

Hello. I'm Russ Carpenter, Mayor of Richmond Hill. We're here tonight to discuss a tax increase. It's that simple. One can call it equalization, but it's a tax increase on the residents of Richmond Hill. I'd like to ask you this: please keep this word in mind – **fair**.

I'll begin by saying something that may surprise you: if the County really provided, in a fair, legal, and equal manner, all 31 services that they have listed, then, of course, every citizen and business of Bryan County should pay the same taxes.

But, the County does not provide equal services to all its citizens, and it never has. In fact, we believe that the County is over collecting taxes on **all** Bryan County citizens and businesses already. Pembroke and some of the unincorporated areas should be receiving a much larger tax decrease than the tiny amount proposed. Let's talk about fairness: the reason Richmond Hill now pays 1 mil less in taxes is because we already provide our own water, sewer, police, fire, planning and zoning, and public works, among other services the County does not provide for us. The citizens and businesses of Richmond Hill only want what's fair, and that means we shouldn't pay for services our City taxes already provide.

Here's a very brief history of how we got to this point: Last fall, the City of Richmond Hill commissioned a study to determine what services the County provided, what revenues it receives, how that affects millage rates and taxes, and its compliance with state law. The study was based on the County's own audited financial records going back many years. We found some concerning discrepancies, and some major issues in relation to state law, **which forbids counties from using a City's taxes to pay for services the City doesn't receive. We found that, in many areas, the County was not being fair.**

We notified the County of our findings, and requested a meeting last October so that they might explain their spending. We were told no to that request - that this should be part of the state required negotiations between the County, Pembroke, and Richmond Hill as related to service delivery strategy, or SDS. During our few SDS meetings from January to April, our concerns were not discussed to any extent. At our most recent SDS meeting in May, the County finally agreed that mediation was needed since we were not making adequate progress resolving our differences.

During this time, as the City delved deeper into the County's audits, we became more and more alarmed. **The questions of fund allocations and services became increasingly serious.** The City was, and still is, flabbergasted at the County's reactions, or lack of a reaction, to our findings. The City is confident, though, that finally discussing the issues in court monitored mediation shall prove that our findings are correct, and that a millage rate reduction, or some sort of rebate, should follow. Should the County be found to be sufficiently delivering their "so called" 31 services - and taxing proportionally and legally - then an equalization should be ordered. That will be fair – for everyone.

The County along with both Richmond Hill and Pembroke meeting and discussing this was the best and most efficient way to remedy this issue. Mediation was the second best, and we were pleased when the County signed an agreement with the state to enter into mediation. Now, imagine our surprise when, just a few weeks after agreeing to the mediation, **the County**

announces that it was going to raise just our taxes based on delivery of services. This is exactly what the mediation is all about. To say mediation and this tax increase are not related suggests one really doesn't understand the issue, or is simply excusing underhanded actions. I can say, repeatedly, that Christmas Eve and Christmas aren't related, but that doesn't mean they aren't related. There was a fair and efficient way to settle this, and there was a difficult and frustrating way. The County chose the difficult way by going after an unneeded tax increase from our residents and businesses when it did. There was nothing fair or equitable in its actions. **As the representative of 12,500 Bryan County Citizens, plus a majority of Bryan County's business owners which will be affected by this, I want the public to be aware of why this tax increase, no matter how it is disguised, is wrong.**

I will leave the details to our qualified consultant, Wesley Corbett, but I want to highlight few crucial points:

1. Richmond Hill's citizens and business owners contribute over 40% of the County's taxes, yet we comprise only 33% of the County's population. We believe we are already overtaxed. Is this fair?
2. Even with Richmond Hill's current millage reduction, we believe the County has overcharged **all of us** by approximately \$13 million dollars over the last decade. We already pay for the 31 items, plus others we shouldn't be paying. Is this fair? Is it even legal?
3. A one millage rate increase, as is proposed, will raise over half a million dollars for the County coffers. Our question is this: why does the County need this increase, and where will it be spent? Where's the fairness? Where's the transparency? Where was the discussion among commissioners as to this increase? Is it to build up reserves? If the intention is to build up reserves, by our estimation, the County already has an entire year's budget in reserve with the almost \$20 million it has stockpiled.
4. **Based on our analysis, the County has used over \$1 million from its general fund to pay for water and sewer in Waterways, East Buckhead and other small communities such as Wicklow.** Is this fair? Why should the citizens and businesses of Richmond Hill, Pembroke, or in any other Unincorporated County area like Keller, Waterford Landing, Dunham Marsh, and Redbird Creek help pay for the water and sewer in those communities? There are more examples of this type of mis-spending, which Mr. Corbett will cover.

The City of Richmond Hill is not seeking special treatment, or an unwarranted cut in taxes. We only want what is fair and just for our citizens and businesses, and for all citizens of Bryan County, of which we are also.