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Wilkes County

Managing A County On A Budget

I was greeted for my interview by a man with a large personality. This didn't strike me as "right" for the county manager who handles all the money, must be serious, and takes orders from all the county commissioners. I quickly threw all ideas about the county manager's role out and began talking to Mr. John Yates the county manager for Wilkes County.

Mr. Yates told me that his job is handling the budget and personnel. He is appointed, not voted upon, by the county commissioners as is the clerk and attorney. They are appointed the first meeting of the year, Mr. Yates has held county manager for 5 ½ years now. I asked him if his job was "safe" concerning how long he will be around he replied, at any monthly meeting the commissioners can decide to take a vote that Mr. Yates no longer be manager, while this has very little chance of happening I was still shocked to learn that it could happen that quickly.

Mr. Yates knows Wilkes County's budget well after 5 years of handling it, while it may change yearly it's relatively familiar territory. He explained that he will ask that the 22 departments in the county put together a budget at the beginning of the fiscal year, July 1st, based on the past year. Once submitted to the finance dept. they make sure it is a possible budget and then present it to Mr. Yates. The county manager then looks over this accumulation and makes recommendations, cuts, and reconstructs the budget book. It is put before the board of commissioners who vote for or against each suggestion Mr. Yates has carefully put together.

Wilkes County has 70 million dollars a year to put into a feasible budget. Mr. Yates says Wilkes is fortunate in that we didn't have a major incline when everything went up meaning we don't have a huge downfall that will bring down our local economy. Recently the middle schools were built in the county and he said there is about 7 years debt remaining on them, but that is the worst of it for our county. He did have some concerns to share with me about Wilkes County being without growth and how that will have effect on the sales and property taxes.

This meeting with the county manager showed me the depths of what this job has to deal with. It covers the whole budget, including cuts and what to put where, what can or should come into Wilkes County, and to my surprise in a way he actually tells the county commissioners what should happen and they only discuss and vote upon it. It's a powerful job that impacts the entire county, with 422 employees in the county departments alone, that is a huge job to be accounted for. This also gave me a better understanding of where my county stands with local economics and what can have an impact to make a change for the better.