

Walton Tax Watch

Founded 1982

Volume 2 Issue 4

Fourth Quarter

Published Quarterly

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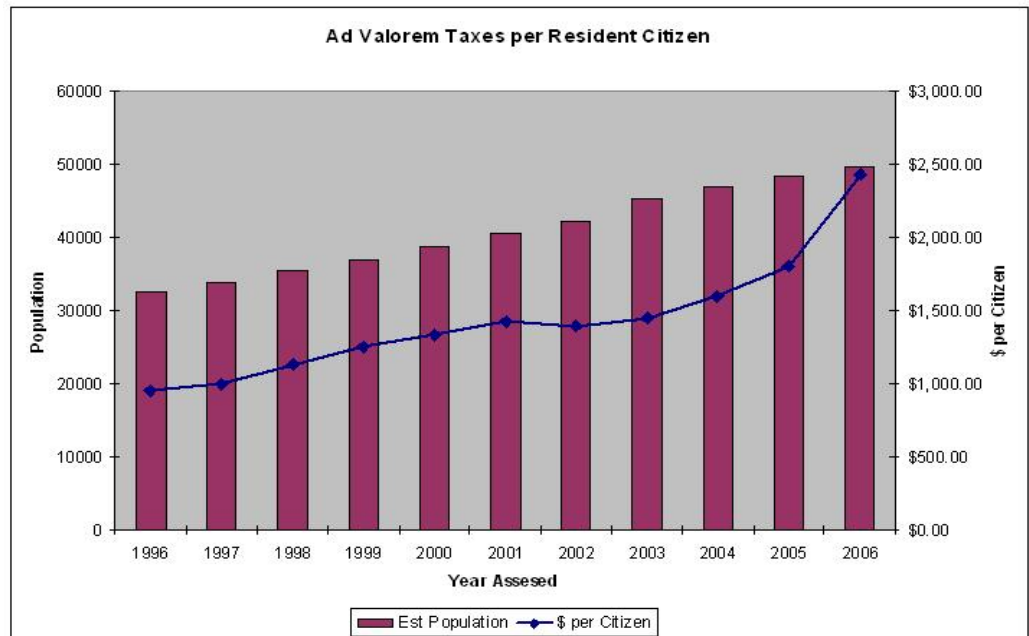
First annual dinner

January 13, 2006

Freeport Community Center
Highway 331

See page 3 for details

Walton County Government Up - Up - And Awaay!



Ad valorem taxes are growing faster than population

1996	2006	Increase
Population 32,000	Population 50,000	56%
Taxes collected \$1,000 per resident	Taxes collected \$2,500 per resident	150%



President's Message

Bonnie McQuiston

At the direction of the board, WCTA has organized a dinner with our annual meeting in 2006.

This will provide good food and an opportunity to meet WCTA directors and other members, fellow citizens from around the county and many of our local officials. This is a first-time attempt and we hope to have a large turnout of our membership.

Ideas and innovations to benefit our members and taxpayers across the county will be discussed. There will be several new committees to work with county officials to gain knowledge of where and how tax money is spent. Please sign up for a committee and get involved. Your help is needed. Indicate on your membership form which committee has your interest and attend the dinner meeting on January 13th.

In October, the board voted to keep our minimum membership donation of \$10 and to continue to handle our money in a conservative manner. Since donations are our only source of funding, so many of you give generously beyond this nominal amount. Your donations are appreciated. We hope to increase membership within the county and with those who pay county taxes but live outside our borders. It is our belief that the value of our organization far exceeds our membership cost.

With a team of talented and knowledgeable individuals, WCTA has gone high-tech. In this issue the new

WCTA interactive website is presented. Suggested by Glenda Wood, it was set up by Robert Nelson and J. B. Hillard. Bob Hudson developed the site and is our webmaster. WCTA is now part of the 21st Century.

