

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
COUNTY OF MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION – January 9, 2023**

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in Regular Session on Monday, January 9, 2023, at 5:02 p.m., in the Commissioner's Board Room, 69 N Main St., Marion, NC.

Members Present

Tony G. Brown, Chairman; David N. Walker, Vice-Chairman; Chris Allison; Patrick Ellis; Lynn Greene

Members Absent

None

Others Present

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Victoria Craig, Clerk to the Board; Lake Silver, Management Assistant

Call to Order

Chairman Brown called the meeting to order at 5:01 p.m. The invocation was given by Commissioner Greene. The pledge of allegiance was given by Commissioner Allison.

Approval of Minutes

Vice-Chairman Walker made a motion to approve the November 7, 2022 Closed Session minutes, November 21, 2022 closed session minutes; November 30, 2022 closed session minutes; December 5, 2022 special session minutes, December 5, 2022 regular session minutes; and December 19, 2022 regular session minutes, seconded by Commissioner Allison. By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed.

Approval of Agenda

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to approve the January 9, 2023 agenda, seconded by Commissioner Vice-Chairman Walker.

Ashley Wooten, County Manager, requested to add to the agenda the recognition of Law Enforcement officers before discussing the property revaluation update. Mr. Wooten also informed the Board that Chairman Brown and Vice-Chairman Walker requested a letter be sent to Truist regarding the Old Fort branch closure and requested that to be added to the agenda as well as discussion about the Pilot Plant, which could all be discussed under the administrative items section.

Commissioner Ellis made an amendment to his motion to reflect the changes requested by the County Manager. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Law Enforcement Officer Recognition

Chairman Brown and the other Board members recognized officers from various agencies expressing sincere appreciation for the jobs they do and protecting the community. Each agency was presented with a certificate of appreciation.

Sheriff Buchanan took a moment to mention his appreciation of the Commissioners and and to all Law Enforcement officers and their partnerships.

Property Revaluation Update

Tax Assessor Tammy Wylie and consultant Tim Cain updated the Board on the revaluation process. The notices are scheduled to be sent out by the end of this month. The preliminary results based on revaluation since 2019 supports an overall increase of all property types by approximately 40%. All sells through December 31st of last year have now been reviewed and reconciled to ensure accuracy and to make sure that they reflect the most recent sells.

As a comparison, Mitchell county went through a revaluation last year with results of a 55% increase. Burke has gone through a revaluation this year with an increase of 40%.

When the notifications are mailed out (estimated to be by January 31st), residents will have 30 days for an informal appeal. There are several avenues for an informal appeal to be conducted: mail in, email, in-person, online, phone in for appointments. Results for informal appeals will be mailed out by the end of March.

Recognition of Brenda Vaughn

Brenda Vaughn was recognized for her 4-year service to McDowell County as County Commissioner. She was presented with a plaque from the Board.

Each Commissioner took a moment to speak on her dedication to the County.

Introduction of New DSS Director

The Board hired Bobbie Sigmon as the new DSS Director. Ashley Wooten introduced her and spoke on choosing. She attended tonight's meeting and introduced herself to the public.

New EMS Program

McDowell EMS became one of the first agencies in the state to be approved to provide blood products in the field. The program was initiated with the assistance of UNC Health.

Emergency Services Director Will Kehler was present to discuss the impact they believe it will have on their patients. He spoke on how even a small rural town can bring world-class care to McDowell County citizens and visitors.

Deputy Director Adriane Jones briefed the Board on scenarios in which the blood products will be used.

Recreation Center Project

Patrick McMurry presented the latest drawings on the Recreation Center project. The plans are very close to being ready for bid advertisement.

The First Presbyterian Church of Marion is in communication with staff regarding the current dead-end parking lot. There is an 18-foot grade change that requires a retaining wall between the McDowell Recreation property and the church.

The existing skate park will be turned into additional parking. There are currently 37 parking spots and by the end of the project, there will be 61. There will also be parking added around the baseball field, which will include handicapped parking.

The press box and seating plan include one male restroom and one female restroom as well as a shared toilet area with a changing station incorporated. There will be a concession area as well as a press box area. For the sitting area, there will be a continual change in elevation for better views of the field. There will be a 50-foot net system at the back of the field.

There will be a walking path around the field that will be ADA-compliant. Various options for pool accessories were presented to the Board. The architect will seek the final say in the coming weeks for the pool design. The pool consultant has worked hard to create a design in which only one pump room is needed for the pool area and splash pad. There will be 6 lanes at 25 yards for swim competitions, which will include starting blocks. With the size of the pool area, there can comfortably be two lifeguards on duty.

