

Tax-free holiday set for Thursday through Sunday

by Al Summers

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Georgians will get their chance to do a little shopping, sales tax-free, Thursday through Sunday, July 31 - Aug. 3.

But, there is a hitch - the no sales tax only applies to certain items. Those items have to be connected in some way with "back-to-school" supplies and items.

According to the Georgia Department of Revenue (DOR), the following items will be available during the sales tax holiday:

- Articles of clothing. The exemption applies to articles of clothing and footwear with a

sales price of \$100 or less per item. Clothing accessories such as handbags, umbrellas, cuff links, handkerchiefs, jewelry, key cases, wallets, watches and watch bands, and ponytail holders and/or similar hair products are not exempt.

- Personal computers. A single purchase of \$1,500 or less of personal computers and/or related accessories is exempt. If the single purchase exceeds \$1,500, the entire transaction is taxable.

- General school supplies. The exemption applies to the purchase of general school supplies with a sales price of \$20 or less per item.

The DOR's guidelines also specifically state, "The exemptions are intended for an individual's personal use. The exemptions exclude items rented, leased, purchased by businesses, or purchased for resale. The exemptions do not apply to items sold at theme parks, entertainment complexes, hotels, restaurants, and airports."

Some local businesses are holding special sales to coincide with the sales tax holiday to give the consumer extra incentives to purchase goods during the event.

For more information, visit www.dor.ga.gov/salestax/holiday/index.aspx.

Sheriff responds to questions

by Al Summers

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Gilmer County Sheriff Stacy Nicholson recently sat down with the *Times-Courier* to respond to questions raised in paid advertisements in recent editions of the paper. Nicholson referred to questions raised by Randy Bell and Bruce Manning that were asked regarding the sheriff's office in advertisements that addressed the commission candidates.

Nicholson said, "There were three questions that concerned the Gilmer County Sheriff's Office. Those three questions, one by Bell and two by Manning, are not for the commissioners to answer. Elected officials are not employed by the board of commissioners. Therefore, questions regarding those elected individuals should be answered by the appropriate official, as they control their offices."

In response to Bell's question from a paid advertisement on page 5A of the July 3 edition of the *Times-Courier* that read, "\$6 million will be spent on the jail. I can't say if I am for or against this because I don't know the specifics of what they plan to do. The jail isn't old, though, and last I heard we were housing prisoners from other counties. Is it really necessary?"

Nicholson addressed the ques-

tion, "I am glad to answer Mr. Bell's question regarding the addition of the Gilmer County Detention Center and whether or not inmates from other jurisdictions should be housed here for profit. First of all, we do not house inmates from other jurisdictions for profit and haven't during my tenure as sheriff."

"Secondly, with the jail expansion, we are adding only 24 new beds. Those beds will be minimum security beds for our inmate work crews. This will allow us to utilize the dorms where these crews now bunk for what they were intended: segregation cells for inmates which should be segregated. The rest of the expansion is to fix what should have been done to start with by creating medical dorms for infirmed inmates and adequate intake and holding areas. Just because that jail was built cheap doesn't necessarily mean that it was built right."

The sheriff then addressed two questions raised by Manning in a paid advertisement on page 2A of the July 17 edition of the *Times-Courier*, the first of which read, "The sheriff has deputies who live outside of the county. They have take-home cars provided by the county. With gas the price it is now, how can he justify that? It is understandable if they lived inside the county, but outside the county?"

Nicholson responded, "First, yes we do have a total of 14 deputies who drive their cars outside Gilmer County. However, most of those live within seven minutes of the county line. With the rising cost of gas, I understand completely why anyone would question this. This is not just a Gilmer County issue. This is being questioned all over the country and has been for years. The answer is the same here as it is everywhere."

"Yes, it benefits the officer. We are able to attract quality officers at a lower rate of pay than some of our nearby agencies, but that's not the reason. We allow only the officers who are subject to respond to an emergency situation to drive their cars home as a privilege. However, that privilege comes with a price. They are essentially, by written policies regarding take-home cars, on call 24 hours per day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Of course, we know everyone has "downtime," but if we call, they have to come."

Nicholson continued, "Deputies, particularly on evening watch, routinely answer calls that have been backed up from day shift on their way to work. We routinely call them in to their shift early directly from home when calls are heavy. Detectives report directly to crime scenes from their homes. Transport officers leave from their homes to conduct after-hours transports. S.W.A.T. and other specialized officers report directly from home to incident scenes. All of these are examples of the reasons we still allow deputies to drive their cars home."

"Ninety-five percent of the reason is to possibly save the life of an officer needing help, or a citizen in trouble. A typical barricaded suspect or hostage situation will normally call for a command structure and ground force of 20-25 personnel. We are budgeted for five deputies per shift. Can you see why it's necessary to call folks in at a moment's notice? And, as a side note, government agencies pay roughly a dollar less per gallon for gas than do the public."

