

Subject: **Oconee Chair- Part-time or Full-time!? A Continuing Topic**

As a retired official, I have managed to remove myself from the County day-to-day operations. However, when I retired I stated that I would continue to be interested and would comment on issues of importance to our county and community. One issue being discussed now does “rev up” my “gears”- so here goes on the Chairman status.

Some of last year’s campaign rhetoric is coming back to haunt the current incumbent. With less than 36 hours of awareness of his involvement in running for the job, he made certain specific pledges about the county that will be revisited time and again during his time in office. At the time, I felt that he had heeded the advice of a few critics who wanted to take a slap at me and my service. I also felt that some aggressive recruiters prevailed on him to take the job with the idea that it could be ceremonial and he would continue to enjoy his retirement from the Extension Service with its retirement benefits and perks. However, the job is not exactly like it appears to armchair quarterbacks. Incumbency and time provide strong doses of reality.

**I grew into Oconee County Government.** I served 10 years as County Attorney, 18 years as City Attorney, 18 years as school board attorney, four years as a commissioner in the 70’s. I attended numerous seminars and governmental associations training and seminar sessions. At the expense of appearing immodest, I felt as qualified in County Government as any City or County Administrator that I have met in Georgia. I also had a strong sense and love of community. An important goal and motivation for my serving was to see Oconee be respected as a community. It was apparent that many in Athens and other areas of the state considered us a “backward, rural, country county” that would and should be consolidated. We were often ignored or just taken for granted. Thankfully, with the help of many others we managed to achieve that Respect Status and have become an important regional Player. THAT IS NO ACCIDENT, to which long-time observers can well attest. It took years of planning and effort.

Just like the 12 years that I worked with the **Bear Creek Regional Reservoir Project**, the long-time effort and hard work often went unreported or unnoticed unless something controversial occurred. Now with the filling of the Reservoir, the most uninterested citizens and some former antagonists are now “believers” and are impressed with their visits to the site.

So it is with Oconee County. We quietly hired planners and other professional staff and worked on infrastructure plans for years, with much public input I might add- with numerous citizen committees, meetings, annual citizen planning meetings at the Civic Center. We published much information about the county and had wide public support for SPLOST funding and other fund sources to get the infrastructure in place. As with Bear Creek, there were some nay-sayers, who were a small but vocal minority. As we progressed with improved roads, water and sewer, we started to realizing success with regional stores such as Home Depot, Lowes, Grocery Stores etc. (I think this is just the beginning if we continue to shepherd and channel our limited resources toward long term planning and projects; i.e. the LAS sewer system and Mars Hill Road widening which are still in process although started years ago.)

With that background I want to comment on some of the media reports, statements of the incumbent, and editorials on Oconee County’s Chairman position. I will address certain key points with some facts, and yes some opinion, based on 26 years of experience in “the arena” which gives unique insight.

1. **OCONEE VOTED TO GO TO COUNTY MANAGER ABOUT 10 YEARS AGO:** That is a Media myth that is often presented as “fact”. Around 1980, the Oconee voters, in a county referendum, strongly and lopsidedly defeated a formal county Administrator Form of Government that had been proposed by an assertive board of commissioners with a “Plan” from UGA. The voters strongly said no. As County Attorney in the late 70’s, I did the first lengthy and detailed written legal analysis of the Oconee County Local Acts on its government that had been done in over 50 years. ***The Charter still provided that the Chairman was the Road Superintendent and would be provided “hay for his horse, used in his duties”!***

2. **PART-TIME CHAIR:** Then in 1987-88, the County commissioners started looking at County Manager/Administrator operations. I was County Attorney and directly involved in drawing the resolutions, job descriptions and legislation with input from many including UGA folks and City/County Professionals. Legislation was passed to allow for a Part-time chair who had general duties, including being the Chief Elected Official and chief executive officer. Many of us, Chamber, Business folks, and others (*including myself*) thought it would bring more professionalism to the county. However, the cost of a trained experienced professional manager was beyond the budgetary means of a small county with about 15 to 16,000 folks. Attempts at hiring younger persons, not experienced in management of government did not always work.

