

018 – Counting Across the County with Tax Commissioner Daniel Reeves

[Music]

[Graham]: Hey there! I'm Graham Parker, and you're listening to the Around Pickens podcast! Have you noticed that it's starting to feel just a little bit cooler in the morning? It's a subtle thing, but gradually summer is starting to fade into fall. But before you break out the sweaters and the pumpkin spice, there is a bit of unpleasant business to attend to first, because Autumn isn't the only thing coming this month. There will also be property tax bills. Yeah, it's that other tax season for those with land, buildings, and other assets, and now that we're in that time of the year, I thought it would be the perfect time to speak with the man in charge of collecting that tax. Daniel Reeves is Pickens County's Tax Commissioner. His office is where you go when you need a new tag, to register a mobile home, or conduct a tax sale. They juggle quite a bit over there, and I wanted to find out more about how they operate heading into their busiest time of year. Our conversation touched on a number of topics including differences between his duties and the tax assessors, the wide array of services his office offers, and what Pickens residents should know about their tax bills this year. So, without further ado, sit back, let's hear what Daniel had to say about paying taxes.

Well, Daniel, I appreciate you joining me this morning. I know you just got back from a conference last week, so I'm sure you got a lot to catch up on today.

[Daniel]: Very much so, very much so. Yeah.

[Graham]: Yeah, well uh-

[Daniel]: Thank you for having me.

[Graham]: Yeah, absolutely. Um, tell me uh, a little bit about you. You've been our tax commissioner now for 5 years, is that right?

[Daniel]: I have, yes, correct.

[Graham]: What were, what were you doing prior to getting elected?

[Daniel]: Uh, no, nothing really like this. Um, of course I've, I've been in pastoral ministry since 1998, but I was actually a welder uh, prior to doing what I'm doing now. Uh, in 2009, the uh, of course most people know that the, the economy kind of fell out. Um, I know about a hundred people in the particular company I was working for got laid off. And so, um, you know finding a job around that time was a little bit difficult, so anything that I did find was temporary, you know? So, I was bouncing around for, for about a year, year and a half there. Uh, at the time Sharon Troglin was the tax commissioner and uh, she started coming to the same church that I was going to and so she offered me a job uh, which my wife was terrified 'cause I'd never worked in an office. I'd always done some form of uh, uh manual labor. Um, but you know I had the, the pastoral background so I was, I'd always work with pe, people and uh doing customer service. So, I'd worked in some form of the public for you know, for most of my life. Um, and so when you know I, I took the job here working on the line. Started out there on the line just like everybody else does and it was you know it was almost like hand in glove. I was I, I, I was good at it. I retained the information well, I was great with the public, and so it, uh it was just something that I actually, I loved and enjoyed doing so and I've been there ever since, since 2011.

[Graham]: Wow.

[Daniel]: Yeah.

[Graham]: Man, that is, that's quite the job.

[Daniel]: Yeah.

[Graham]: So, what uh, what made you decide to actually run for Tax Commissioner?

[Daniel]: Well at, at the time that I ran the, my predecessor he had decided not to rerun, and I was at the time the, the deputy Tax Commissioner and I was the delinquent tax manager uh, the ex officio Sheriff there in in the, the county that deals with the property tax sales and things like that. So I was, I had already been working here for right at 10 years at the time of the uh, of the election. And it, he had decided not to run, and he asked if I would run in his place. And it was, like I said, it's a job that I love, it's something that I enjoy doing. I love being in the public uh, I enjoy doing what we do. Uh, it's, it's different than any, anything else that anybody does. You know we're the only, the only office that does it. And uh, but it's, it's something that, that you know that I felt that, without trying without sounding arrogant, I felt that I was the best one in the uh, for the job given the, the knowledge that I had and the uh the training that I had and the job that I done every day. And so, it was something that um, that I felt that was, that was right for me, and I felt that I was right for the county on that.

[Graham]: I see.

[Daniel]: Yeah.

[Graham]: Let's talk about the job itself. What uh, what duties are you charged with as Tax Commissioner?

