



Citizens Comments Corner

RESPONSE TO CITIZENS INQUIRY

Check here for Administrative Response to Citizens Inquiries Posed During the Public Comment Section of the Open Meetings of Mayor and Council

Why have property taxes increased/doubled? Why have assessed values increased?

The City Administration posed questions to the DeKalb County Tax Commissioners/Assessors offices inquiring about the substantial increase in values for the properties in Stone Mountain. The response from the Assessor's Office was "Value revisions are made exclusive of what is occurring in other markets, which is to say we look at the real estate activity in Stone Mountain. The percentage of growth is relative to the tax base. Recall that when markets declined in the 2009 to 2013 timeframe, Stone Mountain experienced a considerable decline, and it has taken a much longer time to rebound. "

There were concerns about balancing the budget on the "backs of the poor", about potential gentrification within the City, and about whether the City can declare a disaster.

The City, as it is common to do, balances its budget with the City's General Fund Reserves. When preparing for adoption of the budget, any amount in estimated expense over anticipated revenue is offset by the assigning of General Fund Reserves to balance the budget. The budget is not balanced through taxation. In fact, the budget is already set at the time that ad valorem taxation process begins, and it is set based on the valuation and mil rate established during the previous year.

As mentioned in the first question, the City's Administration was concerned about the amount of increase in valuation and posed question to the Commissioners and Assessors offices. The City hears the concern and will continue to question values that warrant inquiry or investigation by the City.

Emergency declarations and disaster declarations are different. Disaster declarations are for any natural event, including any hurricane, tornado, storm, high water, wind-driven water, tidal wave, tsunami, earthquake, volcanic eruption, landslide, mudslide, snowstorm, or drought, or, regardless of cause, fire, flood, or explosion, that the President determines has caused damage of such severity that it is beyond the combined capabilities of state and local governments to respond. For example, the State, by the discretion of the U.S. President declared a natural disaster after Hurricane Irma. The City received funding for disaster relief during that time.

Emergency declarations supplement State and local or Indian tribal government efforts in providing emergency services, such as the protection of lives, property, public health, and safety, or to lessen or avert the threat of a catastrophe in any part of the United States. The Federal Government, by the authority of the President, declared a public health state of emergency during the COVID pandemic. The State of Georgia also followed the Federal Government in issuing State Executive Orders in response to the Public Health State of Emergency. The City received funding through the CARES allocation granted to DeKalb County and will receive assistance through the American Rescue Plan Act for Coronavirus relief.

The Administration will continue to research its options for aid and funding for its City and its citizens and stakeholders through whatever means are available to the City.

If taxes are increased, when will the increase occur?

Any increase in millage rate over the rollback rate will apply to the 2021 tax year with tax bills being due in September and November of this year.

Weight of community input?

The City is required to hold three (3) public hearings to hear public comment on any notice of property tax increase. The Council uses these opportunities to hear the public's concerns and considers those concerns in making their decision regarding setting the tax millage rate.

Funds received from CARES and ARPA? The City should look at the receipt of Federal funding to offset some General Fund expenses.

The City received just over \$712,000 in CARES funding from DeKalb County. The City after allocating that amount in General Fund, decided to allocate a portion of the funding to mortgage, rent and utility assistance for residents located within the City (\$165,000) and a portion of the monies to business relief assistance (approx. \$374,000) and other COVID related expense (PPE, Building Alterations, Cleaning, etc.). At present there is approximately \$92,000 remaining in the COVID relief fund.

The City has not received the American Rescue Plan Funds of \$2.4 million. Regulations of the plan explicitly prohibit using the funds for loss of revenue due to roll back of millage rates. The funding objectives for plan funds are:

- **Support urgent COVID-19 response efforts to continue to decrease spread of the virus and bring the pandemic under control**
- **Replace lost revenue for eligible state, local, territorial, and Tribal governments to strengthen support for vital public services and help retain jobs**
- **Support immediate economic stabilization for households and businesses**
- **Address systemic public health and economic challenges that have contributed to the unequal impact of the pandemic**

Information on the Plan can be found on the U.S. Department of Treasury's site at:

<https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/coronavirus/assistance-for-state-local-and-tribal-governments/state-and-local-fiscal-recovery-funds>

Why was \$1.2 million spent in a facility that the City does not use?