The Appraisal Process is a particularly informative article on the website detailing the process of setting property taxes. This was researched at the urging of District 5 Commissioner Meadows. It was evident during this year's budget hearings that the public is not well informed on this subject, especially the appeals process. January 1 is the beginning of a new tax year and new appraisals so take the time to educate yourself on our website.

In order to build a member database on our website, members are asked to go to www.waltontaxpayers.org and click on "Join the WCTA" link (even though you are already a member). This will allow us to create mailing labels, phone lists and email lists.

Your board of directors is honored to serve the taxpayers of Walton County. Thank you for your membership in WCTA. Best wishes for the Christmas season and in the New Year.

"We believe the value of our organization far exceeds our membership cost."



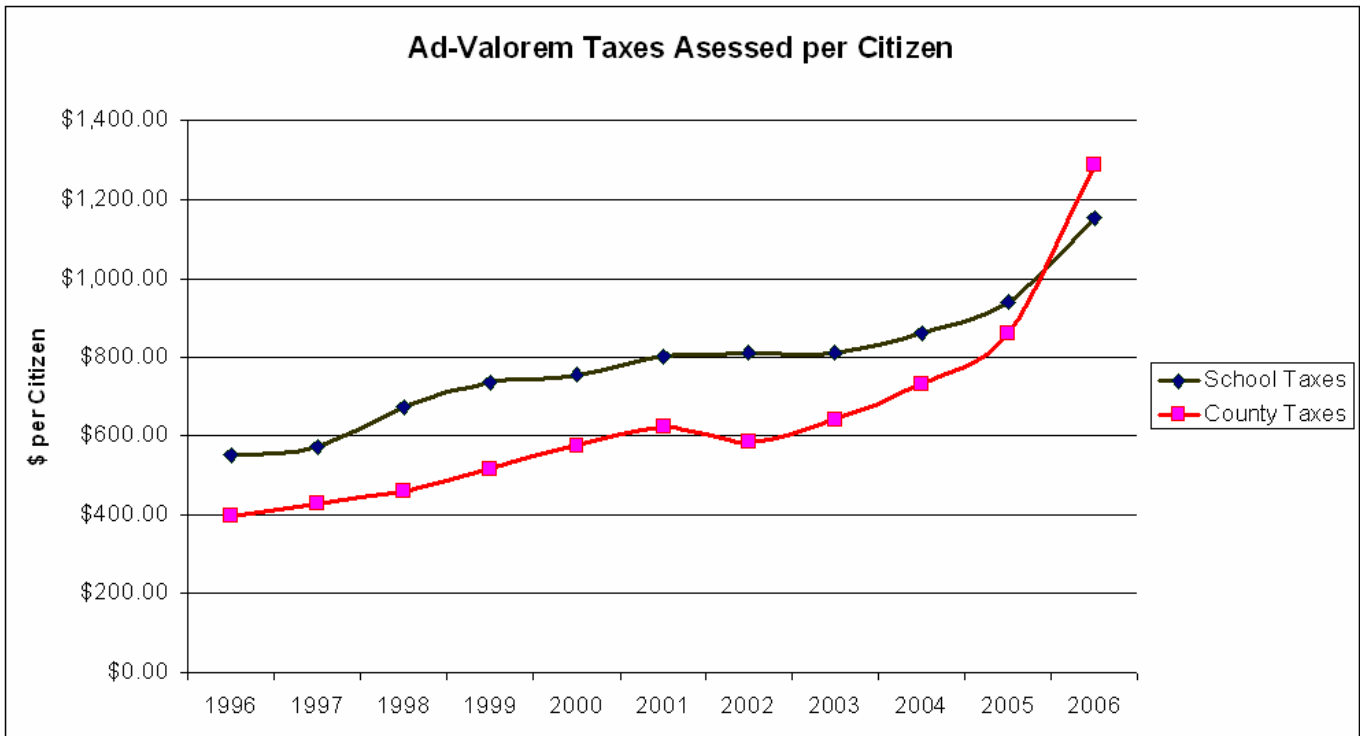
Nominating Committee

It's time to fill vacancies on the Board of Directors

Please contact any of the following if you wish to be considered or wish to recommend a nominee

Bob Hudson	622-0521
Dick Ryan	622-1590
Tom Terrell	892-3538
Virginia Pridgen	834-2670
J. B. Hillard	892-3450

Walton County Taxpayers Association, Inc.



