

Connor Luckey-Smith
Haywood County
Board Of Commissioners
Interview with Chairman Mark S. Swanger

I was lucky enough to sit through a county commissioners meeting, and interview the chairman of the board, Mark S. Swanger. The meeting was in the historic courthouse, and surprisingly I did not need to go through any security. It was a wonderful experience, and I hope to do it again soon.

1. How long have you served on the Board? Will you run for re-election when your current term expires?
Chairman Swanger: "This is my third term, I was re-elected last fall, so I have about four more years to go. I'm not sure what my plans are yet."
2. What are your local priorities, or what county issues hold the most importance to you?
Chairman Swanger: "Generally speaking, good government, being transparent and having a process that is inclusive. Specifically, priorities of budget matters are always at the top of the agenda. You got to have money to run things. By the same token, you have to be mindful of wise expenditure funds, and that the only place to get money is from the citizens, so you have to be very careful of how you spend the money."
3. Are there long-term concerns you have about our county?
Chairman Swanger: "Infrastructure is long-term concern. In times of economic downturn, usually the first thing that is put to the side is infrastructure, because you can not really see it. But if you let infrastructure to deteriorate beyond a certain point, then you create a real liability, and you have to pay for them at some point."
4. What role does the Board of Commissioners play in addressing those concerns?
Chairman Swanger: "Well they can't happen without us, we act as facilitators to obtain state and federal funds, grants funds, and the like to accomplish some of the infrastructure needs that we have. The budget and so forth, is exclusively within the purview of county commissioners, by law we must approve all budgets and expenditures, transfer of funds, and set the tax rate. I have a sheet I just received this morning that shows the tax rate in every county, the state average is 63.75 cents per hundred, in Haywood it is 54. So we are a little below average."
5. What are the biggest issues that citizens ask you about?
Chairman Swanger: "I get more complaints about barking dogs, which may not seem like a huge deal, but to them it is. The animal shelter, and those kind of issues are very personal to people. Occasionally, I'll get a complaint about someones bad experience with DSS, child custody, or something like that. But generally speaking, the big problems, people don't ask me about."
6. What are some of the responsibilities for county governments that you were not aware of when you ran for office?
Chairman Swanger: "I was school board chairman for two terms before I served for the board of commissioners. I was very aware of how county government worked, so I wouldn't say there was anything that I wasn't aware of."
7. What are the hardest decisions you've faced as a county commissioner?

Chairman Swanger: "Without question, when the economy fell off the cliff in 2008, mid year, I realized, looking at the revenues and sale tax, it was going to be six or seven million less than anticipated and budgeted for. The only way to cut that amount of money that quickly was for reduction in force. We lost about fifty-two positions, a lot of it was through attrition and early retirement, but unfortunately there were people who lost their jobs. That was the most difficult decision to date."