

The Republican Primary to run for the Chatham County Commission Chairman is now June 9. The two registered candidates on the GOP ticket appeared at the SIRC Forum at Plantation Club January 14.

## Jason Buelterman

After a coin toss, Jason spoke first. He has been Mayor of Tybee Island for the past 14 years. A graduate of the University of Cincinnati, he worked for Senator Rob Portman's (R-Ohio) congressional office when he was a member of the House, before moving to Tybee and managing the IB program at Johnson High School.

Jason first ran for office in 2001, and was elected to the Tybee City Council, after a campaign of knocking on almost every door on the island. His early and enduring philosophy is financial strength and wise spending of government's limited resources. He continued as mayor for 14 years, by keeping the millage rate low, while building the city's reserve from a one-month cushion to now over ten months – a key to a hurricane prone area.

He also helped bring a free public charter school to Tybee (Tybee Maritime Academy) after its only private school closed.

As County Commission Chairman, he would continue fiscal conservatism, while addressing the current strategic threats, principally a lack of County coordination and communications. He currently has the support of all the Republican County Commissioners and virtually all the mayors of local municipalities.



## Billy Hair

He has previously served as County Commission Chairman, for two terms, and was term limited in 2004. He won reelection with a plurality of 13,000 votes, with a legacy of bringing people together to govern effectively. He likened the job of the County's chief executive as running a good size corporation, with a budget of over \$250 million.

He first came to Savannah to serve as president of Savannah Tech, and helped to achieve higher education credentialing for its students. He has PhD in Education, an MBA, and an undergraduate degree in Finance, Real Estate and Insurance.

His goals include restricting the growth of government by capping property taxes at the rate of inflation and de-indexing Stephens Day limitations. Plus using SPLOST funds for maintenance as well as construction.



## Q&A Session

Q1. Where are the biggest opportunities to cut the fat in current budgets?

A1. Jason: Not in community safety programs (police, fire, EMS, 911 system) but virtually everywhere else. We need to budget through zero-based practices instead of carry-

ing forward previous year line items to ensure taxpayer dollars are used efficiently.

A1. Billy: Head counts for county staffing have grown too high. And SPLOST funds spend too much on new construction and don't consider follow-up maintenance costs.

Q2. What is your best accomplishment in your previous government service?

A2. Jason: building Tybee's fund balance from almost zero to 10 month's worth (83%) of the annual municipal budget. This was done while simultaneously cutting the millage rate for property owners and despite weathering the 2008 recession and hurricanes Matthew and Irma.

A2. Billy: Helping to bring JCB manufacturing operations to Savannah. One of their biggest reasons for the move was their confidence in the government leadership here in Chatham County. JCB is one of the three largest construction companies in the world.

Q3. How can you deal with the large unfunded pension liability of Chatham County?

A3. Jason: We successfully tackled this issue head-on with respect to Tybee and now have a pension plan that is in excellent condition. Chatham County's pension fund is actually in good shape—it has 94% of its long liabilities funded which exceeds actuarial recommendations. However, it's OPEB liabilities (retiree health care insurance) is only funded at 25%. This needs to be addressed by changing the benefits offered to employees hired going forward.

A3. Billy: the right way is to convert all new employees to defined benefit plans, e.g. 401k's, from the antiquated pension systems that municipalities are stuck with now. Care must be used not to violate state or federal regulations in the conversion.

Q4. Why do all new employees have to be interviewed by only the County Chairman or County manager?

A4. Billy: They don't. Bring in the heads of the divisions to whom they report, for their expertise.

A4. Jason: Let the stakeholders—citizens and direct reports—also have a say in who gets hired. (Editor's note: the question implies that some cronyism has been used in the past in who gets hired.)

Q5. Have you looked at the inequities in the Board of Assessors actions on property values?

A5. Jason-Yes. It would be beneficial to have a few fresh sets of eyes on the Board to address this issue especially as it relates to commercial properties which are exempt from Stephens-Day protections.

A5. Billy: most assessors are voluntary jobs; there may be a need to pay for some professional advice.

Q6. With the move to expand the Hutchinson Island Trade Center, will there be any resumption of the past attempts to pay for hotel expansion using public funds?

A6. Audience members knowledgeable in this arena were adamant that no such public funds would be accessed, and all new hotel construction, if any, will use private funding.



