Ingham County Board of Commissioners Joint Republican and Democratic Caucus Meeting  
September 26, 2017  
Minutes

Members Present: Anthony (arrived at 5:22 p.m.), Crenshaw, Celentino, Grebner, Hope, Koenig, McGrain, Sebolt (arrived at 5:25 p.m.), Nolan, Tennis, Naeyaert and Schafer  

Members Absent: Banas, Hope, and Maiville  

Others Present: Jared Cypher, Teri Morton, Michael Townsend, Jill Bauer, Tim Dolehanty, Becky Bennett, and Liz Kane  

Call to Order  

Chairperson Crenshaw called the meeting to order at 5:05 p.m.

Limited Public Comment  

None.

1. Discussion Regarding Talking Points/Town Hall Presentation on Tax Millage  

Chairperson Crenshaw introduced the information sheet the Controller’s Office had prepared regarding the tax allocation millage  

Commissioner Schafer stated he appreciated staff putting together the talking points about the County millage, as the public was already asking about the ballot question.

Commissioner Grebner stated that he assumed the public would not care about the proposal until they received their ballots, which for some would be by absentee, and the others would be on Election Day. He further stated that when voters did see the question on the ballot, they might be confused as to what it meant.

Commissioner Naeyaert reminded the members that she had requested they come with the knowledge of what other ballot proposals and events were happening in their districts that might affect the community’s view of the millage. She stated that Mason Public Schools had a bond proposal on the ballot, and she was not sure if the City of Mason had something on the ballot.

Chairperson Crenshaw stated that Lansing did not have a millage on the ballot.

Commissioner Grebner stated the City of East Lansing had ballot questions that would confuse the voters.
Commissioner Celentino stated that there was no millage on the ballot in Lansing Township, but Lansing Township had just decided to assess 90 dollars more for residents to fund public safety.

Commissioner McGraw stated he was concerned that voters would be frustrated with millages, especially in light of Lansing Township’s increase and East Lansing’s ballot proposals. He thanked the Controller for compiling the information sheet.

Commissioner McGraw stated that he recalled the decision had been made to use the millage money to fund OPEB. He asked if that decision would be discussed in the meeting, and if it would be official in this setting.

Commissioner Koenig asked if the tax limitation question could be called something else.

Commissioner Crenshaw stated the Commissioners had to be neutral in this position. He further stated he believed that some positions would come back into play if the tax millage passed.

Tim Dolehanty, Controller, stated he did not believe the decisions on what would be funded if the tax millage passed had been made yet.

Commissioner McGraw clarified that if the tax millage was approved by the voters, then the increase would begin at the next collection.

Teri Morton, Deputy Controller, stated it would not take effect until the summer of 2018, because that was the first collection in 2018.

Commissioner McGraw asked if that meant that none of the money would be on-hand until the second half of 2018.

Ms. Morton stated that was correct, but the funds could still be applied to 2018 because they did the same thing with the General Fund budget.

Commissioner McGraw stated the funds could be applied to 2018, but they could also hold off applying the funds until 2019, to reduce the use of fund balance.

Commissioner Tennis stated the funds in 2018 could be used to reduce the use of fund balance.

Ms. Morton stated that was the Controller’s recommendation.

Commissioner Koenig stated she understood that the millage was originally going to help save essential services. She further stated that did not seem to be the case with the current plan, and asked the Controller if the tax millage would help cover essential services or if it was just funding OPEB.

Mr. Dolehanty stated this would help fund pensions, not OPEB. He further stated that if the County made that pension payment, then they might have to offset the cost by cutting services.

Commissioner Grebner clarified that the Controller’s recommended budget that the Board of Commissioners was in the process of ratifying drew down the County’s reserves by $3 million.
which meant the County was balancing their budget by spending down their savings. He further stated he supposed the County could do that for another year, but sooner or later, the County would run out of savings or go bankrupt.

Commissioner Grebner stated that the County was not running out of savings this year, because there were no new expenses, and there was $3 million being drawn down from the County’s savings. He further stated that if the County did not levy taxes, sooner rather than later, there would have to be drastic cuts in services.

Commissioner Grebner stated that if you looked at the language on the ballot, it almost looked like a tax cut because it was establishing separate tax limitations. He further stated that in his research, he had found that Clinton County just passed a similar proposal, and Lenawee County had one on the ballot as well, which meant that it could pass in more conservative places.

