided with Commissioners David Morales, Jonathan Williamson and Tre' Ross in attendance. County Administrator Bryan Aasheim (remotely), and County Clerk Kellie Lank. Vice-Chairman Blake Hendrix and County Attorney Kendall Gross did not attend this public hearing. The Metter Advertiser was notified of the meeting, but no representative attended this meeting.

Della and Jerry Cowart, Harold Lynn, James Wallace, James McNeely, Chris Billingsley and Keith Aldrich were present for this public hearing.

1. Call to Order
Chairman Jones called the public hearing to order at 8:00 a.m.

2. Invocation and *Pledge of Allegiance*
Commissioner Williamson delivered the invocation and led the *Pledge of Allegiance*.

3. To Hear Public Comment on the Proposed 2025 Millage Rate Increase
Chairman Jones outlined the ground rules for public comments, noting a five-minute speaking limit per individual, a 60-second warning, and a request that all comments be directed to the Board of Commissioners. He then opened the floor for public comment on the proposed 2025 millage rate increase.

Mr. Keith Aldrich (453 South College Street) addressed the Board. He asked about the driving factors behind the budget and proposed millage increase.

Administrator Aasheim explained that the major factors include increased demand for public safety services, with Sheriff's Office dispatch calls up 20% over the past year and EMS calls rising 15–18% over the last three years—from about 100 per month to more than 200. The Board considered adding an ambulance at an annual cost of $1.2–1.3 million, but instead adopted a more moderate "fly car" model, adding one staff member per shift and a quick response vehicle at an annual cost of about $450,000. He also noted that House Bill 581 suppressed growth in the tax digest by limiting value increases on homesteaded properties, which previously helped balance the budget without millage increases. The millage rate has been held at 12.294 since 2021, with inflationary increases in property values covering budget deficits until this year.

Mr. Aldrich asked whether the cost of three new firefighters had been considered, estimating their expense at about $70,000 each. Administrator Aasheim clarified that the fire budget is presented by the Metter City Council, with the county required to pay 50% of the city-approved budget under the 2018 SDS agreement. Fire costs are funded through the Special Service District for the unincorporated area, not through the county's general fund. Chairman Jones added that the city had discussed the third firefighter for two years, with costs split evenly between the city and county. He explained the firefighters are cross-trained EMTs who assist EMS by driving an ambulance when both units are out, helping reduce reliance on mutual aid. EMS averages 7–8 calls daily, with some transports to Savannah or Augusta taking 3–6 hours.

Mr. Aldrich commented on the decline of volunteer firefighters and cross-trained EMTs. He then asked what assurances could be offered regarding future tax reductions. Chairman Jones explained that the Board spends four to six weeks in open budget sessions, reviewing line items in detail, and open to the public. He then encouraged Mr. Aldrich to attend the FY2027 budget meeting beginning in April of 2026. He said taxes could only possibly be reduced if a FLOST passed.

Mr. Aldrich asked about other revenue-generating options. Administrator Aasheim stated local governments are limited to taxes and fees, with reductions in property tax requiring increases elsewhere, such as EMS or landfill fees. He noted that grants often come with spending requirements, while SPLOST allows nonresidents to contribute through sales tax.

Chairman Jones cited budget figures: of the \$11.3 million county budget, \$4.9 million comes from the tax levy, with about \$4 million collected (93% rate). Approximately 76% of the budget is allocated to personnel and benefits. He emphasized that a one-mill increase generates \$372,000 (at 100% collection), less than the \$450,000 needed to expand EMS services.

Mr. Aldrich asked if the landfill fee would be removed once the landfill closed. Administrator Aasheim explained the landfill is being closed to resident and commercial use but requires \$4 million for state-mandated closure, with \$2.2 million currently reserved. He recommended keeping the landfill fee in place for another two to three years in order to provide the resources needed to close the landfill permanently. Once the landfill is closed permanently, Aasheim stated he would then recommend the landfill fee be taken off or removed from the tax bills.

Mr. Aldrich asked about the city-county relationship. Chairman Jones acknowledged past tensions but noted significant improvements since the 2018 Shared Services negotiations and described the current relationship as the best during his tenure. He attributed differences to varying government structures but emphasized strong cooperation among Candler County officials. Commissioners Morales, Williamson, and Ross agreed, stressing teamwork and the absence of political discord. Mr. Aldrich thanked the Board and expressed his intent to become more involved in county matters.

Mr. Chris Billingsley (2176 Victoria Road) then addressed the Board. He thanked the Commissioners for their work and acknowledged the necessity of the proposed 8.23% increase, though he questioned whether the funding approach was best. He encouraged the Board to explore alternative revenue streams and expressed concern over the impact of potential job losses from the announced closure of five International Paper mills between Savannah and Jacksonville. He noted the local economy would be affected by reduced timber demand and lost trucking and equipment jobs, and urged the Board to account for this impact when planning future funding.

With no further comments of discussion, Chairman Jones called for a motion to adjourn at 8:35a.m.

4. Adjournment

Commissioner Williamson made a motion to adjourn this public hearing at 8:35. Commissioner Ross provided a second. The motion carried 5-0.

Maranda K. Lank

Kellie Lank, Clerk
Attest

Chairman, Brad Jones