

## Millage Rate...from Page 1A

“tax increase” when a school system or county receives more money in a given year than in a previous year, regardless of whether the increased tax revenue is due to a tax rate increase or a tax base change.

For the most part, in

this case, it's the number of property owners and improved properties that have increased in Union County, i.e. growth, and it's something every county and school system seeks within reason.

So, more money is

collected in gross tax dollars because there are more people in the county paying taxes, but no taxpayer from the previous year should pay any more this year than they did last year, assuming their property valuations have remained the same.

In the scenario of keeping the millage rate at 11.74 mills, the term “tax increase” is really just a revenue increase rather than a rate increase.

The school system's 2020 budget is predicated on 99% tax

collections, though usually, the budget is figured based on about 95% of collections, as it generally takes a year or two to account for all tax payments.

“Next year, we will have to adjust that, because realistically, we typically don't receive that much (in the first year of collections),” she said.

However, Bundy said they did collect 99% this year and praised Union County Tax Commissioner Lee Knight for his efforts.



Local resident and property owner George Burch spoke in the Aug. 15 millage rate public hearing at the Union County Board of Education. Photo by Mark Smith

## Electric Rates...from Page 1A



Jeremy Nelms

By June of each year, the TVA requires the EMC to notify the authority how it plans to implement its expected rate increase at the local level.

As in years past, the EMC

Board voted in May to pass the increase directly on to member bills instead of absorbing it internally in order to avoid going further into debt.

Incorporated into the vote directing the TVA increase to member bills was a corresponding rate adjustment that would be revenue-neutral for average users, or people who use about 907 kilowatt-hours per month.

The same rate adjustment has been conducted in each of the last two years and is aimed at creating a fairer distribution of fixed costs across the membership, as it moves fixed costs that have historically been built into the variable energy rate to the non-variable customer charge on member bills.

Should the TVA Board decide to take Lyash's recommendation not to impose a TVA rate increase in 2019, the only action that will occur on Oct. 1 will be the EMC's revenue-neutral rate adjustment.

This adjustment will

result in average-use members seeing zero change in their monthly bills, below-average users experiencing a slight increase, and above-average users seeing a slight decrease in power charges every month.

Starting with October bills, all residential and GSA1 member accounts will see an additional \$1.54 in customer charges and a corresponding decrease in their variable energy charges, which will be greater offset for customers who use more power than those who use less.

In the Aug. 12 EMC Board meeting, Director Cory Payne said that, based on feedback from a member, he would like the board to revisit its decision to enact the 2019 rate adjustment and consider other options.

The board's decision to implement the rate adjustment still stands, however, and the EMC will be advertising the adjustment in area newspapers in the coming weeks.

In other news, online voting in the annual EMC

Board of Director elections will be opening up this Friday and will end at midnight on Sept. 24.

Only three people submitted paperwork for nomination as candidates in this year's election, those being incumbents Gene Mason of Union County, Cory Payne of Clay County, North Carolina, and Ray Cook of Cherokee County, North Carolina.

The annual meeting and election will take place on Thursday, Sept. 26, at the EMC Headquarters in Young Harris, with business set to begin at 3 p.m.

New this year, all member voters will be entered to win one of three cash prizes that will be awarded on Monday, Sept. 30.

“This year marks the 81st Annual Meeting,” according to a recent EMC news release. “General Manager Jeremy Nelms will welcome members, present the executive summary for the 2018 calendar year and share any upcoming news and events.”

## Communications...from Page 1A

needing to be made regarding tonality and getting used to the new radios.

According to E-911 Director David Dyer, who also serves as the county fire chief and EMA director, going from analog to digital is the biggest news in emergency communications since radios first arrived in Union County decades ago.

“The best thing is that we have more clear and consistent communications than ever before – those are our two biggest advantages,” Dyer said. “There were times when you didn't know if your radio was going to get out or not.

“And then, there were times when you could get out, but it was so staticky that no one could understand what you were saying. So, it just makes things so much easier.”

Added Dyer, “This has been in the works since January of 2018. It's taken that long to do it, as there were a lot of processes that we had to go through to get to this point.”

The project was entirely SPLOST-funded, thanks to the forward-thinking attitude of Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, who years ago included emergency communications in the current voter-approved SPLOST referendum.

And it's been a personal goal of Dyer's to make sure the digital changeover happened as soon as possible to boost the quality and improve the effectiveness of Union County's public safety communications.

But why are digital radios such a big deal?

The move to digital is largely a response to the Federal Communications Commission's 2013 “narrowbanding” of licensed public radio frequencies used by analog technologies.

Essentially, narrowbanding increased the number of channels available for use by newer entities/agencies by requiring all broadcasting frequencies to operate using narrower 12.5-kilohertz channels instead of the wider 25 kHz channels that everyone was used to operating on.

Since analog radios had a narrower bandwidth to work with after the switch, this meant a reduction in coverage for agencies like those in Union County, as communications started traveling a shorter distance, which translated to weaker signals and more audio interference.

Furthermore, the FCC has said it may do another narrowbanding requiring agencies to go down to 6.25 kHz channels, which would only serve to make analog communications worse here in Union County.

That's where the benefit of going digital comes in. Digital radios convert people's voices into bits of information using binary code, and these bits are sent to repeaters that use technology similar to cellphones.

The result is crisp, clear, reliable communications that

can travel farther than ever, which is critically important in mountainous areas like Union County – especially when lives are on the line and every second counts.

As Dyer stated, there were many places around the county that previously experienced limited to no communications via radio after the 2013 narrowbanding, such as Suches.

But thanks to the digital changeover last week, not only are these places accessible once more, communications there are clear and static-free, and the range has increased to include locations that have never before been reachable.

“Digital just has a much better range,” Dyer said. “I've talked in my vehicle in Jackson County to here. And we had some EMS folks at Erlanger in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the

other day, and they could hear us clear as a bell.”

Added Dyer, “I think this radio system that we have now will take us well into the future.”

E-911 will continue to monitor the old analog system in case outside agencies attempt to contact Union County, and it will also be able to use analog as a countywide backup if necessary.

All local first responder agencies have new radios in both the handheld and vehicle variety, and those new radios have the capability of using the old analog system as well.

Residents of “scanner land” who use old analog scanners will not be able to tune in to the digital system unless they acquire an NXDN-capable scanner, with all local first responder frequencies remaining the same.