

**EFFICIENCY COMMITTEE MEETING
OCTOBER 4, 2021, 2:30 P.M.
ANNEX BUILDING**

ATTENDANCE: Chairman Justice Cecil McDonald, Justice Harbans Mangat, Justice Michael White, Justice Aaron Fleeman, Justice Neil Burge, Justice Molly Jackson, Justice Tobye McClanahan, Judge John Alan Nelson, County Clerk Janice Currie, Treasurer Peggy Meatte, Finance Director Kelli Jones, Mark Brasfield (NEA Town Courier), Public Affairs Director Tom Henry and Jeremy Bennett

1. Justice Cecil McDonald called the meeting to order and added that it was the committee's first meeting in quite a while and announced that some issues had arisen over county drainage taxes. Judge John Alan Nelson began by providing the size, scope and history of the county's drainage districts and by introducing Mr. Jeremy Bennett, from Drainage District #9 and their two sub-districts #3 and #4.

2. Nelson explained that the original survey of Mississippi County began in 1823 and took twenty-six years to complete. In 1902, Judge Rozelle organized the first drainage committee, but received death threats and so he dropped the idea of draining Mississippi County. In 1910, Judge Gladish finally granted permission to establish the first drainage district and in 1912, construction began for the county's first drainage district (Carson Lake District #8). Nelson then described the various Drainage Districts, beginning with Carson Lake Drainage District #8 and their 128 miles of ditches that drained 56,942 acres in Wilson, Marie and Bassett. Grassy Lake/Tyronza is Drainage District #9, 368 miles of ditches, with 168,000 acres of land. Golden Lake is Number #11, 63 miles and 30,000 acres. Osceola is Drainage District #12, 23 miles of ditches and 10,000 acres drained. The Dead Timbers Drainage District is Number #13, 58 miles of ditches and 26,000 acres. Drainage District No. #16 has 1,697 miles of ditches and 57,000 acres. Drainage District No. #17 in the north end is the largest district and has 262 miles of ditches and 162,000 acres. So, we're draining about 510,000 acres of land with 1,037 miles of ditches.

3. Nelson summarized the two issues before the committee: the question of equitable drainage tax assessment and the practice of drainage districts having to pay the County Assessor personally for information needed in order to make changes when properties sell or get divided. Mr. Bennett described an example of possible inequity, saying he was approached by someone from Blytheville that had two parcels, one 0.6 acres and the other 1.41 acres roughly. The man told Bennett that he was paying ten times as much on his half acre as he was on the 1.41 acre parcel. Bennett added that the assessed value of those two parcels, the big one was a higher assessed value and more land, but he was paying less than on the smaller one. When Mr. Bennett began doing research on how these assessments were set up, he found that it was based at least in theory, upon some form of benefit estimation -- with those benefiting more, paying more. He also added that it has become standard practice for drainage districts to pay the County Assessor personally for the information they need in order for changes to be made on parcels that sell or get divided, and he also admitted that perhaps there isn't anything wrong with it, but that it just didn't feel right to him, so he stopped paying. "Once I started, we were paying the Assessor a fee and it equated in our district to \$3,000 a year. And when I started my assumption was that it was just to access the parcel database that's available on the website for anybody and I thought, I'm not keen on paying for that if that's the case, so I stopped paying the assessor. And when I say, the assessor, I'm talking about the assessor personally. I'm not talking about paying the county. So that kind of seemed a little odd to me. However, doing more research, that seems the norm. So, we've been paying the assessor until I started since 2014, personally giving him a 1099 [form]. When parcels were split up, he would divide the assessment on those parcels and put that in the system and update the system. So I wasn't fully aware of what I was paying for, but I couldn't pay him. And then when I reached back out about making a change, he said, "Well, you know, you're not paying me and nobody else is going use my system but me and my staff," Bennett said. Bennett also informed the committee that Drainage District #17 changed the assessment to a \$2 per acres and a 2.15 mill across the board, which made the fee equitable and nearly doubled their revenue and suggested that perhaps the answer was to look at implementing something equitable across the county, without doubling taxes.

4. Justice Tobye McClanahan asked if anyone knew exactly how it was calculated. Bennett said yes, based upon a big binder each of the districts have that includes a numerical value on parcel basis from 1932. He also explained how originally the assessed "tax" was based upon a benefit value assigned many years ago and that using that as the value, we now have a calculated amount (similar to mills).

5. Justice McClanahan asked, "But how is that not like an elected official selling something that belongs to the county?" Bennett answered, "So we've done that, except this year, since 2014. St. Francis Levee District has been doing that since 2004. District #17 has been doing it, I don't know how long... basically, this is what we are paying for... it says, "I'll evaluate the assessment and calculate drainage district taxes, give you an update of monthly changes, complete yearly report for each district, I'll work with the Collector to give you a complete list of all delinquent drainage taxes paid or not paid and I'll do it for \$3,000 a year. That's what our districts pay him directly. I don't know what the arrangement is, but there's payment by #17 and #16."

6. The committee discussed how the Treasurer and Collector portions are handled currently in other matters, to compare to what Mr. Bennett was saying is currently happening with the Assessor's Office. Justice McClanahan, "It sounds like the business probably got started from some sort of antiquated method years ago and the good old boy system and no one's ever questioned it. It's just always what happens, it sounds like." Justice Ash said, "It looks like what we are needing to in some way bring it in house, so that you would pay a certain administrative fee that would cover the Assessor, the Collector and Treasurer."

6. It was recommended by some that other commissioners discuss the possibility of implementing a flat rate for the entire county. Justice McDonald said that it had been a very good Efficiency Committee meeting, with a lot of good information, but that they would definitely have to come back for another meeting. Justice McClanahan made a motion that another meeting be scheduled that includes Assessor Harley Bradley, Mr. Jeremy Bennett and anyone else that Bennett can get to come from the districts." Justice Neil Burge seconded the motion and the motion passed.

3. Meeting adjourned.

Minutes submitted by: Tom Henry