

**BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
LEON COUNTY, FLORIDA
WFSU Town Hall Meeting
April 5th, 2023**

The County and City Commissioners met in a Town Hall Meeting on March 7, 2023, at the non-profit organization The Village Square. Chair Nick Maddox and Commissioners David O'Keefe, Rick Minor, and Brian Welch were present at the event. Also present was Clerk to the Board Secretary Beryl H. Wood.

**This is a brief summary of the County's portion of the Town Hall Meeting.*

Vanessa Rouse, the Executive Director of Village Square, commenced the second part of the Town Hall Meeting featuring the Leon County Commissioners. She expressed gratitude to the Commissioners for attending the event. Ms. Rouse informed the audience about various ways they could access the live broadcast replay.

Kim Kelly, Director of Content and Community Partnerships for WFSU, introduced the Commissioners to the audience.

Tom Flanigan, the Program Director for News at WFSU, facilitated the remainder of the meeting as they transitioned into the questionnaire segment of the program. He directed the first question to Chair Nick Maddox, asking how he would describe his job to a 5-year-old.

Chair Maddox stated he has a 4-year-old. He explained that whenever he goes to his child's school and explains what he does, he replies that the County makes the rules, and specifies where people can build and what they can build within Leon County. He shared that when speaking to adults, he would explain it as they make rules on anything local, when it comes to ordinances, land use, etc. The most important things they make decisions on are land use and budgeting.

Mr. Flanigan inquired about the areas of agreement among the Commission members and the similarities they share as board members.

Chair Maddox responded by stating that, despite having diverse backgrounds and representing different districts within the County, the Commission members generally agree on the importance of public safety, infrastructure development, and improving the quality of life for the residents of Leon County. He emphasized their shared commitment to addressing issues related to public safety, such as law enforcement and emergency services. Additionally, they aim to enhance infrastructure, including roads, parks, and public facilities, to benefit the community as a whole.

Regarding their similarities, Chair Maddox highlighted the Commissioners' dedication to public service and their desire to positively impact the County. They all share a passion for serving the community and strive to make informed decisions that benefit the residents and businesses within Leon County.

Commissioner O'Keefe expressed his perspective on the areas of agreement among the Commissioners. He shared a common belief that they are collectively responsible for the well-

being and future of the County's citizens. He emphasized that while they may not always see eye-to-eye on every issue, they approach their decision-making process with good intentions for the betterment of Leon County. Despite potential differences in opinion, their underlying goal is to make decisions that benefit the community and its residents in the long run.

Chair Maddox expressed his belief in the importance of maintaining mutual respect among the members. He acknowledged that each individual holds their own unique perspectives and thinking patterns. As the Chair, he emphasized his commitment to ensuring that everyone's opinions are considered and treated with respect. Chair Maddox further emphasized that even in instances of disagreement, personal attacks on fellow members are not tolerated.

Commissioner Minor expressed his conviction that all members of the Commission are dedicated to improving the community to the best of their abilities. He acknowledged the diversity of perspectives and backgrounds among the Commissioners. Commissioner Minor also highlighted the positive and productive working relationship that exists among the seven members. He pointed out that voting outcomes that are not unanimous are rare in the Commission's history, which he viewed as a positive sign. According to him, constructive conflict within the local government level is desirable and indicative of a healthy decision-making process.

Commissioner Welch affirmed that all members of the Leon County Commission share a common commitment to assisting and supporting the community. He emphasized the importance of approaching the meetings with a mindset focused on helping people, which he believes contributes to the Commission's ability to handle disagreements. Commissioner Welch expressed his appreciation for the Commission's practice of engaging in robust and productive conversations. He values this aspect of their work and recognizes it as a positive attribute of the Leon County Commission.

Mr. Flanigan asked about the collegiality the Commission referenced; how can you translate that to the community? How do you get those principles to the broader audience when there seems to be a lot of division and conflict?

Chair Maddox provided an example of leading by example during the Lake Munson Board meeting, which was a contentious issue. Despite the passionate nature of the crowd, he made a conscious effort to emphasize the importance of maintaining respect and civility. By setting the tone and demonstrating respectful behavior, Chair Maddox ensured that the Commission exemplified the principles of collegiality. He recognized that if the Commissioners were to attack one another or engage in disrespectful conduct, it would create an environment that is counterproductive to fostering a sense of unity and collaboration. Chair Maddox aimed to create an atmosphere conducive to productive discussions and effective decision-making by actively promoting and upholding respectful behavior.