?? – The City currently uses all of the facilities that it currently owns and therefore, we are not aware of the facility that is referenced in this question. Specificity about the nature of the question (i.e. which facility, what project) might offer more of a targeted response.

Money from filming in the City...does it not offset the tax needs for the City?

In 2020 the City collected \$3,500 in film revenue through its Visitor Center Fund for filming within the City. As of May 31, 2021 the City has collected \$5,600 in film revenue within the fund. Expenses in the City's Visitor Center Fund are estimated at \$79,965 (inclusive of the Tourism Manager's and Attendant's salaries and benefits, Supplies and Utilities, and Event Expenses). Hypothetically anticipating that \$1,120 per month might be collected for film revenue in 2021, film revenue collected for 2021 at \$13,440 would only be 16% of the revenue collected within the Fund and does not adequately offset the \$46,815 in General Fund subsidies to the Visitor Center Fund. In other words, the City does not derive enough in film revenue to sufficiently offset its needs for revenue derived by taxes.

Why can't monies be taken from Police Services, Administration and General Government to pay for other services such as infrastructure and parks?

The City's General Fund Budget (only) at adoption was \$5,046,464. The Administration is the core department of local government services. This department houses Human Resources, Code Compliance, Zoning Administration, Permits and Licensing, and other administrative functions. The expenses within this department include salaries/employee benefits for City Manager (Chief Executive Officer), City Clerk, Code Compliance, Accountant, Administrative Asst/Communications Officer, and Clerk Receptionist); Professional services expenses such as Building Official/Fire Official/Permit/Inspection/Permit Technician services; Communications (phones, email, webhosts, etc.), Purchased services related to nuisance abatement of properties within the City; Supplies (postage, office supplies, gasoline for Code Compliance, and uniforms for Code Compliance). General Government is the City's Government-wide expense category. No salaries are housed within this department but the department expenses do include annual retirement expense for current and retired employees, medical reimbursement expenses, legal services (City Attorney and other legal representation), audit services, Liability Insurance, Contract for services agreements, and \$484+K in COVID relief funding (approx. \$374+K spent in Business Relief Assistance in 2021 and \$8+K spent in PPE and COVID Related Building Alterations). Public Safety departmental expenses include salaries for all public safety personnel (Chief, 2 Lieutenants, 1 Admin Sgt, 1 Records Clerk, 2 Investigators, and 11 patrol positions). The Lieutenant positions provide administration and patrol type services. The Admin Sgt. provides Code Compliance support in addition to police department administrative duties. The department expenses also include purchased and contracted services (IT, Equipment/Radio/Vehicle maintenance, Law enforcement liability and vehicle insurance, Radio/Phone/Computer/Internet/Email/Systems communications, Licenses and fees for data and storage for bodycams, tasers, etc.; Supplies (ammunition, office supplies, gasoline, small equipment, uniforms; Capital Outlay expenses (Vehicles, Computers, Radios, etc.) Expenses in each of these departments are specific to each department and are necessary in everyday operation and maintenance for service provision within the departments. With regards to infrastructure and parks, there is relief given to the General Fund by the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax Fund. In 2017 a referendum passed in DeKalb County that assesses an extra penny sales tax. The City is slated to receive almost \$5.7 million over a 6 year period beginning in April 2018. Approx. \$854K is to be spent on parks and \$4.4 million on roads and transportation infrastructure. Council has awarded over \$1 million in transportation funds for street and infrastructure projects and has recently

approved the solicitation of bids for improvements in Leila Mason, McCurdy, and Medlock Parks. Visit

http://www.stonemountaincity.org/main_document/index.php#revize_document_center_rz1045 for more information on SPLOST.

Detail on the City's budget can be found at

http://www.stonemountaincity.org/main_document/index.php#revize_document_center_rz2356 . Also, any amendments to increase or decrease the City's budget must be approved by

resolution (decision) of Council. These decisions are made in open meetings of Council.

