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Mableton City Council OKs spending plan

By Annie Mayne

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MABLETON — The Mableton City Council approved a \$3.5 million spending plan that will guide the city's financial decision making through June 30, 2024, at their Thursday night meeting, held at the Riverside Epicenter.

Some council members clapped after unanimously approving the spending plan, which has been subject to community and council debate for the last few months. Councilwoman Patricia Auch has been the main voice of concern among the council members.

Auch told the MDJ after the vote that she still had reservations about the pace with which the plan had been presented, but felt it was time to move Mableton forward.

"This is what we're doing, this is the path

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forward, so it would've been pointless to vote against it at this point," Auch said. "It's how the council is set up to work. I'm not always going to get my way, but I can't keep digging my heels. We've made a decision, as a council, how we'll move forward."

THE PLAN

The city projects nearly \$3.8 million in revenues to be collected in the next seven months, with \$2.25 million coming from motor vehicle taxes alone. Mableton has set their expenditures at roughly \$3.5 million, which will leave the city with just over \$309,000 in the bank by the start of the fiscal year on July 1, 2024.

The city is not under any legal requirement to create a spending plan or budget just yet. Mableton Mayor Michael Owens has repeatedly said the plan has been created in an act of transparency.

"We wanted to make sure, again, that we're being transparent and forthright about the money that is coming in, and the expected expenditures that we are going to have," Owens said.

Before the plan's passage, Councilwoman Debora Herndon voiced a few questions she had received directly from constituents.

"Is it just a green light to spend money?" Herndon asked. "Or is there another step that takes place?"

City attorney Emilia Walker- Ashby explained that the spending plan approves individual line items up to a specific limit.

"Whatever amount you have put in here, (the line item) cannot exceed that amount for anything," Walker-Ashby said.

She also clarified that Owens will have the power to approve expenditures up to \$5,000 for basic needs, per transaction.

"That would give him the authorization for \$5,000, per transaction, to be able to make those purchases at or under that amount without having to go to the council for permission," Walker-Ashby said.

There is a loophole. If the council has previously approved a certain expense over \$5,000, Owens will be able to authorize it without asking the council.

"If (an expense) is over \$5,000, the only way the mayor will be able to authorize it, is if (the council) has previously authorized it," Walker-Ashby said. "To the extent those funds have been previously authorized by you, and they don't go over the amounts you put in here, then the mayor would not need to come to you."

The city's litigation services, city clerk services and trainings from the Georgia Municipal Association are among the previously approved funds Owens would not need to seek approval for in the future.

"Our goal is to put together a spending plan that basically allocates funding in buckets," Owens said. "So that once we do have our departments up and going, they will be prefunded, if you will."

BUSINESS LICENSES

The council also voted 7-0 to approve an occupation tax ordinance, which will allow the city to begin collecting fees from business licenses issued in Mableton starting Dec. 13.

All Mableton businesses will now get their licenses from the city, allowing those occupation taxes to go directly to Mableton's government, as opposed to Cobb County. Businesses that require special regulation, such as health spas and pawn shops, will still need to get their regulatory certification from the county.

"(Required businesses) will pay the occupation tax to the city of Mableton, and the city will issue them the occupation tax certificate, but they will still be required to pay a regulatory fee to the county for the ability to engage in that particular occupation," Walker-Ashby said.

Mableton plans to eventually take over regulatory certification for those businesses as their government grows in staff and capacity.

There was slight confusion among the council when discussing adoption of a schedule for occupation taxes. Cobb County has two different schedules for occupation taxes, allowing county employees to exercise discretion about taxes paid between categories of businesses.

The differences are minor, but by having two schedules, Cobb County has created a potential for disparity among businesses that are bringing in the same revenue.

"It's not a large difference, but it is a difference," Walker-Ashby said. "I was told that the county authorized the staff to charge businesses within the confines of these two schedules, but they did not dictate which schedule (employees) have to use."

Walker-Ashby picked one of the county's schedules, the A-2 list, and suggested Mableton have every business pay a standard tax rate based on their revenue, leaving no room for discrepancies.

The council seemed to agree on this idea—but Auch wanted to ensure that whatever schedule the city adopted would be the lowest set of taxes for Mableton businesses.

"I think almost all of us (council members) made the promise of 'same taxes, better service,'" Auch said. "I don't know that we should be charging higher taxes just because it's convenient for us."

Hoping for more discussion, Auch initially voted against the occupation tax ordinance. But before the official record was taken, Walker-Ashby clarified Auch would only be able to make a motion to reconsider the ordinance in the future if she was a part of the majority vote, leading Auch to change her vote to a "yes."

'OUR VOICES MUST BE HEARD'

Two Mableton citizens and Councilman T.J. Ferguson used their respective comment times to express disappointment with a recent rezoning near Six Flags Over Georgia that was approved by the Cobb Board of Commissioners.

"The Six Flags area will be an entertainment district for the city of Mableton," Ferguson said. "I ask the Board of Commissioners to stop putting things in Mableton that other jurisdictions don't want." The county commission approved a request from Tunnel to Towers foundation, a non-profit serving first responders and veterans, to convert the closed Wingate hotel that sits between the Riverside EpiCenter and Six Flags into affordable housing for veterans.

"Know your City Council is against the case simply because of location and not, let me repeat, not, because of the Tunnel to Towers mission," Ferguson said.

Ferguson, who "applauded" Commissioner Monique Sheffield and Chairwoman Lisa Cupid for working with the council to "make Mableton awesome," still urged Mableton residents to continue to make their voices heard to the commission.

"Voice your opinion about any and all zoning cases that affect Mableton. Our voices must be heard," Ferguson said. "We need a city because seven looking out for 70,000 is so much

more effective than five governing 700,000 plus. Have your voices heard at 100 Cherokee Street, people."

'NO SHORTCUTS'

The council also voted 7-0 to approve a resolution adopting a preliminary classification and payment plan for 13 positions, paving the way for Mableton to hire a city manager, community development director, and IT director, among other things.

Owens called the meeting "a milestone night," and said this is the moment Mableton has been waiting for.

"There's no shortcuts to getting it right. At times I think it can seem drawn out, and long, and arduous. But it's also thought-provoking, and inspiring, and it's this visionary work that we're doing," said Owens. "We're literally building a new city. How fantastic is that?"



From left: Councilwoman Patricia Auch, Councilman T.J. Ferguson, Councilwoman Debora Herndon. The Mableton City Council approved their transitional spending plan, an occupational tax ordinance, and a preliminary classification and pay plan for future employees at Thursday night's meeting, held at the Riverside EpiCenter.

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Mableton resident Michael Murphy speaks to the Mableton City Council at Thursday night's meeting about the Cobb Board of Commissioners' recent approval to rezone an old Mableton hotel into an apartment building for veterans. The county commission voted 4-0 to rezone the property, causing uproar among Mableton council members and residents like Murphy.

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