[Daniel]: Uh well the tax commissioner is, a lot of people don't realize, is an elected constitutional officer and they're responsible for every phase of collecting property taxes from processing property, um homestead applications. In a lot of counties, we actually don't do it in our county um, we uh the tax assessors, uh accept those but a lot of counties do that. Uh, but we work through the proper, uh preparation of the digest from billing, accounting, disbursements. Um, we are in a uh like I said a, a constitutional officer and so those duties um include property taxes, uh collecting property taxes. Those assessed on real estate, public utilities, motor vehicles, mobile homes, and those collections are dispersed to the school, local governing authorities. And we're also the local tag agent uh for the state so we collect any kind of fees and penalties for motor vehicles. Um processing of uh motor vehicle titles, issuing tags, uh tag renewal decals, um insurance lapse fines. We do disability placards uh so anything to do with motor vehicles and property taxes on the collection side of that, that's, that's um what we do.

[Graham]: I got you.

[Daniel]: Yeah.

[Graham]: Well, you know part of what I do here is I field public questions that we get on our website and uh I, I get quite a few questions that are maybe aimed either uh, towards the tax assessor office or maybe towards yours office and it gets a little mixed up could you just sort of explain the difference between the two.

[Daniel]: Well, there is a lot of uh, confusion. A lot of times they get a lot of our phone calls, we get a lot of their phone calls. Um it's uh, because I can see where the confusion would be, Tax Commissioner, tax assessor sounds like it would be in the same office but it's actually two uh total separate divisions. But the uh, the tax assessor's office, their job is obviously to assess and appraise taxes, you know set the value on those taxes. But the Tax Commissioner's job is to bill and collect on those taxes and to disperse uh, those taxes. So, like, you know like your value, the tax commissioner does, doesn't do anything on that regard. Um, you know the tax assessor they use certain methods to determine the value of properties uh, they go out and do the site checks uh to go do that. Uh but the tax commissioner, their job is simply to bill and collect and to disperse. So, you know your, so the amount of your tax bill we're not in charge of. We're not in charge of whether or not you have a certain exemption, we don't do that. Um our job is to collect upon

those taxes and make sure that the certain entities and governing authorities in the county uh, have what they need to function and operate on a day-to-day basis.

[Graham]: I see.

[Daneil]: Yeah.

[Graham]: Well, let's talk a little bit about the uh, nuts and bolts of how taxes get collected and dispersed. Can, can you uh, just sort of walk us through some of that?

[Daniel]: Well, we have a lot of methods of collecting on the taxes obviously. Um we, we try to make it easy in every avenue from actually the collection on the property end. We offer everything from um, prepayment which is, as we set people up on a contract to collect early, up to 75% of their bill. It's almost like an escrow account for those that don't have escrow they can actually come in and set up a, an account with us and we can collect up to 75%. And we generally don't do above 75% because you never know what's going to happen with exemptions or maybe some kind of grant or something just like we had last year with the HTRG Grant. And the way the law specifies with collecting prepayments is if you collect a, anything that you collect above what the bill is the law won't allow for a refund. You have to put it into the kind of the pot for the next year and then we can apply it to next year's bill. So, we try to not collect the full amount due to the fact that you may over collect and that, you know that may be a, you know a discomfort to the, to the taxpayer. Uh, we also do partial payments for those that that maybe, maybe they can't afford to pay the bill uh, immediately or, or on time. So, we do off, offer 12-month payment plans for people to be able to pay on their property taxes. Um, you can pay your bill online uh, you uh, the same way with your tag. You can renew your tags online; you can pay your property tax bill online. We have a drop box in the front. Uh, so we have a lot of ways that we, we collect the bill. Obviously, you can come in person. So, we, we've opened up a lot of ways for people to be able to pay and make ease of access to be able to, to do that. Uh, so that's, you know we try, we try to accommodate the public as much as possible to be able to, to do that.

[Graham]: Yeah, certainly sounds like it. And I'll say for anybody listening uh, check the description of this episode, we'll include a link to the Tax Commissioner's Office down there. Uh, but you know at the time that we're recording this the millage rate has not yet been determined; I, I imagine it will be shortly after it's released. Uh, with that in mind I'm just curious is there anything you would like uh, people to know uh, ahead of getting their tax bills this year?