Building Projects

Services Building

The project architect CBSA has completed the baseline drawings and has not begun the drawings for the proposed renovation work. Staff and the architect have met with the Probation/Parole staff to determine what code requirements they have for the space.

Old EMS Station

Staff has worked over the last few weeks to prepare the building for removal. Some abatement work will be taking place over the next few weeks before demolition will occur. The flagpole and transformer will be removed and retained for possible future use at another County facility. Staff will try to sell the steel frame portion of the building, but if it doesn't get sold, then it will be demoed.

Paving

The Garden Street lot has been paved. The landscaping around the lot will be addressed.

DSS Building

The Board has selected Little as the architect for the DSS facility evaluation. Staff will be meeting with them this week to review the current situation and start their evaluation on what options may exist for improving the facility.

Water System Projects

Staff continues to work on an unprecedented number of water-related projects.

- The County's engineer continues to work on the engineering and design for both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the Nebo Water System expansion. Phase 1 has been approved for bid. Those bids should be advertised in the next few weeks. Phase 2 (which involves extensions of lines westward towards the City's system) is only in the beginning of design. These Phases are ARPA funded, which has hard deadlines given by congress. Estimation of phase 1 is going to take at most, 12 months. Commissioner Allison asked if citizens knew about signing up and Mr. Wooten said that staff will be going door-to-door in the near future and citizens can call the administrative offices.
- McGill Associates has begun the design work for the Hoppy Tom Hollow Water Project. The anticipated bid date is scheduled for July 2024.

Vice-Chairman Walker made a motion to approve the McGill Associates contract as presented, seconded by Commissioner Allison. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

- An Appalachian Regional Commission grant to extend water around Exit 90 has been submitted and is pending a decision from State and Federal officials.
- The study of water service to the West Marion Elementary Area is underway. An ARC pre-application was accepted and the County is eligible to apply.
- A grant for service along NC 126 was submitted by the September 30th deadline. The review process will probably take about two months longer.

Broadband Update

The state continues to develop an application for the Completing Access to Broadband (CAB) grant. CAB requires a greater contribution from counties than GREAT. Specifically, a 35% match is required to come from counties for these applications. The Board has previously authorized expending \$1 million of the County's ARPA allocation for broadband. There is \$900,000 left after the GREAT match, which would allow for a grant of a little over \$2.5 million. The CAB program details are still being formulated. Staff will reach out to Connect McDowell to request assistance in identifying areas that need service.

Audit Overview

Last month the Board received and approved the audit at the December 19 meeting. The audit was presented as 'Unmodified' with no findings. Below are a few staff takeaways from the document:

Fund Balance

The Local Government Commission has set a recommended minimum of 20% for Fund Balance Available for counties in our population range. The Fund Balance Available has increased in total dollars to \$12,803,398 or 23.39%, an increase from \$10,528,568 or 20.64%.

Water Fund

The County's Water Fund continues to perform as expected with revenues over expenditures. The County did borrow money about five years ago for a water line extension. That debt payment (which was over \$100,000 a year) was negatively affected when applied against the fund. That debt is now fully paid, which erases the negative impact on the fund. The system will grow over the next years as additional lines are built. This addition will grow the customer base. It will also grow the operating expense to be sure.

Waste Fund

The Waste Fund continues to be supported by a transfer from the General Fund. The Board previously received information regarding this transfer. Based on staff research, most counties that have a Waste Fund also utilize a household user fee. Based on a rough estimate of the number of households (approximately 18,000), the household fee would be approximately \$125 per parcel if the Board were to proceed and approve this.

Vice-Chairman Walker voiced that he wasn't interested in a household waste fee at this time, echoed by the remainder of the Board. Commissioner Ellis requested that staff look into other options that are possible in the County budget.

Commissioner Ellis commented positively on the trend that the County is going towards in its fund balance. He asked Mr. Wooten what a county the size of McDowell is recommended to be at, to which Mr. Wooten responded 39%.

Administrative Items

Truist Branch Closure in Old Fort

Chairman Brown and Vice-Chairman Walker requested Mr. Wooten to draft a letter to Truist Bank to reconsider the closure of the branch in Old Fort. Truist is the last bank left in Old Fort in addition to two credit unions.

Vice-Chairman Walker made a motion to allow staff to draft and send the letter of reconsideration to Truist, seconded by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Pilot Plant Sale

The County currently owns the Pilot Plant that isn't being used at the moment. There have been people reaching out to staff showing interest in purchasing the Pilot Plant. Mr. Wooten asked that the Board approve staff to look into an appraisal of the property.

