

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION – November 18, 2024**

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in Regular Session on Monday, November 18, 2024, at 5:00 p.m., in the Commissioner's Board Room, 69 N Main St., Marion, NC.

Members Present

David N. Walker, Chairman; Tony Brown, Vice-Chair; Lynn Greene and Patrick Ellis

Members Absent

Chris Allison (Illness)

Others Present

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Sena A. Allison, Clerk to the Board; Fred Coats, County Attorney; William Kehler, EMS Director; Jenifer Bunty, USDA Forest Service Acting District Ranger to the Grandfather District and Bobbie Sigmon, DSS Director

Call to Order

Chairman Walker called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m. The Prayer was given by Commissioner Greene. The Pledge of Allegiance was given by Vice Chair Brown.

Approval of Minutes

Commissioner Greene made a motion to approve the October 14, 2024 Regular Session minutes; the October 21, 2024 Regular Session minutes; with a second by Vice Chair Brown. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Approval of Agenda

Ashley Wooten, County Manager spoke of a change to the Agenda under Appointments Item C. to be stricken, as the speaker was unable to attend.

Vice Chair Brown made a motion to approve the Agenda; this was seconded by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Helene Emergency Response

Chairman Walker welcomed William Kehler to come forth to give an update on Hurricane Helene response and recovery efforts. Mr. Kehler began with this being day 55 of the EOC Activation and gave the following updates:

Roads

- US 221 North at Mountain Paradise Campground remains closed due to the bridge outage, in which NCDOT is working on a temporary bridge.
- NC 226 North, Coxes Creek remains open; both NC 80 and NC 226A (up through the Turkey Cove Community to Little Switzerland) remains open to local traffic only with lane closures due to landslides.
- Hwy 70 West at Curtis Creek remains closed as NC Drive shows an estimated time to open with a temporary bridge, as January 22, 2025. This is significant to the EMS operation, traffic flow for citizens and the debris removal process.

Lakes

- Lake Tahoma: they are working with FEMA and the US Army Corp of Engineers on debris removal from, as that is a significant water intake source.
- Lake James: the units remain offline, which is the ability to draw down the lake at any given time or move water through the lake system. The first restoration time for one of the units is scheduled for March 2025.

Water Systems

- Old Fort is in the process of repairing the 8-inch main that was causing pressure issues.
- City of Marion reports no issues.

Utilities and Cell

- Some isolated fiber and cable issues, with a couple of temporary cell trailers still in place specifically on NC 80 to ensure citizens have 911 access.

Landslides

- WNC have 1,996 documented landslides, with McDowell's Northern and Western areas being the most heavily impacted areas.
- USGS have identified a number of slides to houses for citizens to be able to give technical assistance for best practices on what the land owner can do for future safety.

McDowell County Disaster Hotline at 828-652-3241

- Operating 24/7 for all storm related questions and information where citizens can call and be assisted by a member of the EOC team.
- Calls reported are mostly water, well and septic issues, the need for heaters, FEMA and private bridges and culverts being out.

Community Comfort Stations for citizens with water issues

- Old Fort at 1 Water Street and Woodlawn at New Horizon Church at 5878 US 221 N in Marion.
- These resources were requested from the State and FEMA to include showers and laundry trailers and will remain until there is no need.

FEMA Disaster Recover Centers (DRC)

- Old Fort at AC Bud Hogan Community Center 909 East Marion Street and in Marion at the McDowell Senior Center (Lower Level) 100 Spaulding Rd. Hours are Mon-Friday 9a.m. – 2 p.m., Saturdays 9a.m. – 2 p.m. and Closed Nov 28-Dec 1st for Thanksgiving Holiday.
- These will be consolidated to one operation at the McDowell Senior Center on Monday, December 2nd with the same hours of operation.
- Anyone who has received a denial, go back in the Center and speak with the representatives for assistance.

Direct Housing Assistance

- FEMA is the lead agency, in which residents must apply at the DRC to be eligible for assistance.
- Support includes hotel vouchers, rental assistance and direct housing.
- 36 families to date have been approved for direct housing with temporary structures such as mobile homes or travel trailers. The goal of FEMA is to place the housing on the citizens own property for septic and power, or if this is not doable, to move into one of the temporary housing locations set up.
- Applicants can apply for Individual Assistance called IA with more housing to be available by FEMA as the need arises.