Does it appear to you that taxation is out of control?

We focus on the limited role of government and how much money is necessary to provide basic public services. Become part of a larger voice, asking local government for true tax relief for all of the citizens of Walton County.

www.waltontaxpayers.org

First Annual Dinner and Business Meeting (public invited)

Menu: Bar-B-Q beef, and chicken
Various vegetables, dessert
tea, coffee

Friday, January 13, 2006
Freeport Community Center

Catered by Simply Good Bar-B-Q
Mossy Head, FL

Dinner—6:00 PM
Meeting—7:00 PM

Business Meeting:

Dinner—\$10.00

Recognition of Achievements in 2005
Presentation of Certificates of Appreciation
Financial Report 2005
Establish Goals for 2006 and Committees
Election of Directors

RSVP by email webmaster@waltontaxpayers.org
or call 231-1469

Makes reservations by email, phone, or returning
membership form with notation

WCTA Unveils New Website

Presenting www.waltontaxpayers.org. If you want to see what a team of talented and knowledgeable individuals can do in short order, please visit our new web site *WCTA Online*.



snapshot view of the website

WCTA Online is the new Website of the Walton County Taxpayers Association. The site first went online November 7, 2005. At www.waltontaxpayers.org. In launching the Website, the WCTA believes that it will soon become an essential resource for the residents and taxpayers of Walton County to receive timely and accurate information in regard to local tax issues.

The WCTA has many volunteers gathering data from various local government sources. These volunteers then try to break this data down into a simpler format so that it can be understood by the general public. Knowing exactly how your tax dollars are being spent is the first step to becoming an informed public. Once the public has clear information then they can more easily let their elected officials know what they would like to see done in their community. The WCTA will be relying on its members and the public to let us know what issues

they would like more information about. To request more information on any specific local tax issue, contact us at info@waltontaxpayers.org. We hope to use *WCTA Online* to establish and extend partnerships with organizations that help taxpayers and the public know what information is available about taxpayer issues in Walton County. Among the content on the new Website are sections that give the locations, addresses, contacts for County Offices and Directors and Commissioners, the WCTA mission, Officers and Directors, budgets, a links page and other current and research pages. We invite your comments and suggestions concerning ideas, questions or concerns about this new outreach arm of the Taxpayers Association. The website is under the direction of several Executive Board members.

“Taxation with representation ain’t so hot either.” — Gerald Barzan, humorist

WCTA Highlights of 2005

- County Commission voted to move new jail north of DeFuniak Springs, something WCTA worked for over two years to achieve.
- Redistricting committee was appointed that WCTA requested in May 2004.
- Guest of honor Florida Attorney General Charlie Crist was hosted by WCTA for a day in Walton County to celebrate his cooperation in elimination of Sprint toll fees in part of county.
- In partnership with Walton Chamber of Commerce, WCTA hosted a joint panel of Citizen Budget Committee and county representatives on county budget and finances.
- WCTA opposition to a new taxing unit (MSTU) for Sheriff Department resulted in a unanimous vote by county commission against it.
- Citizens Budget Committee participated in the county budget workshop; recommended a one mil reduction in ad valorem tax levy.
- WCTA developed a complete analysis of Sheriff Department budget for special county commission workshop.
- In budget hearings, WCTA argued for a reduction in ad valorem taxes; taxes reduced by $\frac{3}{4}$ mil.
- Newsletter had a complete makeover for a professional appearance.
- New logo adopted.
- New website went online.

All of these achievements are the result of a combined effort by WCTA volunteers working many long hours for the taxpayers of Walton County. This is teamwork at its best; knowledgeable and talented people with unique skills coming together to make our organization and our county the best it can be. We close 2005 on a high note.

