

MARILYN EDWARDS
County Judge



280 North College, Suite 500
Fayetteville, AR 72701

WASHINGTON COUNTY, ARKANSAS
County Courthouse

July 7, 2016

Members of the Washington County Quorum Court

RE: 2017 Budget Process

Justices of the Peace:

I wanted to put some thoughts out there regarding last year's budget process. I believe it is incumbent upon me to say some things, and to say them in a way that there can be no misunderstanding.

I told you at the beginning of the hearings last year that the product and the process would belong to you. I also asked you at the beginning to lay out where you wanted to be at the end of the process in terms of reserves, to justify why you wanted that number, and to make a plan as to how you were going to get there. You did finally determine what amount you wanted the reserves to be but there was never an announced consensus as to the reason why this was the appropriate amount of reserves, nor was there a plan for how to get there, other than a last minute grab at monies that traditionally have gone to the Road Department. Once again I am asking you on the front end, "what do you want the reserves to be for 2017 and how do you propose to get there?" When preparing our budgets we all need to know the constraints under which we are working. While I realize that with 15 different people on the Quorum Court, there may be 15 different sets of goals, you can and should, at the beginning of the process, tell us what you want, by majority vote.

Last year, you spent almost 15 meetings (and therefore, \$45,000 of taxpayer money) going line-by-line through budgets only to come to the end and say "cut operations by 2% across the board" and then, finally, to raid the Road Department Fund by \$1.2 million. You could have done that at the beginning of the process. In other words, there seemed to be no thought in September as to where you wanted be in December, and not just for reserves. The Quorum Court's primary responsibility is the budget. The citizens of this County deserve a budget process that has focus and significance.

Second, if you have a problem or concern with a particular department, I am asking you to take it up first with the appropriate elected official or department head in advance of calling someone out in public. I heard it stated in the budget hearings that "this is the only time we have to ask questions." That is simply incorrect. The County offices, all of them, are open every working day of the year from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm. Every elected official can and will avail himself,

herself and staff to you on the slightest of notice. If you want to ask a question, you have email, phone, or in-person visits available to you. Several of you have said, "I don't know why people are upset. We aren't belittling people." I respectfully disagree. Many of you cross examine county employees in a way you would not tolerate if you were in the chair. On this point, I cannot speak for all elected officials, but I can tell you this: my employees will be instructed to simply leave when they are being mistreated. If that means you don't pass that budget, then that is what it means. You would not put up with being embarrassed in this way. Treat others the way you wish to be treated.

Third, you are going to have to actually deal with some issues this year that you have put off. In 2012, when you cut a one-half mill from our revenue, there were two points articulated over and over again: first, the reserves were too large and we needed to give that money back to the people of Washington County; second, you could put the millage back if you wanted to. The goal of shrinking the reserves has been realized and then some. Last year you had the chance to restore the millage in the face of shrinking reserves and you refused to do it. A large part of the problem is your conscious decisions to continue to spend while refusing to replace the revenue you cut four years ago. You cannot cut your way out of the County's budget issues.

Fourth, the County runs on two things: physical capital and human capital. For the last couple of years, you have neglected our investments in both. While I am encouraged to hear some support for raises, I know that it is July and a lot can happen between now and the time you vote on a final budget.

I would like this year's budget process to be collaborative instead of adversarial.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions. My door is always open.

Sincerely,

Marilyn Edwards
County Judge

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