EOC and VOAD Coordination for Housing

- Emergency Operation Center (EOC) and Volunteer Organization Assisting in Disasters (VOAD) is led by Jerry Lewis from Grace Community Church which focuses on Emergency – Rapid – Repair to ensure homes are safe, sanitary and secure from damages caused by Helene.

- The lead organization is Baptist on Mission, along with other faith based and charity group focused on repairs for citizens to move back in their homes safely.
- These organizations coordinate weekly at the EOC.
- Assistance can be sought by the Hotline number of [828-652-3241](tel:828-652-3241) or the mcdowellcares.org website directing to Baptist on Mission.

Private Roads and Bridges

- Estimations of destroyed private bridges are presently over 100 and currently there are assessments to all communities for bridge/culvert and private road damage.
- FEMA is who to contact under Individual Assistance (IA). The goal is for the State to bring back the OSBM program to help in this process.

Debris Pickup

- Currently debris is being picked up on right of ways of state roads through the Army Corp of Engineers, who contracted Ashbritt Contractor for this service to the County.
- Communities presently picking up are; Old Fort, Crooked Creek, Marion, PG, Woodlawn and Ashford. They will move to all communities in the process.
- Future pickup includes: right of way for private roads, developments, waterways, private property (destroyed structures), campgrounds, commercial property and gated communities with right of entry (ROE) required by the HOA's.
- FEMA and the EMT met on waterways identification that has any type of debris that has the potential to affect or destroy critical infrastructure. The EOC will work with other programs to begin this process, then will bring in the FEMA debris teams for the scope to be given to the Army Corps of Engineers for removal. This is a significant undertaking that will not be a fast process as many of the rivers and small streams have been decimated and will need to be rechanneled for safety purposes upon any future flooding.

Hazard Mitigation

- FEMA/NC Emergency Management Program is a volunteer program for residents who had structures that were destroyed or heavily damaged by floodwaters, to apply for buyout or elevation assistance.
- Residents apply online at www.NCDPS.gov/HM
- This is a Federal program wherein it is not mandatory for residents, but is a last resort and could be a process that takes years to complete.
- Local Government does have grants for generators to protect critical infrastructure as Hazard Mitigation monies become available.

- The EOC's task is to identify which infrastructures needed protection from the storm by generators and will have the data to present, once the program is released.

Mr. Kehler spoke to the Board citing how the management to a disaster is preparation, response and recovery, in which the county is still in the response and recovery operations. He told there are still EMS and DOC personnel located in Old Fort to assist the Mayor and the Town on a daily basis for water, sewer, damage assessments, debris removal and road repair. There is still EM staff working daily with citizens, homeowners and veterans to get them the resources and the right connections for restoration. Additionally, Mr. Kehler is making sure his staff receives debriefing and any mental care services they may need through the recovery process as through God's grace, no staff or volunteer lost their life as they accomplished heroic tasks.

He mentioned the Free Medical Clinics no longer in place, but were in Old Fort and Marion, in which the clinics saw a total of 636 patients for storm related injuries and what a benefit this was to serve the citizens.

The director closed with their commitment to the community being unwavering and how it is the duty for the Emergency Management team to exceed everyone's expectations.

Commissioner Greene asked 2 questions: first, if power had been restored to Turkey Cove, in which Mr. Kehler responded REA is showing no outages, however there could be a few that are not appearing on their map. If there are still residents without power, it could be they have been given notice from building inspections that it is not safe to connect power. Second question was if the nursing homes and assisted facilities had generators, which he answered they had been in contact the Monday before the storm hit with all the facilities and that Centers for Medicaid Service requires the skilled facilities (Autumn Care and Deer Park) to have generators, in which they did have. He mentioned that is not a requirement of the long-term care facilities.

Commissioner Ellis spoke on all the positive comments he has received on each of the EM agencies and gave thanks to all the agencies. Chairman Walker noted the incredible preparedness that the EMS started with prior to the storm, citing this is what saved a lot of lives.

