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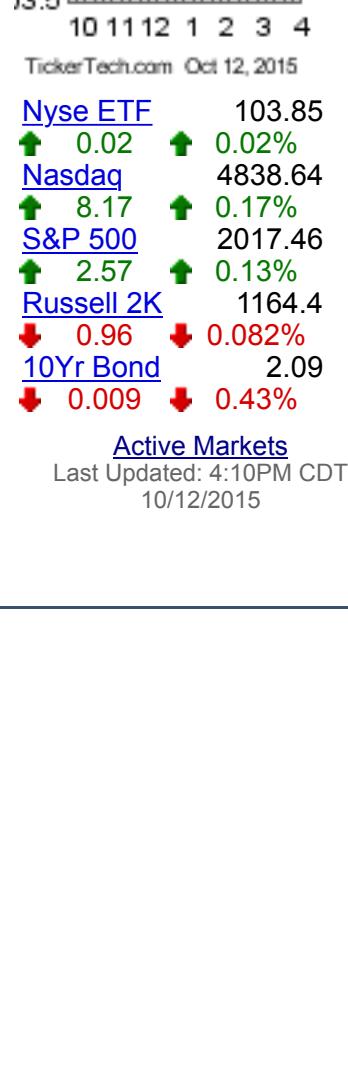
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### WILLIAMS / 'Fixing' after the fact is tough

*Legislator agrees more info earlier might have lessened turmoil*

By Robert M. Williams, Jr.

Published:  
Tuesday, September 1, 2015 7:13 PM EDT

Rep. Chad Nimmer has been a busy man. In addition to his day job in the timber industry, Nimmer has been mediating the on-going battle between Pierce Commissioners and our neighbors, the Waycross City Commission.

It's only appropriate. The Blackshear legislator is the one who ignited the simmering dispute months ago. An update came from the popular young representative this week after I asked a simple question:

"You broke this. What are you doing to fix it?"

From early-morning coffee klatches to evening sit-downs, Nimmer has been soothing bruised egos and side-stepping unhappy innocents caught in the crossfire. All the while, he's been gently pleading for a truce. Politically ham-handed Pierce leaders who chose secrecy, instead of open government, to get their way can't understand why the "other side" isn't happy. Waycross officials, often tone-deaf politically, have been hapless in what to do next. Nimmer is working hard to bridge the gap.

If you've been away on Mars the last couple of months, here's what it's all about: Nimmer, at the request of a few Pierce leaders — elected and un-elected — pushed legislation through the General Assembly to end Waycross's city limits claim to roughly 400 acres just east of the Satilla River in Pierce County. Waycross, which was invited by landowners to annex the area three decades ago, had invested big dollars in water and sewer infrastructure (which was not, by the way, gifted to them by the state.) They've also reaped significant dollars from a few large businesses in the form of license fees and taxes. Exorbitant fees say some, while allegedly failing to deliver at least some of the services once promised. Waycross city attorney, Rick Currie, has likened the split to a divorce. An "amicable" divorce is rare, especially so when one of the parties finds the dissolution papers left under their windshield wiper in the dark of night, not unlike how this was done.

There is no clear-cut answer as to whether, over the long haul, the Waycross de-annexation will ultimately be good, or bad. Nimmer, however, now concedes the process he followed to get his legislation passed was "flawed."

"More information, not less, would have helped this situation," says Nimmer plaintively. "I see that now."

Ultimately, it was the very authority Nimmer looked to for guidance that let him and every resident of our two communities down: the General Assembly's office of legislative counsel. They're the ones who advised Nimmer a so-called "public notice" of his legislation was sufficient to alert affected parties. It wasn't. The so-called "notice" was so vague no one could know what was about to happen and it failed miserably in serving its purpose, to inform affected citizens. The resulting impact has wasted much time and many taxpayer dollars. It's not the first time legislation has been passed without sufficient knowledge given those affected. It won't be the last.

And, nearly always, it doesn't happen that way by accident.

Georgia's General Assembly has long been averse to open government and legislators have deliberately undermined public notice more and more over the years. The result is seldom good. Rep. Nimmer now sees clearly how adequate public notice might have helped avoid much of this turmoil and possibly saved thousands in legal fees.

Nimmer's epiphany on the value of adequate public notice won't be shared by many of his colleagues, however. That leaves one more natural question for our local legislator: What will he do to fix it?

Sitting across the table recently, Nimmer said he thinks he can resolve the Waycross-Pierce dispute — and help provide more openness in state government as well. Let us all hope.

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