Please do join the City for its regular and work sessions of Council held on the 1st and 3rd Tuesdays of each month, respectively. The meetings are held at 6:30pm and for now are held via virtual platform. Access information to the meetings are published to the City's website <https://www.stonemountaincity.org> , through Constant Contact and social media at the City of Stone Mountain – Government facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/CityofStoneMtn/> . If you do not and would like to receive news and information through Constant Contact please provide your email address to Admin Assistant Micah Richards at mrichards@stonemountaincity.org .

Why are we (taxpayer's) still funding DDA?

The DDA (Downtown Development Authority) serves as the Economic Development arm of the City. The Council adopts a fiscal year budget in December of each year for the upcoming year. The current year's adopted budget does include a General Fund allocation of \$184,853 to fund the DDA. It was mentioned during the hearing session that the City is slated to pay the note on the Old Post Office Building that is owned by the DDA. Actually, the DDA has budgeted its own reserves to pay the current year's note on the building. Council, as a majority has to decide whether or not to continue allocations to the DDA. Further answer to this question is reserved for Council.

Who does assessments?

The DeKalb County Tax Assessor's Office does county-wide assessments on the properties (real and personal) located in DeKalb County.

What did we do to decrease budget?

The City completes periodic review of its budget to determine if amendments need to be made. Particularly at mid-year (around ad valorem taxation) the City Administration does a mid-year review to determine whether revenue and expense estimates are in line with expectations and does an analysis of the expense line items to see if lines items within the following categories can be cut based on projections for the 1st half of the year:

- Purchased Services (Communications, Insurance, Travel, Education, etc)
- Supplies (Postage, Office Supplies, Small Equipment, Utilities, Gasoline, etc)
- Personal Services (Personnel positions, etc)
- Capital Outlay (Vehicle Purchases, Equipment Purchase, etc)

This year, salaries in the Administration Dept were cut with the termination of contract for the Asst. City Manager/Public Safety Director Position. Allocation to the DDA was cut with the completion of the 2020 Downtown Master Plan project. The Public Works Dept budget was cut with the completion of the 2020 Local Maintenance Improvement Grant project for street paving. No expenses were assigned to replace those costs. Overall, at adoption of the current FY2021 budget the City's budget was reduced \$497,285 in comparison to the amended budget for the previous FY2020.

Details on the City's budget as adopted for FY2021 can be found on

http://www.stonemountaincity.org/main_document/index.php#revize_document_center_rz2356 .

Information that has been given to the City Manager on Federal Guidelines for American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Funds should be disclosed to the public.

The information is provided on a public platform on the U.S. Treasury Department's website. For anyone seeking information regarding please see below:

The City Manager is also engaged in the process for ARPA funds because she, as a member of the Georgia Municipal Association's Federal Policy Council, worked with others to ensure that thought and consideration for the needs of cities, especially non-entitlement cities under 50,000 (like Stone Mountain) was had during the writing and passage of the bill for ARPA. As the government official responsible for the administration of these and all government funds collected or received by the City, The City Manager continues to avail herself of ongoing meetings with the Georgia Municipal Association and the GMA Federal Policy Council to get updates and guidance on the administration and expensing regulations relative to these funds and to voice cities concerns about those regulations.

For those seeking information about ARPA, below find direct link to the Interim Final Rule as issued by the Secretary of the Treasury to implement the Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund and the Coronavirus Local Fiscal Recovery Fund established under the American Rescue Plan Act. The States and Cities expect to receive Final Rule in July 2021.

<https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/FRF-Interim-Final-Rule.pdf>

You may also visit the U.S. Department of Treasury site as the link below to find additional information such as funding objectives and fact sheets about the American Rescue Plan.

<https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/coronavirus/assistance-for-state-local-and-tribal-governments/state-and-local-fiscal-recovery-funds>

Process to appeal taxes

Information regarding the appeals process in DeKalb County, Georgia can be found at

<https://www.dekalbcountyga.gov/property-appraisal/appeal-process> .