Membership and Operations

Membership is only \$10.00 per year. The dues support publication of Walton Tax Watch, maintenance of the website, and usual business expenses associated with running this volunteer organization. Additional donations may be subject to a tax deduction as the WCTA is an authorized non-profit 501 (c) 3.

WCTA— who are we?



*The eyes and ears of
Walton County for
taxpayers*

The Walton County Taxpayers Association was incorporated in 1982 as a not for profit corporation to give a voice to taxpayers.

The WCTA is a non-partisan organization with twenty-four directors who represent Re-

publican, Democrat, Libertarian and Independent political parties. Our directors are from north and south Walton, representing the entire county. Local issues are our focus that impact taxpayers.

Over the years, we have organized and hosted candidate forums for all candidates running for local offices. This allows candidates to discuss their views and to learn the issues and interests of county citizens. We host forums for county commissioners and other constitutional officers to answer questions from the public and to be accountable for their actions.

Position papers are distributed on county issues to local officials, to the general public through local media and to our members through newsletters.

A yearly analysis of the county budget is conducted and arguments are presented for lower taxes.

We believe in fair, prudent and honest representative government.

There are no paid employees or board members. We are funded only by donations which pays for our quarterly newsletter printing and mailing. We represent the interests of all Walton County taxpayers, whether county residents or absentee property owners.

We believe that it is vitally important to stay involved in how our county spends our money, especially as our county and tax base grow. Bureaucracies tend to focus on how much money can be taken from taxpayers and on ever-expanding ways to spend our money. We focus on the limited role of government and how much money is necessary to provide basic public services. We believe that a unified group of individuals can make a difference. We are the eyes and ears for the taxpayers of Walton County.



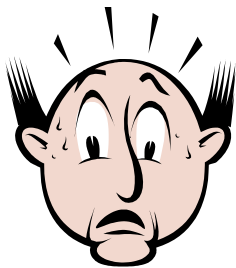
TAX COLLECTOR GETS HIGH SPEED PROCESSOR

As of December 15, the Tax Collector's office has collected and distributed \$77,901,009 in property tax payments. 23,040 transactions for a total of \$38,535,545 of those payments were processed with the new high speed remittance processor.

Cory Godwin, Chief Deputy Tax Collector, says in the past, trays of mail were dispersed among counter clerks who manually keyed in property tax payments while also serving customers at the counters. As a result, mail would pile up and checks would not clear for months. During this time, taxing authorities waited to receive their distribution payments.

Using the new processor now requires only two employees to complete the daily mail, leaving other counter clerks to focus on customers. They expect to maintain this level of efficiency throughout tax season and are on track to make the largest first time distribution in history from the Tax Collector's office.

Non-Budgeted Requests Surprise Taxpayers



From July through September, the proposed county budget for FY2006 was reviewed in public workshops and hearings. WCTA directors were actively involved in all phases of review and led a successful challenge to county commissioners for a millage rate reduction while Walton County experienced one of the largest property tax levy increases in history.

Within a month after final budget approval, unbudgeted expenditures of close to \$1 million were discussed at county commission meetings. These particular items were county maintenance of private cemeteries, hurricane assistance to victims in Mississippi and establishing a free physician/health program for county employees.

This prompted a letter to the Board of County Commissioners from WCTA. We asked them to establish a policy, process or guidelines for unbudgeted expenditures over \$100,000 which would provide for public input and eliminate spur of the moment non-agenda requests with significant impact to the public. We will address these areas in the coming year.

Property Tax Discount Extended

The Florida Legislature authorized county commissions in counties declared a major disaster area approved for assistance by the President the power to extend the early-payment discount on property tax payments. Walton County commissioners voted support for this legislation and are anticipated to adopt the required emergency ordinance.

If approved, the following options for discounts will be implemented:

- a. 4% for payment made by January 31, 2006
- b. 3% for payment made by February 28, 2006
- c. 2% for payment made by March, 31, 2006

The Tax Collector's office reports that over 62% of property tax bills have already been paid. There is no requirement to re-send tax notices: notice in a newspaper and postings at tax collector offices are sufficient notice.