Commissioner McGrain stated that the information sheet prepared by the Controller showed what was being spent down from the County’s piggybank, and that it was better to do this now as a minimal tax increase, to prevent a catastrophe in a couple of years.

Commissioner Schafer asked if it would be appropriate to send the information sheets to the township supervisors in the County.

Becky Bennett, Board of Commissioners Office Director, stated that one of the information sheets already had been sent to townships.

Discussion.

Commissioner Schafer asked if it would be possible to distribute the information to the township supervisors.

Mr. Dolchany stated they sure could.

Chairperson Crenshaw asked if the members were all clear that they were telling their constituents in best layman terms they could, that this tax millage was needed, and essential services would be cut otherwise.

Chairperson Crenshaw asked if the Board of Commissioners could define what would be cut if the tax millage did not pass.

Commissioner Naeyaert identified the current County millages as presented on a handout as possible program cuts.

Commissioner Grebner stated those programs Commissioner Naeyaert identified actually had their own millages and sources of funding. He further stated that services in the Prosecutor’s Office and the jail could be cut; the quality of service at the County Clerk, Treasurer, and Register of Deeds’ Offices could decrease; and the County could potentially reduce hours of operation, close health clinics and parks, and raise fees if the tax millage did not pass.
Ms. Morton stated that the County did eliminate 28 positions from the 2018 budget, most of which were vacant. She further stated that would be hard to do two years in a row without cutting essential services if the tax millage did not pass.

Commissioner Nolan clarified that most of the eliminated positions were vacant.

Ms. Morton stated there was one Corrections Officer position and one Parks Department position that were currently filled that would either be eliminated or cut to ¾ time. =

Commissioner Nolan asked if anyone would be losing their jobs.

Ms. Morton stated that one person would be losing their job, and one person would be reduced to ¾ time.

Commissioner Nolan asked what departments those employees were in.

Ms. Morton stated that the Parks Department position would be reduced to ¾ time, and one Corrections Officer at the Sheriff’s Office would be eliminated. She further stated that they expected some turnover at the jail, so the position would likely be vacant by the time it was cut.

Commissioner Koenig stated the Board of Commissioners needed to express the urgency of the tax millage, because it was going to be tough for the County even if the millage did pass. She asked how he Board of Commissioners could factually convey that urgency, because voters would likely see the question on the ballot and vote no, or be indifferent if they did not understand.

Discussion.

Commissioner McGrain suggested that someone on the Board of Commissioners author an op-ed to publish in the Lansing State Journal, City Pulse, or other publications around the County. He further stated that the op-ed should convey the importance of the tax millage without explicitly telling voters to vote for it.

Commissioner Anthony arrived at 5:22 p.m.

Chairperson Crenshaw asked if the Chamber of Commerce had reviewed the tax millage and expressed any opinion on it.

Commissioner Anthony stated the Chamber of Commerce had not taken a stance on the tax millage yet. She further stated that the Chamber was usually opposed or neutral when it came to millages.

Commissioner Crenshaw stated he expected the Chamber of Commerce to express their opinion on the tax millage later.

Commissioner Anthony stated it would be better if the Board of Commissioners could be proactive in their messaging, rather than being reactive to other interest groups’ stances. She
further stated it would be smart to have the Board of Commissioners steer the conversation, rather than be reactive.

Commissioner Naeveert stated she thought each Commissioner should author an op-ed or get behind an op-ed, because she knew her constituents would not be responsive if Commissioner Anthony talked to them about what was good for their district. She further stated that the Board of Commissioners needed to get ahead of the Chamber of Commerce’s message, and get their information out quickly.

Commissioner Sebolt arrived at 5:25 p.m.

Commissioner McGain stated one way to respond to the Chamber of Commerce was to argue that the County’s hands were tied, and while the County had done a good job over the years managing the budget, it was now in a bind. He further stated that one of the Chamber of Commerce’s talking points was usually “wants vs. needs,” and this tax millage covered everyone’s needs.

Commissioner Nolan stated that whoever drafted the op-ed noted that 28 employees had been reduced from the County already. She further stated the op-ed should mention that the County was working hard on this and had taken action to save millions of dollars already.