Mr. Wooten referred back to the Hazard Mitigation in stressing this buyout program would be a last resort for people who have no other alternative after going through all the other resources available. He repeated this is voluntary for residents and not mandatory and stated this program had to be approved by the Board.

Vice Chair Brown made a motion to approve the requested Program, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

US Forest Service Update

Chairman Walker welcomed Jenifer Bunty, the acting District Ranger of the Grandfather Ranger District to give the Board an update. Ms. Bunty thanked the leadership present in the

room noting the impressive partnerships McDowell County has taken on with the Hurricane response.

She began with the National Forest in NC and the Grandfather District data that estimates 190,000 acres of blow down across Pisgah National Forest. She told they are looking at 70% damage, including roads, trails, eco systems and infrastructure that fall in the severe or catastrophic category. Ms. Bunty declared it is a monumental undertaking in which they have begun working with their partners who will continue the assessment process.

The report included having reopened 7 roads thus far, with another set scheduled for this Friday, the 22nd, stating this will include 30 miles of trails. Their trail priorities are the Gateway Trails near Old Fort and Catawba Falls, which remarkably had no damage to the grand staircase.

Ms. Bunty told they are working through the process of allowing timber salvage near roadsides through the National Forests with a letter coming out to allow firewood collection to be done without a permit.

She closed with the message of working closely with the NC Wildlife Resources Commission on the damage to Armstrong Fish Hatchery to ensure the trout population is thriving as much as possible. The Board thanked her for sharing this update.

DSS Update

Ms. Sigmon began by introducing Patrick Bentancourt the Director of Macon County DSS, in which Mr. Bentancourt would honor Ms. Sigmon with a prestigious award. He told she participated in a program called The Director's Academy to enhance critical decision-making skills for DSS Director's. It focuses on 6 core training areas within the job's crucial roles, in which Ms. Sigmon completed the program in an impressive 12 months, versus the normal 36-month curriculum guidelines.

He noted that he was her assigned mentor to serve as a sounding board and advisor to provide her support, whereas he found himself receiving support from her during this process. She had the tedious task of presenting to a review panel of her peers, after each of the 6 modules were completed and commended her for how she engaged in her presentations. Lastly, he told she shared a critical issue that she was given within her job and how it drove her to go through the Academy to learn as quickly and as she could for the betterment of her post.

Mr. Bentancourt presented Ms. Sigmon with the award for her completion of The Director's Academy through the NC Association of County Directors of Social Service, in which the Director was recognized by the Board and the participants in the boardroom with applause.

Chairman Walker congratulated Ms. Sigmon and thanked her for participating in the Academy and she returned how she wanted to learn as much as she could as it is beneficial to McDowell County. She began her update with the MOU data; with 81% in screened in reports, 98% face to face visits, 20% of permanency within 12 months, 14.3% entering Foster Care, telling of 1 child that had reentered foster care. Commissioner Greene asked for the details on

how long it was from the time this child was placed back into the home, to when the child returned back into foster care. Ms. Sigmon continued with Adult Services being at 55 CAP cases, 39 SA In home cases with 4 outreaches. She mentioned having 2 positions that need to be filled in that department, with a brief discussion on how many vacant positions are within the DSS. Ms. Sigmon returned to her MOU update with Child Support of 8 applications and 95 court cases, Energy serving 75, Food and Nutrition 330 applications.

She moved to the DSNAP program serving 2070 in person applications, 2442 applications approved with 790 apps in the que from the state when the 8 days ended. She pointed out that the program generally runs for 7 days, but McDowell County ran for 8 days in hopes of serving everyone they could. Ms. Sigmon told the County distributed \$1.5 million DSNAP dollars, with Chairman Walker asking her to relay to her staff the Board's appreciation of their hard work during this process. She noted several Counties that gave assistance in processing applications and the on-site assistance they received from other DSS Directors.

Chairman Walker requested the County thank the YMCA for letting DSS use their facilities for this operation, with Ms. Sigmon stating they could not have done it without EM personnel assisting in setting up for all DSNAP requirements to provide for the program.

Strategic Plan

Mr. Wooten began with the Board having the Strategic Plan draft that is ready for adoption. He noted the Plan can be amended at the Board's discretion.