[Daniel]: I think the biggest thing to know about this year ahead of the uh, getting your tax bill is, well for one the look of the tax bill is going to change a little bit but that's not going to be a big deal. We usually put an ad in the newspaper showing the new, the new bill and what it's going to look like and what each line means. But last year on your bill, I don't know if everybody noticed or even knew about it, we did put an ad in the newspaper but Governor Kemp put out a uh, he gave a grant to all the, the counties in the state of Georgia for those that had Homestead properties and he gave what was called the HTRG grant which was the Homestead Relief Grant and so it got up to like \$500 off certain tax bills. And I'm sure that this year for those that may not have realized that was on their bill they may think that their taxes have increased substantially but it's actually this year the Governor did not give that grant and um, so you, so your actual bill of what it would have been normally will be this year. So that, that grant is not available but if you look on last year's bill if you have Homestead you can see to the right of the bill it would say HTRG, it be next to where the sales tax rollback was uh but, but that will not be on this year's bill. So, there will be a difference but it's not that your taxes have went up it's that you don't you don't have that grant this year. So, so just, just understand that. So, look at last

year's bill uh, before you're, before you hit the roof because it, you, you may think that your taxes went up 500 bucks but it's, it's not the case.

[Graham]: Yeah, that's uh, that's definitely something to keep in mind. Uh, well um, let me ask you in uh, in the five years that you have been in charge of the office have there been any notable changes to how you and your staff do the work that you do?

[Daniel]: Well, we changed a lot of how we operate in general. Whenever we came in uh, a lot of positions were doing certain things that they no longer do. We, we've done a lot of changes, we've done a lot of technological changes in our office. Whenever I took office in 2011 uh, we didn't even have a website, you know? We, we done everything in office. Uh, either it came by mail, or you came in the office. And, and so, you know you were busy; it was really, really busy all day. You were most likely going to stand in line uh, but you know we did a good job back then getting everything done. It's just that we, the technology just wasn't, you know what it is in the office now. So, you know we have it to where, you know you can go on your most, you can do most things except for title um, preparation on our website. Uh, we've even got it to where you can pay e-checks uh, online. You can do the uh, you can, you know you pay by card online, you can call in and, and, and pay your, pay your bills. Uh so you know there's just a lot of things that we had whenever Darren Satterfield was here. He put the drop box in the front uh and we're continuing to work toward, you know making things easier, making things more um, making things easier for the public to, to pay those bills. And we want to make it as easy as possible; we certainly don't want to add to the stress of the taxpayer. So, we, you know so, so we're always looking for that's what, that's one of the reason we just uh, came back from the, the conference that we did which the conference was on emerging technology for tax commissioners' offices. It's one of the reasons we go and do that is so that we can all, we can be finding better ways to serve the public.

[Graham]: Well, if I could pivot a little bit uh, you know your, your staff around here kind of have a reputation of being some of the happiest uh, employees in the building. Uh not just walking into the office even at the uh, you know employee break room they're usually smiling and chatty. I'm just curious uh, what is your approach to promoting positivity in your office?

[Daniel]: Well, we, we stress great customer service. Uh, we, you know we try to create perks in our office for our employees. You know we, we want our employees to enjoy the work that they do, and we want them to um, to also understand the need for uh, positivity toward their our, our customers. Uh, you know just to be kind of I guess blunt in saying it is, you know with our office obviously we collect taxes, we, we collect Ad Valorem taxes for Motor Vehicles. So, our office doesn't sell anything so people that are coming in that what they have is not really a choice; it's something that they're having to do. So, if they're having to do this, we want them to have the best experience possible with uh, the situation that they have. So, we want, we want our people to, to give the utmost customer service whenever they come in. And, and one of the things that we do is we offer Employee of the Quarter. Um, it's kind of a challenge, it's not a game but it's a, it's a competition that we have. And we take every statistic in the office whether it's how many phone calls have been answered, how many, many titles have been processed, how many uh, uh decals have been renewed. We do every little thing from customer service comment cards. We put those on the desk because we want to know how our staff is doing. So, we use every statistic that there is to how many days that they're missing you know it's for every little thing and we reward our, our staff based on that. So, you know we're constantly doing something to, to let them know that we appreciate them and the job that they do. We try to foster a positive environment and across the whole but the biggest thing we want is for people to come in and feel