Commissioner Sebolt stated when he had been talking to voters about the tax millage already, he mentioned the County’s AAA+ bond rating, and that this tax millage was not out of fiscal malfeasance, the pressure was coming from the outside with the pension payments.

Commissioner Schafer stated he thought the op-ed should mention that the Sheriff’s Office had lost 56 positions since 2006, so he believed the County had lost way beyond the 28 positions.

Commissioner McGain stated he thought that it was likely that the two positions the Board of Commissioners had saved this year, the Assistant Prosecuting Attorney and the Fugitive Team Detective, could be on the chopping block in 2018 if the tax millage did not pass.

Chairperson Crenshaw clarified that there was a consensus from the members to publish an op-ed, sooner rather than later. He asked who was going to write it.

Commissioner Anthony stated she could do the op-ed on behalf of the entire Board of Commissioners, if she had staff assistance in drafting it. She further stated the op-ed could be repurposed for use in local papers as well.

Commissioner Grebner stated that in the case Commissioner Anthony described where the op-ed was drafted by staff, the op-ed could not urge support of the tax millage. He further stated the op-ed could present the facts about what would happen if the tax millage did not pass.

Discussion.

Commissioner Koenig asked if the op-ed would be more powerful if all of the Commissioners’ names were on it, to say they were all behind it.
Commissioner Naeyaert stated that having all of the names on the op-ed would show it was a bipartisan effort.

Commissioner Anthony stated that they could also provide talking points to County-wide officials, since they had their own constituencies that reached out to them, and the officials could educate them.

Chairperson Crenshaw stated the talking points were already sent to township supervisors, but they could also be sent to County-wide officials and clerks.

Ms. Bennett stated the talking points were already sent to clerks in some cases, if she could not find the supervisor’s email.

Commissioner Naeyaert stated she was going to ask Sheriff Wrigglesworth to go with her to some of her townships, to talk about the tax millage. She further stated that made an impact on her constituents, when the Sheriff could highlight the services his office provided and the position cuts it had taken.

Commissioner Anthony stated she and Commissioner Koenig had spoken to staff during their weekly meetings about a millage plan. She further stated they had discussed they needed to be smart about when they put the jail millage and other millages on the ballot, because voters could start to get confused and end up opposing them if there were too many millages.

Commissioner Anthony stated there needed to be a strategy in place every time the County wanted to put a millage on the ballot and they should learn from this experience.

Chairperson Crenshaw asked the members when they wanted to distribute the information.

Discussion.

Commissioner Grebner stated the information should be distributed sooner rather than later.

Commissioner Koenig stated absentee ballots were already available.

Commissioner Grebner stated that there were three places in the County (Lansing, East Lansing and Mason), where the turnout would be driven by local items on the ballot, and the rest of the county’s turnout would be mostly elderly people on the permanent absent voter list that get ballots for every election. He further stated the rest of the County would be confused about the question.

Chairperson Crenshaw stated there had been a suggestion to have a town hall event and asked Commissioner Anthony to explain.

Commissioner Anthony stated that in the spirit of educating voters and providing an opportunity to frame the County’s message and showcase services the County provided, there had been a discussion to have a budget town hall that was driven by staff. She further stated that given some of the recent development in the paper regarding the County and the discussions that were happening at the County level, she did not know if it was a good time to hold an event.
Commissioner Anthony stated information could be disseminated about the tax millage without holding an event. She asked the members if they thought it was a good time to hold an event, as they were not too far into the planning process yet and it could still be cancelled.

Commissioner Nolan stated she did not think it would be a sure thing, and she thought that it would be questionable.

Commissioner Anthony asked if Commissioner Nolan had meant that the tax millage was questionable, or the town hall event was questionable.

Commissioner Nolan stated she thought the town hall event would be questionable, because she did not think it would be what the Board of Commissioners wanted it to be.

Commissioner McGrain stated that given some of the concerns at the County level, he did not think they had the timeframe to hold a town hall on the tax millage and explain how other issues interrelated.

Commissioner Koenig stated that was the discussion she and Commissioner Anthony had with staff. She further stated they were wondering who would come to the event and why they would be there, whether they would want to complain about the recent events, or if they would want information.

Commissioner Koenig stated those questions made her uncertain that holding a town hall would be a good idea.

Commissioner Sebolt stated he did not think the members should concern themselves with who would show up to the event. He further stated he thought it was the Board of Commissioners’ responsibility to be accessible to constituents and provide information and answer their questions on any topic related to county issues.