Commissioner O'Keefe expressed his observation that the Commission has demonstrated a willingness to change its stance on different topics when exposed to alternative viewpoints. In his view, this characteristic reflects the qualities of a good commission. Commissioner O'Keefe identified trust as a fundamental element underlying this dynamic. He emphasized that if the citizens of Leon County believe and trust that the Commission is attentive to their concerns and incorporates their input into policies, they will not feel the need to resort to loud and confrontational means to be heard. By fostering a sense of trust and actively listening to the community, the Commission can establish a relationship where citizens feel their voices are valued, and their needs are considered in decision-making processes.

Commissioner Welch acknowledged the existence of a divisive and contentious political environment at the national level and expressed concern about attempts to bring that energy into the local community. He firmly believed that resorting to nastiness and engaging in name-calling is counterproductive, especially in the context of local governance. Commissioner Welch emphasized the importance of focusing on productivity and effectiveness as a public servant. He recognized that getting caught up in the noise and negativity can hinder progress and prevent meaningful achievements. By prioritizing constructive dialogue and maintaining a focus on serving the public, Commissioner Welch aimed to navigate beyond distractions and make tangible contributions to the betterment of the community.

Commissioner Minor expressed his agreement with his colleagues' perspectives. He shared examples of engaging in respectful conversations with individuals with differing viewpoints, even if he personally disagrees. He emphasized that regardless of political affiliation, everyone shares common goals, such as economic growth and the protection of national resources. Commissioner Minor believes that starting from this shared foundation can lead to improvements in various aspects of governance and community well-being. By seeking common ground and focusing on shared objectives, he believes that constructive dialogue and collaboration can be fostered, leading to positive outcomes for the community.

Mr. Flanigan discussed public safety and crime. He mentioned that in 2022, we had a total of 108 shootings, resulting in 19 deaths and 91 injuries in Leon County. In the first three months of this year, there have been 19 shootings that have resulted in 2 deaths and 13 injuries. He asked if the situation in our area was improving and, if not, how can we improve it.

Commissioner Welch shared that the police and sheriff departments are doing great. He believed it's important to note that this is not only a law enforcement problem but also a community-wide one. He stated that he believes they're moving in the right direction until we have no shootings.

Commissioner Minor stated that the City Commission mentioned that public safety is their number one priority, which is the same for the County Commission. He mentioned that in 2020, we had a record-breaking 28 murders in Leon County. He says we've had improvements, but the problem remains the same. He also believed the sheriff's office is doing a great job with the All-In Initiative. He explained that the All-In Initiative has been great and recalls that it is where every citizen, neighborhood, or county works together to reduce crime. He noted that the new law, CS/HB 543: Public Safety, will make it harder to crack down on shootings and murders.

Chair Maddox reemphasized how this is a community problem we all must come together to fix. He believes the most significant factor is how we get along with one another. When he was younger, he recalled how his family taught him to love thy neighbor because they operated from a place of love. He said today; we don't operate out of love enough. He stated that law enforcement can only do so much, and it starts with us.

Commissioner O'Keefe stated that he believed we were going in the right direction. He agreed with Chair Maddox, "It isn't just law enforcement's responsibility." He highlighted that the Commission is bringing in outside experts to help with this issue. When asked if we have invested enough in our communities, he replied that so many communities lack alleviation from crime, economic security, and lack of proper infrastructure. He highlighted that the sheriff's department is moving forward with the Initiative to give 100% of the minors they interact with pre-arrest diversion. He stated that this would help give eligible minors a chance before they are placed into the criminal justice system.

Mr. Flanigan moved to the following topic: Employment. He highlighted that even though Florida is considered at full employment, citizens still struggle to find employment post-COVID-19. He mentioned the number of jobs coming to Tallahassee via the new Amazon facility being built in Tallahassee. He asked what the Leon County Board of Commissioners could do to jumpstart additional employment to help with unemployment, homelessness, etc.