like that they've been waited on with a smile. That people were friendly to them, that they were helpful, that they were accurate in their information. Uh, you know we, we want, we try to foster a, a culture of positivity in our office because we think that's, that's the, that is the best way to, to serve your public and to let them know that we care about what you do and that we understand that, that if it wasn't, you know it, it wasn't for you guys coming in doing what you do, these people this is how these people um, their salaries are paid. Just, just to, to, to say it bluntly um, that's why we want people to understand that in our office we look at it as the public is first, the office is second, and the individual is third. So, we always want to look at the needs of the public before anything else, but after that we look at the needs of the office. And so, we, we, we just want to create a good environment when people come in that they're able to leave feeling like they were properly serviced and that, that, that we done a good job for them. Because we, you know we, we want to see them do well and, and want them to be blessed when they leave.

[Graham]: I can tell a lot of intention has gone into this and uh, just from personal experience I think it's definitely hitting the mark. But uh, as we round out the conversation here um, I just want to give you the opportunity. Do you have any final message or a word you'd like to give to the taxpaying public in Pickens?

Uh, we want to thank you. We just thank you guys for your trust in our office and for allowing us to serve you uh, for allowing us to have another four years uh, to, to do this job. Um, we want to do anything that we can to help you no matter what area it is. It may not even be pertaining to our office but if you come in, we'll make sure that we send you in the right direction and that uh, so that we can get you what you need. But if you need us at any time uh, you can, you can call us or come by and we'll do everything that we can to help you or at least send you in the right direction uh, so that we can um, uh so we can see to it that you that you have what you need. And that being said if you do come in, you'll notice over the last couple of months we've been doing some construction in our office so you may come in and there'll be a little bit of things scattered. We're, we're creating a little bit of a better work environment. We're securing uh, up our office and, you know kind of closing off some of the holes that were there and we're making it to where it'll flow a little better uh, so we're not having to run up and down the hall to go ask, ask questions or go to different departments. We're trying to create one hole there uh, so if you um, so if you come in you see that, that should be done in the next couple of weeks. It's going to look a lot better and we're going to have a lot better uh, system going on.

[Graham]: Yeah, well that'll be great. I know uh, everybody back there will be looking forward to that being over.

[Daniel]: They are. Yeah, they are.

[Graham]: Well, uh, Daniel Reeves is Pickens County's Tax Commissioner. Uh, Daniel thank you for coming by this morning.

[Daniel]: Thank you for having me. Thank you.

[Graham]: Absolutely.

Whether you are well off or not so well off we can all agree that paying taxes is never fun. One positive thing that we have here in Pickens is that we have a very good collection system. Seriously, Daniel's staff is top notch and if you want an even more convenient way to pay, they have a great website. Check down in the description for a link to it and other tax resources. Thanks again to Daniel and best of luck to him and his staff with the work ahead this tax season. With that we are going to transition to the question to the chairman, the part of the show where you the listener gives ask a question to Kris Stancil. Real quick though I do want to give a brief update on the show. After this episode we're going to transition from putting out an episode once

a month to more like once a quarter. It's not because we're running out of people to talk to, but we just want to experiment with some other video projects for a while. So, keep an eye on our Facebook page and our YouTube channel if that's something you're interested in. But with that said let's talk to Kris and hear what viewers wanted to know.

So, Kris you know our guest this month was a tax commissioner Daniel Reeves and funny enough we actually have a viewer question related to taxes but it's uh topic I think is maybe better suited towards you. So, I'll just read the email we got uh, comes to us from Tonya. Tonya says, "Hello, I saw in the progress last week that the county is thinking about implementing a T-SPLOST. I have some questions about this. First, I believe that we already have a SPLOST in place so how would this affect that? Second what kinds of projects will get done if it passes? This all seems a bit abstract, and I'd like to know where these extra pennies are going towards."

So yeah, Kris what can you tell us? What is a TSPLOST?