Effects of rolling back millage rate

The rollback rate is the rate that ensure the same dollar (revenue) amount of tax billing as was billed in the previous year. The rollback does not account for appeals or the rate of revenue collection. The City determines its current year budget based on the certified digest as of the July before the adoption of the current year's budget. Although the rollback rate might mean the same amount of dollars are being billed, it does not mean that the city will collect every dollar that is billed. Even rolling back the rate might result in a reduction in revenue expectation for the city and may necessitate a reduction in budget for the city in the form of reduced operations, benefits and/or services. Please refer to pages 2-4 of the Council packet for the upcoming 06/29/2021 special called meeting of Council. Millage rate scenarios as they relate to budgeted activity can be found at http://cms4.revize.com/revize/stonemountain/City_Clerk/Meeting_Agendas/Special%20Called%202021/Special%20Called%2006%2029%2021.pdf

Is the City reaching out to the citizens about meetings?

Yes. The City's meetings are always held on the first and third Tuesdays of each month at 6:30pm. The meetings are published on the City's website calendar and are posted on the message board at City Hall. Public hearings, like the ones on taxation, by law have to be published in the news paper of general circulation within so many days of the hearing. The City complies with those laws. Please do engage in what local government is doing by attending the meetings of Council. The City has a monthly newsletter that goes out to citizens. If you have not done so already, please provide your email to Admin Asst./Communications Specialist Micah Richards at mrichards@stonemountaincity.org or 770-498-8984 ext. 130. He will be glad to add you to the newsletter list.

As a point, the regular meetings of Council have been held on the first Tuesday for years and attendance has generally been low (only a few persons). More attendance has been seen since it was made necessary during the pandemic to meet in virtual session. Low attendance has not been because the City did not make the citizens aware. And to ensure that the City continues to engage as many people during meetings as it can, the City Council has committed to equipping its meeting room with sufficient technological upgrades to allow a combination of in-person and virtual access to the meetings. The Administration is considering a yard sign approach for the announcement of special meetings and projects.

In an effort to help to service the seniors of our area, the City entered agreement with a local non-profit (Faith Works in Action) to aid 30 seniors in receiving tablets for use. When the City was engaged in the residential assistance relief program, it coupled with a local business to allow time slots for citizens without computers, laptops, or internet access to use the local business space to connect for the purposes of completing applications for funding online. The City does want to engage its public and it does want to increase participation in processes. The City welcomes all suggestions.

Paraphrased question – why is it that in the middle of the budget year the City is stuck and cannot fund mandates?

The budget cycle for the City is a calendar year cycle which ends on December 31, 2021. This means that the City sets its budget ahead of the ad valorem tax cycle which is not accomplished until June/July of the budget year. The budget is set based on the previous year's millage rate for the previous year's property valuations. When the time comes for millage rate adoption, the City reviews its current budget to determine what effect the rollback rate will have on its current budget and it reviews its capital, maintenance and infrastructure needs (non-budgeted items) to determine if any of these needs might have the potential to be funded with any proposed tax revenue increase. Unfunded mandates are just a portion of the City's need for funding. However, capital and infrastructure needs are a greater portion of the City's need for funding, and these needs cannot go without consideration. Yes, the City has an aging stormwater system. Many of the subdivisions in town are several decades old and the infrastructure that services the storm systems in many of the city's neighborhoods have reached their useful life. The City has not raised the stormwater fees paid by the property owners – which help to pay for operational maintenance of the system. However, the fees that property owners do pay are not sufficient for system maintenance and infrastructure replacement. Failure to collect and set aside revenue for the system will only result in continued deterioration of the system.

Mandates from the Environmental Protection Division (EPD) regarding storm system upkeep, plan provisions and requirements, and system testing continue to increase the cost that many local governments have to pay to comply with EPD mandates and regulations. Reference pages 79-81 of the 06/15/2021 Work Session packet found at:
http://cms4.revize.com/revize/stonemountain/City_Clerk/Meeting_Agendas/Work%20Session%202021/Work%20Session%20Virtual%20Meeting%2006%2015%202021.pdf

The city has neglected a project that would have cost \$20,000 and that is now \$500,000.

