



Press Release

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Zooming through a pandemic : Column by Mayor Joe Grandy

In March of 2020, I didn't know what a Zoom meeting was, nor had I attended one. Now I can say I've participated virtually in hundreds of electronic meetings – 212 to be exact.

Washington County didn't stop for COVID-19. It adapted.

We didn't skip a single Commission meeting. Our commissioners and staff quickly adapted to Zoom and live streamed meetings that were not held in person. The work of the Commission continued and the public had real time access to comment on everything from rezoning of property to the County's COVID related responses. During the height of the pandemic, the Commission held weekly Zoom meetings to receive the latest information from public health officials, emergency management and medical professionals to ensure all parties were in the loop.

With the benefit of CARES Act funding, we were able to install state-of-the-art videoconferencing equipment for committee meetings, arraignments in our courts and to assist our veterans in communicating with the Department of Veterans Affairs regarding benefits.

We began 2020 with a new school in the works for students in Jonesborough and an interlocal agreement to earmark funding for improvements in Johnson City Schools. We ended 2020 hoping to get students out of virtual learning and back into the classroom.

In December, our new web site went online with many new features that enhance the transparency of government and improve the way we communicate with citizens. For instance, anyone can sign up to receive notifications on meetings, county news and details about COVID-19 measures such as vaccinations. You can renew your tags, pay your property taxes, pay court fines, complete the application for a marriage license and renew your handicap placard from our new web site. In the coming months our new docket system will enable those with court cases to get up-to-date information on court schedules online, any time.



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Progress on economic development projects, such as the competition of grading and site preparations in the region's new aerospace park and a master site plan for our own Washington County Industrial Park, continued despite the pandemic.

Our Historic Courthouse and Justice Center, while closing to in-person service for a few brief months, continued to do the work of government. Not a single department had to close its doors during 2020.

Our county-wide numbers came close to or exceeded prior year figures in several business areas, because some things don't stop even during a pandemic:

Marriages. From March to December 2020, our County Clerk issued 968 marriage licenses. That's only 44 fewer than the same time frame in 2019.

Property. Folks still bought houses, even during a pandemic. In fact, from March to December 2020, the Register of Deeds recorded 4,604 deeds. That's 276 more than in 2019. Total recordings in the Deeds office hit 23,999 during COVID, as opposed to 21,588 in 2019.

The Zoning Office saw an uptick in building permits with 540 issued in 2020 as opposed to the 430 issued in 2019. Many new developments were in the works pre-COVID. There was a slight increase year to year in subdivision lots, with the Planning Office approving 221 in 2020 as opposed to 211 in 2019.

Autos. The Clerk's office saw only a slight decline in the number of titles, tags and renewals for 2020 - 132,794 pre-COVID as opposed to 130,638 during COVID.

Taxes. Property tax collections were identical, meaning everyone was still able to pay their 2019 property taxes in 2020. Programs like partial pay, which the Trustee implemented during 2019, helped residents spread out their tax payments during the pandemic.

Sales tax figures saw an increase mainly due to online purchases made during COVID. In July 2019, the State began collecting tax on remote sales and remitting the local portion back to counties. From March to December 2020, the State remitted \$48.6 million as opposed to \$47.1 million during the same time frame in 2019. The difference between 2019 and 2020 was roughly \$1.5 million more in tax dollars.

Vaccinations. By far the most important numbers of the pandemic year started in December, when our health department began vaccinating first responders against COVID-19. By the end of 2020, we led the region in vaccinations with 4,862 first doses given in less than two weeks. As of March 23, 2021, we have vaccinated 28%



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of area residents with their first dose and 18% are now fully vaccinated. This far surpasses the State vaccination rate of 19.25% of residents with one dose.

As we move out of the confines of the pandemic, our health department and other community partners are making sure those who want vaccinations receive vaccinations. Our children are back to in-person learning most days of the week. Our restaurants are opening up dining rooms. Festivals are happening with precautions in place and visitors are returning to enjoy all our region offers.

Our ability to adapt and change means we are returning to a new normal, and I for one expect it to be better than ever for Washington County.