

# Sunset Council Cuts Tax Rate By 3.2 Cents, OKs \$1.3 Million Budget

BY SUSAN USHER

In a quiet one-hour meeting Monday night Sunset Beach council members unanimously cut its tax rate by 3.2 cents and adopted a \$1.3 million budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1.

Calculated on an estimated tax base of \$329 million, up \$111 million from a year ago, and a collection rate of 96.7 percent, the tax rate of 13.5 cents per \$100 of real property valuation is expected to generate \$429,715 in revenues. A typical homeowner's town tax bill will go up 15 percent to 25 percent.

No increase is planned in water rates this year, even though the county is increasing the wholesale rate for water.

Councilwoman Julia Thomas reiterated her evolving position on the budget, from first advocating no cut from the previous 16.7-cent rate to acceptance of a 14.5-cent rate. "I was not for the compromise to 13.5-cents because it meant dipping into reserve funds before even get started," she said, adding that she thought the town administrator should be asked her opinion of the budget.

Prior to adoption of a tax rate, she cautioned council members to remember the town's situation is "unstable."

"We don't want to have to go to our reserves in an emergency," she said.

Town Administrator Linda Fluegel said the town could "make it" on the proposed budget based on a 13.5-cent tax rate. "If we end up in a lawsuit, as I've mentioned earlier, we'll still need to seek funds elsewhere."

Saying she was "real comfortable" with the figure after talking with Fluegel, Councilwoman Cheri Cheek, moved adoption of the 13.5-cent tax rate.

The budget includes \$175,000 in contingency line items in case the town is required to do a stormwater system study or environmental impact statement for the regional sewer project or is sued over its participation in the project or over its zoning of Bird Island.

It provides for most of the new items Fluegel had proposed based on citizens' requests, such as two dune crossovers on the east end, token sums for beach cleanup and repairs in the event of a storm or other event; portable toilets for beach visitors' use; benches along the Twin Lakes; some sidewalk construction; and monthly collection of yard debris.

The only item not covered was expansion of the street lighting program. In past years the town has only added six lights a year, which Fluegel said isn't keeping up with the demand. The town may still be able to add additional lights from any funds remaining at the end of the fiscal year, at a cost of roughly \$72 per month per light.

Reserve accounts established in the budget process set aside additional money for long-term capital projects that include a new town hall, beach renourishment, beach access, sidewalks and public restroom facilities, as well as water system improvements.

Current estimated pricetag for the new town hall is \$324,000, up from \$250,000 a year ago, excluding removal of the old town hall and site cleanup, and furnishings for the new building.

The cleanup cost is uncertain, said Fluegel, asking, "Do you know anyone who wants to buy a town hall?"

Cost has increased with changes in plans and resulting delays in bringing the project to bid, Thomas said. The town hall will be built on a new location and will be designed to meet future needs, 4,544 square feet instead of 4,040 feet. The new location will require more paving and more landscaping.

Councilman Herb Klinker had asked the project architect for a breakdown of costs last week, prompting a lengthy explanation by Thomas Monday of the process used in developing the project.

Council fielded only one question from the audience during a public hearing on the budget. Former councilwoman Minnie Hunt inquired whether state law restricts how chambers of commerce may use contributions from municipalities. Sunset Beach allocates \$12,000 in its budget to the South Brunswick Islands Chamber for tourism promotion.

**Cable TV Changes Ahead?**

A proposal to collect franchise fees from Atlantic Telephone Co.'s Cable TV operation would bring in \$7,000 a year in town revenues. But it would require ATMC tacking on a 53-cent-a-month charge or residents' cable bills, about \$6 a year, since franchise fees are not part of its current rate schedule.

Council members took no action

on the proposal until they hear from a committee named by Mayor Barber to explore alternatives for cable service when ATMC's franchise comes up for renewal in the next year.

"My preference would be to get another cable service in here whatever the rates would be," said Mayor Pro-tem Ed Gore. He and Barber have been longtime outspoken critics of ATMC's service, programming and use of converter boxes.

Barber said there are other companies interested in serving Sunset Beach, but only if a larger area is involved. "They want Carolina Shores, that area in, but I'm not going to go knocking on doors in Carolina Shores."

The town committee may invite Carolina Shores to participate in its meetings.

Sunset Beach cannot prohibit ATMC from seeking a franchise or prevent existing customers from continuing to receive ATMC service.

**Fireworks Still Banned**

The N.C. General Assembly may have adopted a bill sponsored by Rep. David Redwine (D-Brunswick) to allow sale of certain fireworks in the state, but that isn't keeping local municipalities from maintaining stricter limits.

"Nothing has changed at Sunset Beach," Administrator Linda Fluegel advised council members. "Fireworks are still prohibited and police will continue to confiscate them."

**Apology In Order?**

Mayor Mason Barber opened Monday's meeting with an announcement that no comments from or muttering among audience members would be allowed during the business portion of the meeting.

"There's no need for it and we're not going to tolerate it," he said.

During public comments at the close of the meeting, audience member Therese Regan pointed out that Barber had reprimanded the audience's behavior at the June 6 council meeting, but not Mayor Pro-tem Ed Gore on his outburst toward an audi-

ence member. She suggested that a public apology was in order.

Barber declined further comment, saying, "That is between the two of them. The town is not going to get involved."

**Other Business**

In other action, council members: ■ heard from Fluegel that she is hiring two recent high school graduates to serve as code enforcement officers. They will patrol the beach seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., citing violators of town laws that regulate animals on the beach strand, walking on the dunes, littering, and using personal watercraft and surfboards in undesignated areas. She has also directed Police Chief J.B. Buell to make sure town officers enforce local as well as state laws.

■ approved the plat for the John Frink Subdivision, a 24.1-acre tract near Sea Trail's Rees Jones course. Forty-six single family homes are planned.

■ referred a letter from Fairway Drive homeowner Alfred Cambria to the planning board for a recommendation regarding his request for establishment of a platted cul-de-sac.

■ moved to the Maples Club House at Sea Trail a 7 p.m. Aug. 1 public hearing on a proposal to allow "Hilton Head"-type miniature golf as a special permitted use in the island business district.

■ tentatively set a meeting for 9 a.m. Tuesday, July 19, with Bird Island owner Janie Page Price's attorney, Glenn Dunn of Raleigh.

■ agreed to a planning board recommendation to allow the Bird Island Preservation Society to continue posting schedules of the public outings it leads to Bird Island if the notice is approved by council, only one posted at each beach access, and all removed at the end of the tour season in October. The notices were previously considered a violation of the sign ordinance.

■ voted unanimously, as it has before, not to join Cape Fear Council of Governments.

heard complaints from audience members about littering, particularly on the beach; abuse of litter receptacles; officers' failure to enforce the town ordinance banning dogs from the beach during certain hours; and Waste Industries' practice of not returning cans to houses from streetside.

## Privilege License Applications Due

Taxpayers who are liable for state privilege licenses should apply before July 1, advises J.C. Raines, Brunswick County revenue officer.

Applications for licenses, along with payment, should be mailed to the N.C. Department of Revenue, P.O. Box 25000, Raleigh NC 27640, or submitted to the local field office at 143 Holden Beach Rd., Shallotte.

Penalty for failure to comply is 5 percent for each delinquent month, Raines said.

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