The Administration is not sure of the project that this comment references. More specificity regarding this comment will result in a more specific response. However, the City Council has continuously voted to subsidize the stormwater fund with General Fund dollars to assist with annual operational maintenance of the system. This amount is not sufficient to include major infrastructure (pipe/structure) replacement and any increase in this allocation would warrant an increase in General Fund revenue that is usually derived from taxation. Additionally, the Council has also approved a major street project (with storm system related infrastructure) that is underway at Sexton Drive that is estimated between ½ and ¾ of a million dollars. This project is being paid for with Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) dollars. The Council's decision to use SPLOST dollars for this project helped to relieve the General Fund (taxpayers) from the burden of this project.

The Administration continues to prompt Council to consider its storm system needs and is searching out measures/ways to get outstanding projects completed. The City Manager fought along with the GMA Federal Policy Council to get stormwater approved as an expenditure that can be covered by American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds and the U.S. Treasury has recently issued guidance that does include stormwater as an approved utility for use of the funds. It will be up to Council to determine how much, if any of the ARPA funds are used for this purpose.

Citizen compared City's mil rate and services to the City of Decatur and wants to know where the money is going.

It is not fair practice to compare mil rates of cities with differing revenue structures. The City of Decatur has a stronger commercial tax base and higher average values of property and therefore, the residential taxpayer in Decatur has the potential to bear less of the tax burden. The City of Stone Mountain has a weaker commercial base and therefore the residents will bear the larger burden. Even if the budget was \$2 million dollars instead of \$5 million, the residential taxpayer would still bear the majority of the tax burden in funding General Fund government operations and services. Citizens who have not done so can review the City's adopted 2021 budget at http://www.stonemountaincity.org/main_document/index.php#revize_document_center_rz2356.

The answer to lessening the residential taxpayers' burden is Economic Development and increase of the commercial tax base within the City.

Will a 15 mil or a 16 mil rate result in a decrease in taxes?

Yes, anything below the 17.818 rollback mil rate will result in a tax decrease.

Who will assist the City Manager in reviewing the budget?

The City Manager is charged with budget preparation and maintenance, in conjunction with the heads of departments who are intricately familiar with the necessities of operations within each of their departments. The City Manager will review each department and fund level budget, have discussion with department heads and present findings and recommendations to Council. During recommendation to Council, the Council can always deliberate and offer suggestions and direction regarding budget allocations. Council has the final authority in increasing and/or decreasing the City's budgets (General Fund or otherwise).

Announcements:

The next public hearing is scheduled for Tuesday, June 29th, 2021 at 6:30pm. Public comment will be taken regarding the Notice of Property Tax Increase. A special called meeting of Council will convene immediately following the public hearing. During the special called meeting Council will consider millage rate scenarios and will consider the 2021 mil rate for ad valorem taxation. Information for access to the hearing and meeting can be found on the City's website (<https://www.stonemountaincity.org>) and will be published through Constant Contact and on the City's facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/CityofStoneMtn/>).

A community meeting is scheduled for June 28th, 2021 geared toward assisting taxpayers with help in the appeals process and other tax related processes. Information for access to the meeting will be published on Nextdoor.

Requested Council, City Manager, and Department Head Salaries are shown on the next page.

Governing Authority and Department Head Salaries by Postion

Governing Authority	Annual
Mayor	12,000.00
Council - Post 1	3,600.00
Council - Post 2	3,600.00
Council - Post 3	3,600.00
Council - Post 4	3,600.00
Council - Post 5	3,600.00
Council - Post 6	3,600.00
	33,600.00

Dept. 030 Administration

Position	Biweekly	Annual
City Manager	3,963.85	103,060.10

Dept. 040 Public Safety

Position	Biweekly	Annual
Chief	2,971.26	77,252.76

Dept. 050 Public Works

Position	Biweekly	Annual
Director	2,946.94	76,620.44

Dept. 130 DDA

Position	Biweekly	Annual
DDA Director	1,961.77	51,006.02

*Base pay salaries shown. The annual allocations shown above do not include benefits such as health, dental, life, short-term disability, etc. or any such benefit equivalent.