Vice-Chairman Walker made a motion to allow staff to get an appraisal done to see what the property is worth, seconded by Commissioner Allison. Chairman Brown stated that he would like the money that the County receives from the sale of that property to go towards the Animal Shelter. Vice-Chairman Walker amended his motion to include that the funds obtained from the sale go towards the Animal Shelter for renovations or a new build.

Vice-Chairman Walker added that he and Chairman Brown met with two farmers who have shown interest in purchasing the Pilot Plant and they hold a letter of guarantee for the

amount that they have offered for the Plant. Vice-Chairman Walker also stated that the need for an expansion of the Animal Shelter is there. He mentioned that in the past there was County land that had been deeded out to a private animal group so that they could build a new shelter but the group wasn't able to do that and according to the reversion clause, the County got the land back. Vice-Chairman Walker stated that he would like to see the possibility of a new building.

Commissioner Ellis agreed that there is a need for a new animal shelter, but would prefer the sale price of the Pilot Plant to go toward the children in the County. He also recommended that staff look into privatizing the Animal Shelter and researching all other options before deciding what to do with the money from the sale of the Pilot Plant and while that research is occurring, have the sale money placed into the General Fund account. Commissioner Greene agreed with Commissioner Ellis.

Commissioner Allison made a motion to second Vice-Chairman Walker's amended motion. By a vote of 3-2, the motion passed. Chairman Brown, Vice-Chairman Walker, and Commissioner Allison voted in favor of utilizing the Pilot Plant sale funds towards renovations or a new build of the Animal Shelter. Commissioner Ellis and Commissioner Greene opposed it.

EMS Write-Offs

Vice-Chairman Walker made a motion to approve the EMS write-offs totaling \$91,360.41, seconded by Commissioner Allison. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Board Appointments

The Historic Preservation Commission is accepting applications for prospective members. Candidates need to have a demonstrated special interest, experience, or knowledge in history, architecture, or related disciplines.

There was a second reading for the Agricultural Advisory Board. Bob Brackett applied to serve on the board.

Vice-Chairman Walker made a motion to approve Bob Brackett's application to serve on the Agricultural Advisory Board, seconded by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

There was a second reading for the Juvenile Crime Prevention Council. Sarah Brewer applied to serve on the board.

Vice-Chairman Walker made a motion to approve Sarah Brewer's application to serve on the Juvenile Crime Prevention Council, seconded by Commissioner Allison. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Commissioner Greene declined to serve on the Foothills Rural Planning Organization Committee, therefore another Commissioner will need to be appointed. Commissioner Greene informed the Board that he chose not to serve on the RPO Committee because he was being asked to provide a personal financial statement and a real estate disclosure statement, which he did not feel was necessary to serve on the Committee.

Mr. Wooten informed the Board that if there wasn't a Commissioner who volunteered to serve on the RPO Committee, then there would be no McDowell County representation to vote on transportation projects in the County. It was also mentioned that the City of Marion has Woody Ayers representing the City of Marion on the Committee.

Vice-Chairman Walker agreed with Commissioner Greene that the information being asked to disclose by the RPO Committee was an overreach and continued to make a motion that staff petitions the local House member and Senate member in Raleigh to remove the requirement of a personal financial statement and a real estate disclosure statement, seconded by Commissioner Allison. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

There has been ongoing discussion of setting up a monthly meeting time with the Town of Old Fort. The Town is ready to start meeting when the Commissioners are ready. Typically, these types of committees have two Commissioners present as well as the County Manager. The Town of Old Fort expressed their interest in this meeting occurring on a Friday.

After discussion, Vice-Chairman Walker made a motion that Chairman Brown will attend every monthly meeting, and the second Commissioner that attends will rotate on a monthly basis which will begin with Commissioner Ellis, seconded by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Tax Matters

Vice-Chairman Walker made a motion to approve tax matters as presented, seconded by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Citizen Comment

Ron Lewis and David Streater presented a framed version of The Civil Rights Amendments to the Board of Commissioners.

Commissioners/Staff Reports

Mr. Wooten announced that County offices will be closed on January 16th due to the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Due to this, the second monthly Board meeting will happen on Monday, January 23rd.

Adjournments

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to adjourn at 6:51 p.m., seconded by Commissioner Allison. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Attest:

Victoria Craig
Clerk to the Board

Tony G. Brown
Chairman