Commissioner O'Keefe stated that if there is a lack of supply, the demand and price go up. He noted that when we have a shortage of workers, the demand goes up, and wages should too. He stated that the Commission should focus more on providing affordable childcare access so parents can reenter the workforce. He stated that the Commission could also focus on building a pipeline for people who want to enter trade fields that offer apprenticeships. He went on to say this will push Leon County to the forefront as leaders in the workforce.

Chair Maddox shared that he agreed with Commissioner O'Keefe. He believed in creating an environment where businesses can thrive. He clarified not only businesses but also the environment as well. He said this would bring on more businesses that would want to build within Tallahassee. He emphasized how trades will drive the workforce into a better future.

Commissioner Minor recalled working in the IT sector. He mentioned how Leon County would become a tech hub in a few years. He pushed for companies to raise wages, which will help address many of the workforce's current issues.

Commissioner Welch stated that, from his understanding, we have more jobs than people. He highlighted that we are an education town. He mentioned how we have an emerging tech sector. He agreed with Commissioner Minor and Chair Maddox in reference to trade jobs being the future of our economy.

Mr. Flanigan asked the Commission to talk about how the state affects the local government. He asked the Commissioners to talk about the Capitol, how they see it playing out, what the Commission's responsibilities are in this situation, and how they can do something about it.

Commissioner Welch replied that as locally elected officials, they must find ways to make what comes out of that building great. He says they have relationships with people from all sectors. He said their main priority is advocating for the local citizens and making sure that the legislature knows that whatever policy they pass substantially impacts their citizens.

Commissioner O'Keefe stated how legislators create laws that help our communities' everyday people. He mentioned that there's only so much the Commission can do to advocate for the citizens.

Commissioner Minor described in detail the efforts of the Florida Association of Counties. He believed that the local government does a great job of honoring the citizens by creating laws to better serve the community.

Chair Maddox stated it was an all-out attack on local government. He emphasized the importance of having a local government, and by giving more power to the state, it takes away from what the County Commission can do. He emphasized to the audience to tell state legislators that Leon County wants their local government to be able to make decisions for our community.

Mr. Flanigan asked the Commissioners, in reference to the Children's Services Council ("CSC"), did they initially expect the Council to impose the total half-cent tax.

Commissioner Minor answered yes and no. He stressed that this organization passed by 66% of the votes on the ballot, and it's strongly needed to improve the quality of life for our kids. He stated that the CSC needs to ensure it moves forward in the right direction. He believed they are moving in a good direction, and he's excited to see their impact on the County.

Mr. Flanigan asked if there was anything the County could do to incentivize employers to give better wages.

Commissioner O'Keefe answered that he believed that the local government's sweet spot is not getting in the way of the market when the market is working. He shared that if there isn't a supply of specific skills or qualifications that local government can step in and help put more resources out, they will. He doesn't believe in stepping in between businesses.

Mr. Flanigan asked what the Commission could do to sustain the water quality in our lakes and whether the recycling program is still viable.

Chair Maddox reminisced on Lake Munson and the efforts that have gone into restoring this lake. He went on to describe the difference between stormwater lakes and natural body lakes, and they're doing their best to restore each lake, dependent on its needs.

Mr. Flanigan asked the Commissioners one final question: What's one thing they want to do that they haven't done yet?

Commissioner O'Keefe stated he would like to ride along in one of the public works trucks to see the actual day-to-day operations.

Commissioner Minor shared how making profound changes on North Monroe Street would be something he would like to see accomplished.

Commissioner Welch acknowledged wanting to improve our quality-of-life amenities and added that he would love to see a world-class athletic facility.

Chair Maddox emphasized that wanting a world-class sports facility for Leon County was also at the top of his list.

Mr. Flanigan thanked everyone for tuning in and acknowledged each Commissioner for their time.

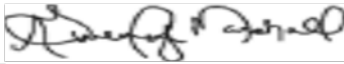
Adjourn:


There being no further business to come before the Board, the meeting was adjourned at 8:00 P.M.

LEON COUNTY, FLORIDA

ATTEST:



BY: 
Gwendolyn Marshall Knight, Clerk of Court
& Comptroller, Leon County, Florida

BY: 
Nick Maddox, Chairman
Board of County Commissioners