Commissioner Naeyaert stated she was willing to go to townships to discuss the tax millage. She further stated that if the County was going to hold an event in Lansing, she would also suggest holding one in the Mason area to get the outer County residents involved as well.

Commissioner Naeyaert stated she would like to see something that encompassed more districts if they held an event. She further stated she was not afraid to go to every one of her townships to say this was happening, because her constituents knew what side of the aisle she was on, and it made a difference to hear from her that the County needed this millage.

Commissioner Celentino stated he did not think anyone on the Board of Commissioners was afraid, and he went to a lot of neighborhood meetings in his district and would continue to go to them to get information out. He further stated he was concerned the town hall event would get bogged down with other issues and they would not be able to explain the whole tax millage and voters might not understand what was really happening.

Commissioner Koenig asked if it would be more effective to have a lot of little events.
Commissioner Sebolt stated he was still in favor of holding the town hall event. He further stated a lot of organizations were holding City Council candidate forums that in the City of Lansing that he tried to attend, because he knew the attendees would be voting, and even if the organizers did not give him a platform to speak during the event, he talked to voters there one-on-one.

Chairperson Crenshaw stated sometimes the organizers let groups put information on tables outside of those events.

Commissioner Naeyaert stated she agreed with Commissioner McGrain’s concerns, but she also agreed with Commissioner Sebolt, because everyone would let the commissioners speak at events.

Commissioner McGrain stated he did not know what they would hand out at the events. He suggested the op-ed could be distributed, especially when he attended his neighborhood meetings.

Chairperson Crenshaw asked the members who was in favor of doing the town hall event.

Discussion.

Commissioner Anthony stated the initial date of October 11, 2017 for the town hall event had been sent around, but she knew there were conflicts with that date.

Discussion.

Commissioner Anthony stated the two options were to stand together at a town hall event, or to publish an op-ed and be ambassadors in their own communities. She further stated she would love a consensus from the members on what they preferred.

Commissioner Naeyaert stated she would bring any Commissioners to her district.

MOVED BY COMM. SEBOLT, SUPPORTED BY COMM. TENNIS, TO HOST A TOWN HALL EVENT.

Discussion.

Commissioner Naeyaert asked if the members would be willing to hold an event it Mason if they were planning on having an event in Lansing.

MOVED BY COMM. NAeyaERT, SUPPORTED BY COMM. SCHAFER, TO AMEND THE MOTION TO INCLUDE A SECOND EVENT IN MASON.

Commissioner Anthony asked if it was feasible to find a date for another event.

Ms. Bennett stated October 11 was the only date in October that was available.

Discussion.
Commissioner McGrain stated if the second town hall event was coordinated with the Commissioners whose districts were involved, then it could be done on a smaller scale and would have similar information to the Lansing event.

Discussion.

THE AMENDMENT CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY. Absent: Commissioners Banas, Hope and Maiville

Commissioner Koenig stated she was only weighing whether holding a town hall event was an effective use of time. She further stated she did not know and she was having a hard time making sure whatever the Board of Commissioners did, it got the message out to the most people.

Commissioner Naeyaert stated she agreed with Commissioner Koenig, as she believed the most effective use of time was to go to meetings in her townships since she did not have neighborhood meetings to attend. She further stated that voters would not show up if they did not know what was on the ballot.

Commissioner Anthony stated if the members agreed to do one of the two options well, she was comfortable with that.

Commissioner McGrain stated he recalled the State of the County event had gone well. He asked if this event would be on the same scale as that event.

Commissioner Anthony stated the town hall event would not be on the same scale as the State of the County event.

Commissioner McGrain stated he thought the event could be done on a smaller scale in terms of time.

Commissioner Sebolt stated even if no one showed up to the event, the media advisories and other posts would be free media about the tax millage.


Commissioner Crenshaw stated Commissioner Anthony and Ms. Bennett would coordinate the event and would get the information to the Commissioners. He asked staff who was preparing materials to get those completed as soon as possible so Commissioners could have them in-hand when they visit neighborhood groups.

Commissioner Naeyaert stated if she did host something in the Mason area, she would send an email to invite other Commissioners so they could show their support.
Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 5:53 p.m.

BARB BYRUM, CLERK OF THE BOARD