[Kris]: Yeah. So, TSPLOST by definition is a transportation special purpose local option sales tax. So, it's specific for transportation, for roads, for Road improvements um, which includes things like storm drainage, sidewalks, so anything dealing with roads uh, would, would, would be in that category. I think uh, one of the, the intuitive things in the question is yes, we do currently have a SPLOST in place. There was a SPLOST that was passed in 2020. Uh, it's a six-year SPLOST so it'll run through 2026. Uh, within that SPLOST that's there which is divvied out amongst the cities in the county with the portion that the county receives close to 50% of that is currently going to roads. So, all the road paving projects that you see done, the annual paving projects that are done are currently being funded out of that SPLOST.

Um, one of the, the, the thought processes in, in trying to present an option for a TSPLOST for the voters to consider is the pace that we're able to use that percentage and go is averaging around 9 miles per year; it, it kind of fluctuates a little bit. The cost of paving has, has skyrocketed in the last five years so it's kind of hard to estimate where that'll be going forward. If it's leveled out, I think between '23 and '24 it started to level back out. So, there's some years that that might be able to exceed uh, 10 miles there's some years that that might go down to seven. Uh, the year we did a full-depth reclamation on, on Grand View Road it was less miles that were done because the cost of that project was, was way more. Uh, if there's significant patching there's way more. So, one of the thoughts that, that was going into place for a separate tax specific to TSPLOST is, is kind of multifaceted. One, as it relates to roads, it gets us on a cycle of improvement. Right now, at the pace we're going they're wearing out before you can ever get back to resurfacing the roads that are wearing out and we're never really getting a lot of progress beyond our main traveled roads. So, getting to our secondary, tertiary roads that, that go off is has been a slower process. Uh, I think that, that our road department crews have done a phenomenal job trying to keep up with, with what we're doing. Trying to, to, to keep patching the areas that need patched but in order to, to get on a cycle, whether that be a 15-year cycle which is kind of a realistic estimate that, that, that no road would be older than 15 years in terms of if it was an asphalt paved uh, surface a TSPLOST would allow for that to be possible because we would be able to increase how much was going into road paving. So, every penny collected from that penny sales tax would go to roads.

How that works with our current SPLOST is when the SPLOST, when the referendum was passed, it was passed for a certain dollar amount to go toward those different categories and so anything collected beyond that dollar amount can go to any of those categories that were in there. So, projects that you see, or you hear the public talk about a lot whether it be Parks and Rec expanding Roper Park, adding additional Parks, all of those kind of things that you see when

we've looked at cost estimates for significant Improvement to where it would be very noticeable those go above the percentage that's currently being allocated to Parks. Um, when we look at public safety the need for more ambulances, fire trucks, things of that nature. The need exceeds a little bit beyond what the current percentage is. Water infrastructure, being able to, to, to replace and, and update the uh, the, you know the 20 plus year old water lines that are in some areas; those costs exceed the percentage allocation that was there.

So, if TSPLOST were to pass, to pass by the, the voters when it goes on the, on the ballot then we would be able to reallocate those funds that are currently going from SPLOST to roads to move those into those projects to where we can start meeting the, the, um the desires of, of the community. Some of them I think are critical. I mean when we go to the water pipes and, and things of that nature; those are things that are critical infrastructure. Making sure the ambulance and the fire truck uh, is up to date and current to where it can arrive at your house, critical. Um, I know Parks is, is more amenity driven but it's extremely essential to have, have high quality parks for, for you know, all of our kids to participate in the activities and to add things for, for our senior population. Whether it be pickle ball, updating the pool the, where it can be used for other things. I mean there's several other features better walking tracks, or additional walking track uh, become possible with the combination of a SPLOST and a TSPLOST.

Um, I know one of the concerns that we, we had looked at is its that extra penny on the sales taxes and trying to see what has that done in other areas. Um, and in the research you know, and this is available online the Department of Community Affairs for the state of Georgia, shows the tax rates for every County in the in the State uh, 112 other counties have some form of a TSPLOST whether it be a single county TSPLOST or a regional TSPLOST for, for their area um, and close to that same number have an 8 cent sales tax or more. Um, there are some counties that are still lower but the vast majority um, two thirds of, of all counties or a little beyond two-thirds of all counties have already kind of moved toward this, this system um, to where you can provide those services and it's spread out to everybody that, that comes in.