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to adopt the Strategic Plan as presented, with a second by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Water Updates

Mr. Wooten spoke on the Phase 1 project of NC 126, Wildlife Road, Lonesome Pine Drive, Jack Corpening Road, Sunny Acres and Bentwood Drive being essentially complete. Hoppy Tom Hollow phase is also almost complete, with a difference of plumbing grants for assistance on this project. Phase 2A and 2B in Nebo is in progress and mentioned the master meter will be moved in January, to Beaman Road with the City transferring ownership and maintenance to the County for approximately 20 active customer accounts. Chairman Walker asked what the total number of customers the County has on water systems, in which Mr. Wooten answered approximately 370, with the additions of the projects the County will be over 500 upon completion. He closed out water updates with Exit 90 beginning and West Marion resuming from the delay of Helene.

Employee Leave Item

Mr. Wooten relayed the staff had been directed by the Board to look at a policy for McDowell County employees on parental leave. He included a draft for review that is based on other agencies policy in preparation for the Board to review. He went over what the State policy is for leave. Chairman Walker asked if the County's Budget included this policy currently, in

which Mr. Wooten answered yes and had a brief discussion of leave time, how time is earned and the age of adopted children.

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to table this upon further review of some of the wording that is on the policy presented to the Board, with a second by Vice Chair Brown. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Farmland Preservation Grant

Mr. Wooten began with an approval by the Board for the submission of a Farmland Preservation Grant with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture that was approved and is requesting for Foothills Regional Commission to help with the grant contract. He explained everything would be paid for, except the \$5,100.00 match that the Board had previously authorized.

Commissioner Greene made a motion to approve both the grant and contract, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Board Appointments

The County Clerk gave two applications submitted for the Board's approval to the Juvenile Crime Prevention Council or the "Persons under age 21" appointees. They are for Patrick Burleson and Jared Helms, who are both MHS students and had attended their September meeting.

Vice Chair Brown made a motion to approve the applicants, with a second by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Budget Reports

Mr. Wooten began with the stating Statewide there has been a dip in sales tax collection, he went over the spending for the past few months and the September remittance. He spoke on the project budget ordinances and budget amendments listed below.

Several project budget ordinances for American Rescue Plan Amendment #15, a Project Closeout Resolution for the Stacy Hill Road Water Line Project, and a Project Budget Ordinance for the Fonta Flora Trail Project are needed for approval and as well several amendments:

GF 2 - Appropriates donations, grants, and loan proceeds in Emergency Services.

GF 3 - Appropriates donation, designated revenue, and grants for the Sheriff's Office.

GF 4 - Appropriate transfers in and transfers out in for Water Projects.

GF 5 - Appropriate revenue sources for Social Services.

GF 6 - Appropriate designated revenue in Senior Center.

Commissioner Greene made a motion to approve all budget matters, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Administrative Items

Mr. Wooten reviewed the EMS write-offs of \$26,847.27, leak requests for the Nebo system and a request by Transit to approve a Title VI plan.

He gave Mr. Kehler's requests of a grant approval from the 911 board for radio consoles; a propane tank to be donated at no cost to the Dysartsville Fire Dept and lastly the proposal to purchase of six cardiac monitors that will be financed for \$372,001.00 for 4 years at 4.15%.

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to approve all administrative items presented, with a second by Vice Chair Brown. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Tax Matters

Mr. Wooten presented the releases, rebills, refunds and discoveries along with the recommendation for the County to engage a company to assist in the reappraisal process for quality tax records. This will be further discussed in next month's meeting.

Motor Vehicle Tax Refunds: \$984.34

Releases over \$100.00: \$2663.56

Releases under \$100.00 \$387.15

Discoveries: \$211.34

Commissioner Greene made a motion to approve tax matters, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Citizens Comments

None

Commissioners/Staff Reports

Commissioner Ellis gave remembrance to Bobbie Young's passing, noting she was a great civil servant who served on several boards and gave his acknowledgment that she would be missed.

Closed Session [(NCGS 143-318.11 (a) (4)]

Vice Chair Brown made a motion to go into closed session, with a second by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Commissioner Greene made a motion to come out of closed session, with a second by Vice Chair Brown. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to adjourn at 6:56 p.m., with a second by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Attest:

Sena Allison

Clerk to the Board

David N. Walker

Chairman