

2022-23 County Budget has many troublesome issues!! Ready or NOT, Set for Approval Next Week!! Cleveland County Unemployment badly misses the mark!! \$50 Million Major Cost over-runs for new Jail, Court "Justice Center"!! Tax Increases on top of tax increases, called "Lowering taxes"?? Wasteful Spending hidden in the fine print??? Robert A Encouraged to run for County Commissioner in 2024!! Report, evaluation, analysis and predictions provided by Robert A

Folks, the Cleveland County 2022-2023 Proposed Budget was presented (sort of) to the Commissioners at the May 17, 2022,

Commissioner's Meeting. There were very few hard numbers provided at the Commissioner's meeting. Lots of fast-talking, phony brags about "Performance" and absolutely NO input from the public was allowed. Not allowed because of any ruling not to allow public input. But not allowed because the public was totally kept in the dark in the budget process, on purpose, from knowing what was going on behind closed doors and no advance notice and a copy of the proposed budget was provided to the public for review. And Robert A had asked for such information previously. But the request was not honored.

So, let's start from the start of the last item on the May 17, 2022, Commissioner's meeting "Regular Agenda. Titled FY 2022-2023 County Manager's Recommended Budget. Presented by the County Manager Brian Epley

Robert A says that if he thought the fast-talking was done on the previous Agenda Item about the Residential Solid Waste Curbside Pickup Agreement, covered in his last article, he had not seen anything yet. Mr. Epley rev-ed up his vocal cords and the words just poured out. Almost super-sonic it was so fast.

County Manager Brian Epley started out by making it clear that he was just doing what the Commissioners had tasked him to do. Had DIRECTED him to do. These were the Commissioner's top priorities. (The shooting Range being the #2 Priority.) That he was faithfully following the Commissioner's Strategic Plan's "Focus areas" as Epley put up one of the first items of his Power-Point Presentation. Robert A remembers thinking that he wished he had worn knee-high "waders" to this Commissioner's Meeting as he anticipated the "bull-ony" was about to get deep. As it turned out, hip-high waders might not have been high enough.

As it turned out, the Commissioner's Strategic Plan's Focus Areas shown on the slide did NOT have anything directly involved with developing budgets. But the bull-ony was indeed getting deep.

For Instance:

Epley made a statement that Cleveland County's unemployment rate was 3.2%. Well below the generally recognized figure of 3.4%, which is called FULL EMPLOYMENT by government economists. A bit later Epley slipped up by saying Cleveland County's workforce that was actually working, was only 61% of the total number of people that were available to work. This means that 39% of the workforce was NOT working. Unemployed. Meaning the reality of the situation in Cleveland County is an unemployment rate of 39%

So, how were this 39% of the Cleveland County workforce surviving? Were they selling drugs? Robbing and stealing and filling up our jails? On some kind of DSS Program? Food Stamps? Or what. Epley never mentioned or explained any of that. Nor did the Commissioners ask him to.

Epley continued by saying that he would start explaining the budget process-Revenue First.

Robert A has stated many times that a bureaucracy exists for the main purpose of spending every dime that is in their present budget and asking for MORE for next year's budget. If the bureaucracy actually does anything useful for the citizens is beside the point. That thought bubbled to the surface once again this time in Epley's presentation.

Mr. Epley quickly moved on to say that tax revenues were expected to increase significantly due to the previous property re-evaluation. And, had in fact, done so. Then Epley uses the code words Revenue Neutral. A government code for raising taxes and claiming they lowered taxes. In Cleveland County, the last property re-evaluation significantly raised the property values but did NOT lower the tax rate as significantly as the property tax value had been increased. Revenue Neutral is calculated by formulas only understood by people like Brian Epley and former Shelby Mayor Mike Philbeck. Whatever Revenue Neutral actually means is NOT what people

think it means. That everything is equal. Property evaluations go up and tax rates go down so that my tax bill remains the same. NOooooooo!!! Folks, for the county to collect more taxes, which they did, the tax rates were only lowered a little and your out-of-pocket cost to pay YOUR tax bill went up a lot. Only fools go around saying the Cleveland County Commissioners reduced property taxes!

Epley went on to claim Cleveland County's administration had couture of performance and that they leveraged this and they leveraged that so everything is better or about to be better.

Then, Epley mentioned the new Justice Center Complex project. The \$90 Million Project that Robert A discovered in last year's budget while looking for something else. Well, folks, that \$90 million project has turned into a \$140 Million Project in this year's budget. A \$50 million increase. And everything is still only an estimate. Epley also mentioned that \$250 Million is available to back up that new Court and Jail (Justice Complex) project, which, Robert A expects will take up every dime of that \$250 million earmarked funding. Enough to build all-new Cleveland County High Schools. NEW High Schools with auditoriums and swimming pools. Not patched up high schools are still full of asbestos and mold.