Um, I know when we, we've first started having the conversation and we were considering working with the city used to get an intergovernmental agreement in place um, I just went and sat at, at parking lots at a couple of the different places along 515 and sat at the racetrack for a little while went over to Sackets, sat in their parking lot for a little while went to Quick Trip sat in their parking lot for a while and then I even went to Walmart and sat in the parking lot for a while just trying to get an idea as to the base of who's spending money um, in those areas, and uh, well over half were out of town, out of County tags that were coming through. Um, and I know that was a no official, there wasn't like a sitting there with a notebook, keeping data, and, and really gathering stats. It was more just; you know I wanted to understand. I know when we have events, you know Jeep Fest, Marble Festival, all those things that go on those are obviously weekend trips that a lot of people come in from, from out of town and spend money and leave. Um, but especially when it comes to roads because roads are used by everybody that comes through so the more that, that can be spread out the more we can try to fight to keep our millage rate down and not affect property owners with that millage rate is the better ability to them provide that service in a better way.

So um, countywide we have 400 miles of Roads um, in the county road system, I think Jasper has 42 miles if I'm not mistaken. Um, Talking Rock has 2 and Nelson has 5 and half miles and the center line road miles of, of locally maintained roads. So, this would provide a funding source to be able to significantly improve um, much more of those roads um, and that was why we put it out. Obviously, this is one of the great things about items that go on referendum. It's

great for us as Commissioners to come up with an idea or to come up with a plan but I would prefer that the voters be able to go and look and by putting this on uh, November of '24 general election ballot is of the one of the um, the largest voter turnouts of, of our citizens, so we get a stronger sense of the, the majority of the population. I know there's sometimes, there's special elections that are held and a low voter turnout comes out and you really don't know did it truly reflect the demographic of the entire community or not. By putting it on a, a presidential uh, election it's a special, you know a special item on that ballot but it's when the voters are, are really coming out and grow so we then know that it's the will of the people not just the, the idea that we had of, of something that was there, so uh, it's I think a tool. I mean obviously if, if the voters say that they prefer not to do it that way then we'll go back to the drawing board and try to work on other ways to continue to improve um, but this gives us the opportunity to, to make that improvement I believe in a faster fashion.

[Graham]: Well Kris let me ask you this, if it were to pass how quickly would it uh, take effect?

[Kris]: So, um, based on state law if it passes in November then the collection would start in April of '25. So, it would, it would begin April of '25. Obviously, it takes some time for, for that to uh, that to, to start to generate and come in to where you can start the projects but uh, that would put us in the '26 paving season of actually being able to fully take advantage of, of whatever, whatever came in if it passed.

[Graham]: I see. Well, there's obviously a lot of reasons to vote this November but uh, this is probably one of the most consequential uh, ways that our own community could be affected. So, um-

[Kris]: And I know that, that uh, our local Chamber of Commerce is going to work to help getting material out, more information. I know right now it was the, the article in the paper with the intergovernmental agreement uh, as a government um, we can never ask for people to vote for anything. All we can do is provide the information. So, from an educational standpoint we will describe what it's going to be used for um, why we put it out, why we felt like it was a, a solution but the, the decision is uh, is, is in the voter's hands. It's not something that we're, we're saying go vote for or go vote against, we're just wanting to make sure that we provide the reasons for it so as that material starts to come out, I know that the, the chamber has, has taken an interest in helping share information. I believe that they're, they're working on trying to schedule a date for a town hall that they'd be willing to host and um, the elected could come in as, as uh, a panel to answer questions and to listen to the feedback during that, that town hall. But it's just to make sure that before, before the ballots open uh, before the, the voting lines open and then people are informed, and they have the information in front of them.

[Graham]: Yeah, absolutely. So uh, for anyone who is interested in that be sure to follow our Facebook page or the Chamber of Commerce Facebook page and we'll get that information out there. But uh, yeah, thank you for coming in and answering that question and remember if you have a question for Chairman Stancil you can email to us

at questions@pickenscountyga.gov where if your question's concise enough and appropriate enough we might just put on the air. But that'll do it for this episode of the Around Pickens podcast, I've been your host Graham Parker,

[Kris]: I'm Kris Stancil,

[Graham]: and we'll see you around!

[Music]