Rhonda Skipper, Walton County Tax Collector, is working out details and coordinating with the Florida Tax Collector's Association on consistent implementation with other counties.

Not Forgotten!

There are still areas in Walton County that need relief from the local toll charges for telephone calls. We are continuing our effort to have these charges eliminated!

There is work to be done

WCTA Board and Committees

There are six vacant director positions on our board. Doc Bain, who was a very active board member, moved away during the year. Now we must bid a fond farewell to two more of our most active directors, Bill Fowler and Ed Lautzenheiser. Both are moving out of Florida. They have been devoted members of WCTA and have made many contributions to our communities and county. They are wished health and happiness in their new homes.

Art McLellan resigned from the board. Paula Platt and Tom McGee are stepping down as their terms expire. Their contributions over the years are greatly appreciated..

The Nominating Committee has a good slate of director nominees. Nominations will also be taken from the floor at our annual meeting in January. If you have time to get involved on the board or a committee, please indicate on your membership form or let us know at the meeting.

Citizens Budget Committee

Analyze county financial statements, actual financial operations and budgets; participate in budget workshop; make recommendations for improvements in financial systems, recommend ad valorem millage rate, make recommendations for strategic plan. Participate in public presentations; keep track of county employee numbers and salaries; review and recommend county policies and procedures.

New Committees

County Administration

Use of consultants, expense cutting and streamlining measures, discretionary funding; Impact Fees.

County Finance Committee

Citizens Budget Committee recommendations, Zero Based Budgeting, Reserves, Strategic Plan; research 401(K) vs. retirement plans.

Public Works

Functional departmental breakdown

Elections

Changes in election laws and requirements, voter registration, candidates and campaigns

Clerk of Court

County audit, records requirements and legal procedures

Tax Collector

Activities and developments

Property Appraiser

Property valuations, tax levy rates

Sheriff Department

Budget and expenses, manpower projections, long term plan

School District

Budget, Taxes, Expenses

Membership

Increase membership – Residents and out of county

WCTA Offers Suggestions to WMBB

A leading source for quality news and investigative reporting, WMBB-TV opened an office in Walton



L to R: Ray Padgett, Bonnie McQuiston, Chris Mitchell, J. B. Hillard

County several months ago. Chris Mitchell, Anchor/Reporter landed the choice assignment of living in paradise and being paid for the distinction.

Recently WCTA board members met with Chris and WMBB-TV executives and engineers in DeFuniak Springs. An exchange of ideas and suggestions were offered on Walton County issues that should be reviewed and reported.

**Walton County Taxpayers
Association, Inc.**

P. O. Box 1085
Santa Rosa Beach, FL 32459

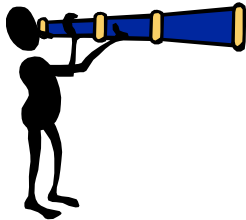
Fax: 850-231-5609
E-mail: Hal7m@aol.com

stamp

Walton

Tax Watch

*The eyes and ears of Walton
County for taxpayers*



Tax Chart

Year	Percentage Increase over previous year
1997	15.1
1998	3.68
1999	7.02
2000	5.98
2001	6.47
2002	9.78
2003	13.25
2004	13.12
2005	29.02

The tax rollback rate is the tax rate that would bring in the same amount of dollars from the previous year. Whenever a taxing authority does not reduce the millage rate to an amount that would bring in the same dollars they are generating increased revenue. Whenever revenue increases it is a tax increase.

This increase can be earmarked for specific purposes, for example, to meet increased population needs and services.

This phenomenon of large tax increases is being seen throughout the State of Florida as local government benefits from the surge in real estate valuations. If not gotten under control, double digit tax increases could easily become the norm rather than the exception. Government must be held accountable and made to justify increases that go beyond inflation and population expansion.

*Tax chart data obtained from
Walton County Property Appraiser*