About this time in Epley's presentation, Epley stated the County is doing MORE with LESS. Robert A made a notation in his notebook, "Where do they do more with less???" \$100 reward offered by Robert A.

Then more CYA fluff from Epley:

- The Commissioners support all of this.

- The County Administration-Performance Management-Results Matter

- Invest in Trails, but no mention of the First Broad River Trail in Upper Cleveland County.

- DSS is leading the charge in doing more with less. (Has Hell frozen over?)

- Death rates are higher in Cleveland County (Move out of Cleveland County and live longer?)
- Not enough doctors in Cleveland County
- Erosion of human wealth
- Citizens Academy?
- More shooting contests at the Foothills Shooting Complex-but Need more \$\$\$ spent on the Shooting range to attract contests AND contestants.
- All Cleveland County Debt will be paid off by 2033
- What about Public Schools and CCC? Not mentioned in detail.
- Solid Waste-More issues to come.

And, the Grand finale: All Commissioners thanked Epley and crew for all their hard work. The actual budget will be online on Friday, May 27th and the Budget Public Hearing will be at the June 7, 2022, Commissioner's meeting.

NO folks, consider that this so-called 2022-2023 Budget Presentation, except for brief statements about the increased estimates for the new jail and courthouse did NOT mention any of the following:

- County spending going to the ALWS Baseball, Inc. (Likely to be \$400,000 to \$500,000 on top of the \$2.2 Million from the state to be given to a "shady" Non-Profit who refuses to provide any financial statements regarding their operations. That is on top of all the \$Millions upon Millions already given to the ALWS, Baseball, Inc. by the Commissioners. Which the ALWS, Baseball, Inc. has nothing to do with the official American Legion Organization except host the American Legion's World Series baseball games at Cleveland County taxpayer's expense.
- No progress report on the "Justice Complex" except for a \$50 million increase in the "estimated" cost. Note, apparently Epley under-estimated (on purpose) the cost to be \$90 million last year in order to get the Commissioners to approve the project. Then, once approved, hit the County with very large increases this year and in coming years.

□NO discussion of any planning for funding new Cleveland County High School construction, despite the well-known information that the average age of ALL Cleveland County Schools (MINUS Shelby Middle and the new North Shelby) is 58 years old.

□No discussion that every one of the “quality of life” projects, such as the ALWS, LeGrand Center, the Earl Scruggs Center, the Shooting Range, the Don Gibson, and now the Cleveland County Fair do NOT generate enough revenue to pay for themselves. By a long shot. Some by a very long shot.

□No discussion about the real unemployment rate of 39%.

□NO public discussions of the many lawsuits against Cleveland County and what Cleveland County is doing to evaluate the problems and resolve them prior to other lawsuits.

□No discussion regarding the failures of the Cleveland County School Board to properly plan for maintenance and repair of existing schools and to plan for new school construction and the funding thereof.

□No discussion of going from ONE staff attorney to three Staff Attorneys.

□Why Cleveland County discourages public input into the County Budget of any other County function, except for lip service.

□And much more

And last, but not least. A reader has suggested to me that Robert A I may be the best potential candidate for a Cleveland County Commissioner in the 2024 Elections. I attend all these meetings, I look up stuff, I have learned the processes and the laws that govern them, I talk to people, I have sources of information that goes directly to the people, etc. But, most importantly, I am NOT afraid to speak my mind and I can back up with records or trained logic everything that I speak up about.

Robert A thinks this reader may have a valid point. Upon such a valid point, Robert A has decided, as he did in his last article, to do some practical thinking about the things Robert

A would do if he was a Commissioner having to decide how to vote on the various things that Robert A is writing about. The issues of our time and place, etc.

So, Robert A, what would YOU do if you were a Commissioner at this Public Hearing on the 2022-2023 Cleveland County Budget???

Here is Robert A's answer:

First, If Robert A was a Commissioner getting ready to vote on this 2022-2023 Budget at the June 7, 2022, Commissioner's meeting, knowing the very little that he knows now, Robert A, after listening to the public participants in the Public Hearing and deciding otherwise, would vote a resounding NO to any Motion to Approve this budget. Robert A would then politely explain that he always votes NO until he is convinced beyond a doubt that he has been presented with ALL the facts and figures regarding what he is being asked to vote on. Budget or anything else.

Robert A has to add that such a scenario as described would be unlikely to ever happen. Because he would have, previous to any vote, quizzed the County Manager extensively prior to such a vote and taken the actions necessary to ensure the County Manager knew exactly what was expected of him well in advance of the budgetary process. Or any other process. And the vote. And so, would the other Commissioners.

Robert A would not condone or accept secret wheeling and dealing when conducting public business and EVERYBODY would know it.

Now folks, the budget with all the numbers is available online at the Cleveland County Website. Take a look at it if you can. You will certainly find it to be a public UNFRIENDLY document. Hopefully the last act of public unfriendliness out of the County Manager's office. I suspect most of you readers already know what Robert A thinks about public officials being public

unfriendly.