Nicholson concluded, "The bottom line is this: I am not willing to risk harm coming to one of my deputies or a citizen due to not having help arrive quickly enough just to save a few gallons of gas."

The county's top law enforcement official addressed Manning's second question which asked,

"The sheriff is in charge of the 911 center. We think it may be a little top-heavy. Do we really need a captain in charge of three people in the addressing department along with a lieutenant and two sergeants to supervise the dispatchers? Even when you try to contact the captain, he is seldom there to talk to you. It must be impossible to attend that many meetings and still get your job done when you are only there less than 50 percent of the time. Get the lieutenant and sergeants out on the street where they belong, protecting the taxpayers. Maybe the captain got his position because he helped the sheriff get into the Masonic Lodge?"

Nicholson addressed Manning's charges with, "With regard to the 911 center, it was placed under my 'umbrella' by the board of commissioners in 2005 because it needed 'structure,' their words, not mine. I set it up just like every other division of the sheriff's office: one captain, day and night; lieutenants and a sergeant on every shift. I recently reduced the number of lieutenants to one at the suggestion of Capt. Tim McArthur. Each person there knows who their supervisor is and no supervisor has too large a span of control. In the past 12 months Capt. McArthur and I have spent many hours in meetings with individuals regarding the plans of the new 911 center. When he, or any other lieutenant, is out of this office, that doesn't mean they are not working. The job does get done!"

Nicholson continued, "Now, I have answered the legitimate questions regarding the sheriff's office. Even though I have been told I shouldn't, I will respond to the accusation that I promoted an individual based on their 'getting me into the lodge.' First of all, no one 'gets' you into a Masonic lodge."

"Secondly, I don't hire friends because they are friends, and I don't promote based on friendship. I promote based on knowledge, experience and the desire to do a job. Most of all, I don't serve the citizens of this county based on friendship. I don't mind answering Mr. Manning's questions, or any citizen's questions, but I resent that accusation."

Nicholson concluded, "I believe more good, qualified folks would step up to serve their communities if they didn't have to worry about unfounded accusations, personal attacks and armchair quarterbacking."

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Taxes and Spending

There is a simple math equation in government: SPENDING = TAXES. The less government spends, the less it needs to tax away from the people. The greatest method of lowering taxes is to spend less. I disagree with the notion that tax money is "OPM" (other people's money). It is OUR money. I have a clear record of voting against property tax millage rate increase and against wasteful spending. The taxpayers simply deserve greater respect. I will never campaign for your vote while burning your gas in a county Tahoe.

County Employees

A. I have proposed a temporary hiring, wage and promotion freeze upon taking office. This is to give the new Board of Commissioners an opportunity to evaluate the current staffing levels, pay scales and staffing structure. We have some very dedicated and talented county employees. It is my goal to cut costs by downsizing through attrition (retirement, leaving, etc.). These temporary freezes would only apply to employees under the direct control of the Board of Commissioners. Other elected officials such as the Sheriff, Clerk of Court, etc., have the constitutional ability to hire and pay as they see fit within their approved budgets. My style is to manage and delegate with accountability, but not to micromanage nor utilize inefficient middle management structures.

B. Health insurance coverage for employees needs to be improved. The current self-insured plan has not been responsive and does not provide adequate protection to our valued county employees. Through the first six months of 2008, health insurance costs are \$155,516 over budget. This equates to being over budget by approximately \$311,000 by year's end. This is clearly not an acceptable situation and must be addressed.

County Surveyor

I was elected County Surveyor in 2001 and served in that capacity until I was elected Post 2 Commissioner in 2004. The only official duties of the County Surveyor are to aid the Probate Court with property line disputes through a legal process called Processioning. Gilmer County has not had a County Surveyor since I became Post 2 Commissioner. The Probate Court has corresponded with my business partner and Registered Land Surveyor Scott Chastain about land dispute matters, and he has since sought the office of County Surveyor. The Board of Commissioners is not required to use the County Surveyor for surveying county property and has not hired my company for surveying county property since I became a County Commissioner. Scott will continue to run the surveying business. I will be a full-time chairman.

New Hospital

I don't know of anyone in Gilmer County who does not want to see a new hospital and better health care services here. While the hospital and health care are private services that are not regulated nor controlled by the Board of Commissioners, I am proud to have been involved in recommendations and efforts to secure the Certificate of Need for the new facility. With the earlier hurdles now out of the way, I have encouraged Sunlink Health Systems, Inc. to proceed as soon as possible with the new facility that we have all worked for and are anxious to see. I have been assured that an announcement of good news will be made in the very near future. If this does not transpire soon, I plan to call a "town hall" meeting with the appropriate representatives to discuss where we are and what we can expect. Good luck Sunlink in breaking ground soon, we are crossing our fingers!

Please vote in the Tuesday, August 5 runoff. You can vote in the runoff even if you did not vote in the primary two weeks ago. You can also early vote any day this week at the Voter Registration Office located between the Commissioners' Office and the old library building.

www.electmarkchastain.com or call 706-889-2718.
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