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Tuscola's millage among the lowest in state

Mary Drier, For the Tribune Published 7:00 am, Friday, January 13, 2017

TUSCOLA COUNTY — A 53-year old decision about finances is making it difficult for Tuscola County to operate efficiently today.

“The very low allocated millage rate and limited tax base continues to be problematic to the financial ability of the county to provide even mandated services from the general fund,” states a report by county controller **Mike Hoagland** to Tuscola County commissioners during this week’s committee meeting of commissioners. “Without the wind-turbine revenue — which we know declines significantly with time — we would rank dead last in the state in general fund property tax received per capita.”

In 1964, then county leaders set the county allocated millage rate, which after the Headlee Rollback was figured in is 3.9141 mills.

The county has only been able to operate at current levels because of voter approval of dedicated millages for certain non-mandated services, Hoagland pointed out.

Taxpayers have rejected requests several times over the years to increase the county's allocated millage, yet they have approved millages for certain programs.

Voters approved the following special voted millages: bridges and streets 0.4807 mill, senior citizens services 0.2000 mill, medical care facility 0.2500 mill, road patrol 0.9000 mill, roads and streets 0.9657 mill, mosquito abatement 0.6316 mill, recycling 0.1500 mill, veterans services 0.1700 mill, **Michigan State University** services 0.1000 mill.

Tuscola County ranks 77th out of the state’s 83 counties in receiving general fund property tax revenue per capita. Huron County rank’s ninth in the state and Sanilac County ranks 64th.

Tuscola County's taxable value in 2015 was \$1,765,660,266. The county's allocated millage levy generated general fund property tax revenue is about \$6.9 million. The

county's estimated population in 2015 was 53,777 which makes the tax revenue per capita \$129.

Huron County's 2015 allocated millage rate after Headlee Rollback was figured is 4.3807 mills. The county's 2015 taxable value was \$2,194,991,653 for a general fund taxable revenue of about \$9.6 million. In 2015, the county had a population of 31,883 which equals a property tax revenue per capita of \$302.

Sanilac County's 2015 allocated millage rate after Headlee Rollback was 4.0482 mills. The county's 2015 taxable value was \$1,538,732,404 for a general fund taxable value of about \$6.2 million. In 2015, the county had a population of 41,465 which equals a property tax revenue per capita of \$150.

The chart Hoagland provided shows the state average allocated millage rate is 5.1618, and that if Tuscola County had that rate instead of 3.9141 mills it would have generated an additional \$2,203,000 in property tax revenue for the general fund, which would have been a 30 percent increase.

Hoagland's presentation showed the county's low allocated millage rate set decades ago impacts the county's finances – even with the revenue from wind-turbine development.

"We are looking at and discussing options on our finances. Expenses have been outdistancing revenue," said **Tuscola County Commission Chair Thom Bardwell**. "We are very reliant on revenue from wind development, but we know we cannot depend on it. It decreases as the years go by."

Although there are two new wind farms proposed for the county by two developments, the proposed wind farm in Almer Charter Township and Ellington Township is meeting strong opposition.

"We will be watching what develops (or doesn't) in Almer and Ellington in the wind projects there," Bardwell said.

Hoagland's review of finances went on to show the 10 top taxpayers in the county in 2016: Tuscola-Bay Wind LLC had a taxable value of \$115,923,650, Consumers Energy had \$118,722,722, ITC Transmission had \$55,944,193, DTE had \$36,093,619, Dairy

Farmers of America had \$13,645,700, Poet Bio-refining had \$9,083,338, Thumb Electric Cooperative had \$6,145,449, **Wal-Mart** with \$3,933,750, **Russell Family Land Co. LLC** had \$3,321,195, and **Michigan Sugar Co.** had \$2,420,927.

The report also noted the largest employers in the county were: Tuscola County government with 378 employees, **Caro Regional Center** with 360 employees, Wal-Mart with 300 employees, and **Caro Community Schools** with 264.

Hoagland's information showed nearly all of the top employers in the county were government entities rather than manufacturing concerns.

The report should have also noted **Hills and Dales General Hospital** in Cass City has more employees than Caro Schools.

The hospital has more than 300 employees according to **Danielle Blaine**, who is the hospital's marketing and foundation director.

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