3. **DAWSON ELECTED:** When the 1987 and 1988 discussions and decisions were being made, I *had no idea, in my wildest imagination*, that I would become directly involved. However, as things progressed, we were getting a lot of rhetoric and theory on the County Government that I felt was not consistent with the “real Oconee County and its citizens” that I had observed and worked with for 18 years. I felt that the candidates who came forward were not addressing the real issues, i.e.: The Watkinsville ByPass was being planned with an At-Grade Crossing at GA 53; GA 316 was being planned with an At-Grade Crossing at Highway 78; and Oconee was at the mercy of Athens for its minimal water and sewer resources. To the surprise and consternation to clients, family and friends I got in the race at the last minute in 1988. I have often told friends that I had mentioned it to my wife and my Dad but they did not take it seriously. However, I made up my mind the Saturday before while working (and thinking) in my garden (I have frequently said that I must have gotten too much sun!). My motivation was that our community needed assertive, educated, experienced and seasoned leadership that would deal with many approaching growth and development challenges facing the county.

4. **SALARY CHANGE In 1993:** The \$12,000 a year salary during my first time caused a considerable financial strain for me and my family. I “borrowed” myself through that term. Some of my political adversaries, wanting me to give up the office, with the help of the Athens Newspaper, tried to sabotage efforts at improving the salary although I received overwhelming personal encouragement and support. I considered strongly not running again but with encouragement, I did run with the understanding and public stand that I would continue to seek equitable pay for the job. I was reelected. The salary was raised by local legislation to around \$31,000 in 1993, with some of my “adversaries” going along.

5. **SALARY CHANGE & “FULL-TIME CHANGE” IN 1998:** After the 96 election, the Board had not had much success with Administrators (I will address this in later paragraph) and financial concerns needed attention that staff (even though significantly increased in number and pay) had not been able to address appropriately. With unanimous support of the Board, and the recommendation of the September 1997 Grand Jury, with newspaper columns supporting it, and two public acts of the Board in December 97, and January 98, Local Legislation was sought to increase the salary and tie it and its benefits to the scale applicable to the other full-time county officials. While it was pending, some political adversaries

enlisted the support of the editor of the Athens Newspapers and others to instigate a calling campaign against it with our local legislators. While very vocal, their numbers were small. I learned that the main players involved were the same ones who had opposed me in the earlier elections and later supported the independent candidacy of a young, politically unknown against me in 2,000. Certain allegations were made that got "into print" but not grounded in fact. **THE ONLY REAL CHANGE WAS AN ADJUSTMENT IN SALARY & REMOVAL OF THE MANDATED PART-TIME POSITION.** The Act is silent on Part-time or Full-time. **A Chairman can put in as little or as much time as he or she feels is necessary in carrying out the duties of the office.**

6. **ADMINISTRATOR/MANAGER:** Since the Spring of 1988, Oconee County has continuously had a Professional in an Administrative/Management position, contrary to some reports. The position has been called Manager, Administrative Assistant, Administrator, Administrative Officer etc. Administrative duties were assigned and carried out by the person based on maturity, experience and expertise. The longest serving was the county's first Planner, Peter Mallory, who served in the position for several years before going into a private vocation outside the political arena. Some of the persons did well and went on to positions in other governments as they matured and gained experience. Some did not work out. Some critics wanted to blame me but the changes were unanimous board decisions. If one checks the job history of some of the persons involved, one can understand that success was not tied just to Oconee or the personality of the Chairman.

7. **CHAIRMAN POSITION:** When I left the County Government on December 31, 2001, we had set up numerous professional positions, i.e.: Professional Planner, County Engineer, Director of Public Works, Professionally certified Director of Utilities; Professional Code Enforcement Positions and many more. They were functioning generally well and staffs had grown in workload and responsibilities. In addition, we set up sub departments in the Commissioners office that had professionals handling Personnel Matters, Finance/Budget, Purchasing and Administrative. It was working as a team with the Chairman serving as the Team Captain. In my opinion, it was working well. As in the past, changing circumstances, growth and more federal and state mandates will require further revolutionary changes as in the past. Some of my critics accused me of not delegating. However, this was uninformed criticism. I delegate much and often. I dealt with lots of headaches that only an elected and experienced person could handle. I also went to great lengths to keep Commissioners, Staff and the public informed. The county copy bill was greatly influenced by this but it helped to get informed consensus on many issues and was well worth the extra effort.

