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COUNTY JUDGE J.D. CLARK'S STATEMENT ON WISE COUNTY COLLEGE TAX RATE

Later this month, I will be asking the Commissioners Court to vote to stay at the same tax rate for both our Wise County property tax rate and our Wise County college tax rate. As everyone knows our tax values are down, largely due to a huge decline in mineral values. Despite the drop in mineral values, most property owners have seen their home values increase. Because our residents are seeing their property values increase, we should not add to the economic burden by increasing tax rates.

The Weatherford College administration, though, believes that we should increase the Wise County college tax rate. In 2009, Wise County voters approved a tax of up to five cents per $100 valuation. That phrase "up to five cents" is important- there is no obligation or requirement to set the rate at the full five cents. Instead, the voters gave the commissioners court the ability to set a college tax rate as we see fit as long as it does not exceed five cents. Weatherford College cannot dictate to us what our tax rate will be – instead, that decision is left up to the Commissioners Court as we decide what is best for our taxpayers.

That college tax currently results in approximately $3.4 million each year. Of that, roughly $2.5 million is used to cover the bond payments for the building, and the remaining funds are to be used for the maintenance and operation of a Wise County college campus. The problem since the inception of this campus is that the Weatherford College administration takes a huge portion of our Wise County college tax revenues out of Wise County and to the main college campus in Parker County. This year, the Weatherford College administration is proposing to take over $800,000 from Wise County to send to the main campus. These "indirect costs," as they are called, have been opposed by every Wise County judge and commissioners court since the college campus was created. The indirect costs are supposed to cover portions of the Weatherford College administration that provide support to the Wise County campus. The logic of having some indirect costs is not disputed. Our disagreement arises from the huge amount of dollars that Weatherford College claims they are entitled to receive from Wise County.

Charging over $800,000 in indirect costs to the Wise County campus creates two large problems. First of all, it means that many of our Wise County tax dollars are leaving Wise County. Secondly, the huge amount of indirect costs is creating a budget deficit at the Wise County campus. If over $800,000 is paid in indirect costs, it will require a transfer from the reserves of over a half-million dollars to balance the budget for the Wise County campus. This is not sustainable, this is not good business, and this is not what the Wise County voters signed on to do.

We disagree with how these indirect costs are calculated, and suggestions and alternatives from Wise County have fallen on deaf ears. When we expressed concern at the budget deficit, the Weatherford College administrative response was to cut staff and services at the Wise County campus, while the indirect costs leaving Wise County and heading to the main campus remained untouched. In fact, it seems that everything is able to be placed on the chopping block, except the money that the main campus is claiming. Wise County has suggested several new formulas that would result in a balanced budget for the Wise County campus with little to no reserve fund transfers, but all of our suggestions and ideas either have been either summarily dismissed or ignored by Weatherford College

administration. Even today, when they could have attended this meeting to discuss this issue face-to-face with the governing body that sets the tax rate, they instead chose to blast out a press release to media outlets proclaiming that Wise County should raise the tax rate and all issues will be resolved.

Our issues, though, are not all tied to the tax rate, and the attitude of "Wise County folks should pay their tax and then just shut up" will not work with me. Even though Wise County residents pay the taxes to fund this campus, Parker County residents can attend school here cheaper than Wise County residents can. A Parker County resident who is paying no Wise County campus taxes can pay $80 per credit hour to come to school in Wise County, while a Wise County taxpayer would be charged $98 per credit hour for the same class in our own county. This is not fair for our taxpayers, and this is not fair for our students.

I also firmly believe that if people are taxed, they should be given a voice. I have requested repeatedly that Wise County be a given a board seat on the Weatherford College Board of Trustees so that Wise County taxpayers are represented in the college system. If Weatherford College continues the policy of taxation without representation for Wise County, then it is that much more important that this Commissioners Court continues to advocate and fight for our citizens through the setting of our tax rate. This is our only real opportunity to vote to protect our taxpayers in this college system.

The Weatherford College administration is going to continue to say that all will be cured by a tax increase, but that is simply not true. They will continue to distract from the issues by pointing out that Parker County residents pay a higher tax rate than Wise County, but that is completely irrelevant when those tax dollars do not fund Wise County. They will continue to point out that Wise County voters approved a tax rate of up to five cents- but do you know that else they voted for? They voted for me. And they voted for all of the other gentlemen who serve on this court. And they voted for us so that we would stand up and do what is right for our taxpayers and our citizens, and right now, that means we should hold firm on the tax rate.