8. **INCUMBENT CHAIRMAN:** When the incumbent was thrust into the candidacy, he did not have sufficient time to have a thought out program and plan. I felt some of my aggressive critics, who I believed and still believe, are a loud, vocal minority who get press attention, had encouraged his position as an indirect slap at me. I have also come to believe that some used the idea as a carrot to lure a person with a handsome retirement with hobbies and family interests into the job. After his candidacy and public statements about the Part-time Change, I had many citizens and county leaders tell me that they were concerned about the thought that someone could adequately do the job in a part-time status. Most said they were going to (and did) vote for him in spite of this concern "because we don't really have a choice"! I knew from experience that being Chairman "was a job" in a vibrant, dynamic county that has been transitioning rapidly from a rural to an urban county. Just attending to local, regional and state meeting obligations takes many hours of a week. In addition, citizen and staff visits take much time. Also, citizens in daily contact with the Chair and county expect the Chief Elected Official to "know what's going on". Staying informed and in the loop takes much time. I knew, and many others-especially experienced Chairmen in other counties- thought some of the Part-time rhetoric was naïve and not easily workable.

9. **SIMPLE SOLUTIONS:** There are no quick, simple solutions to matters of government. One "size" does not fit all.

While Oconee has grown and is a dynamic county, it is a small county compared to most in GA. While the Athens Editorial Pages now say we are too large not to have Professional Government, they were arguing about how small we were when the 98 salary discussion was getting much attention in the Athens Newspapers. Look at area counties, few have really gone to the County Manager system. Jackson has been trying it for six months and it will undergo much change as it evolves. Elbert "switched" to a County Manager about 9 years ago and has had about 9 managers and much confusion among the commissioners. Many counties, especially the growing vibrant counties, have a team effort, like Oconee where there is a person working with Administrative matters and a Chief Elected Official with the status and presence to lead the county in the many larger local, regional and state issues. No two counties are alike in Georgia. Some praise the Athens-Clarke Unified Government and just as many criticize it. It has not been duplicated much in the State for whatever that is worth. (I do think the current Manager, Allen Reddish, is a great administrator and will do a great job- from his own ability and building on the pioneering efforts of others).

10. **FUTURE:** Oconee County and its government is a living, growing entity and will continue to be vibrant and demanding of its elected officials. I am proud to call it home and I have much personal satisfaction in things that we have accomplished in our County and Region in the last 15 years. WE HAVE COME A LONG WAY, BABY!!! And it did not just happen, as some of our newer citizens may think. It cannot be summed up in sophomoric, short, headline-grabbing newspaper accounts. It will take leadership and efforts by all. The Chairman must help guide and implement policy approved by citizens and the governing authority. It is not easy. It is tough and some decisions will make some folks angry- although I found most folks were reasonable when provided the full facts. However, at the end of the day, one can look back and see the progress made.

This summer, on vacation, I visited the Truman and Eisenhower Libraries and Museums. I am reading a book on Truman and plan to read others as well as some on Eisenhower. These two men were President as I entered my adolescence and adulthood. It is interesting to see the enthusiasm for and popularity of Truman in the last couple of decades. While in office, he faced numerous TOUGH decisions, i.e.: ending WW II with the atomic bomb, rebuilding Europe, establishing NATO to defend against Stalinist Russia; integrating the Armed Services; reorganized government and much more. He was greatly reviled and criticized and left office with a very low poll rating. However, the passage of time and emotion have allowed the true facts to come out and he is recognized as a decisive leader who dealt well with some extremely tough questions and wound up doing what he felt was best for the country. A review of History and his time has ranked him as one of the greatest and most respected Presidents in our history.

While addressing a current issue, I have indulged myself in some self explanation and history. However, in order to address a "problem" one has to know some background and facts. I am fortunate to have had many colleagues and fellow citizens to help and support me in a crucial time in our County's history. By far, most folks were and are positive and supportive. Some critics have even given "side-way" compliments with comments like "I may have differed with his style but I know he loved the county and worked hard for it". My response is simply that STYLE WITHOUT SUBSTANCE IS NOTHING. What we are talking about is leadership. You can't buy or hire it. You can't have and use it and "straddle fences" and always be popular with everybody. We do need to pay decent pay and hope that we will attract capable and dedicated elected officials because 'THAT IS WHERE THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD' and it "ain't always pretty, sexy or popular" but necessary in our system of government.