

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION – September 16, 2024**

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in Regular Session on Monday, September 16, 2024, at 11:30 a.m., in the Commissioner’s Board Room, 69 N Main St., Marion, NC.

Members Present

David N. Walker, Chairman; Tony Brown, Vice-Chair; Chris Allison and Lynn Greene

Members Absent

Patrick Ellis

Others Present

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Sena A. Allison, Clerk to the Board; Jason Orthner, NCDOT Rail Division Director; Jason Myers, NCDOT Rail Program Manager and Bobbie Sigmon; DSS Director

Call to Order

Chairman Walker called the meeting to order at 11:30 a.m.

WNC Rail Study Update

Chairman Walker welcomed Jason Orthner to give the Board an update. Mr. Orthner began with their mission being to provide safe and efficient movement of people and goods on NC Railroads through freight passenger safety program, supporting job creation and economic growth. He told the NC Rail system has about 3400 miles of active railroad, including 26 short lines used by Norfolk Southern and CSX. It was determined earlier this year by NC State University 2019-2022 data, the economic output of the States Rail system approximately 20 million dollars. Mr. Orthner told the daily passenger Rail service from Charlotte to New York began in 1988 and daily passenger trains from Charlotte to Raleigh beginning in 1995. They have seen tremendous growth in ridership with both those over time, expecting to see 50% more ridership at the end of 2024 from what data shows from 2019. A study was done to evaluate riding to Asheville from Salisbury which is 139 miles, taking a little over 3 hours

depending on factors such as how many stops would be made and the loops that are in Old Fort. The 6-8-mile ride on the loops can only proceed at 20 miles per hour, however it brings the most scenic and exciting part of the journey which provides a large selling point to expanding the service. Capital costs for providing the new route has been determined at 665 million dollars, that includes track infrastructure, rail signals, safety improvements, stations, equipment and a maintenance facility. He told from the findings of working on the feasibility study, they were given 7 quarters by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) under their quarter ID program, 7 quarters in NC – including Western NC, Salisbury and the Asheville corridor. The NCDOT submitted 12 corridors, which is more than any other state, and they have all received federal funding of 100% for the advancement of determining the scope budget project. The Director went over a view of what the next phases would entail towards passenger and freight trains through our region, and noted Norfolk Southern being very cooperative to the project. Vice Chair Brown asked if there would be the possibility of a station in Old Fort, to which the Director answered they would determine where a station would be, through their engagement with communities. Chairman Walker agreed with having a station in Old Fort, expressing the Town as being the center of the Trails, out of all of NC. He added he was amazed to learn 860 businesses were utilizing the NC Railway Service, from the data shown.

The Chairman welcomed Mayor Steve Little to speak, telling that the Mayor has been an advocate to the passenger Rail system, as well as a historian of the construction of the Railroad in this area. The Mayor began with telling what an honor to have both Mr. Orthner and Mr. Myers come to the Board Meeting, as they are the brain trust of NC Railway, speaking highly of their knowledge and connections. He expressed his interest in having both Marion and Old Fort stations. The Mayor told of being the corridor for that route for 25 years, in which Freddie Killough is the secretary and how they have never given up the hope for a returning passenger rail, as the last one through McDowell was in 1975. Mayor Little spoke of using passenger rails for his trips to Raleigh from Charlotte and the ease of not having to worry with traffic as a great convenience.

Chairman Walker expressed his desire is to make McDowell County the destination for people to travel by way of rail with the Vice Chair inviting the Director and Manager to come back for another update.

DSS Update

Chairman Walker recognized Ms. Sigmon to update the Board. She started with the MIU data on August Child Welfare Assessments at 83%, with the State-wide average at 69%. The Chairman asked Ms. Sigmon how many people look at a report for screen in and out, in which she answered most cases are a 2-level decision, meaning a worker and a supervisor however under certain circumstances the case can be a level 3, meaning the addition of program manager, or a level 5 meaning the addition of herself, an attorney; or a level 6 with the addition of a judge.

Ms. Sigmon moved to Foster Care data on face to face visits being at 100%, as they have contracted Vanguard to assist for children that are placed outside of the

County, which is 12-14 children. Vanguard costs around \$1200.00 per month, using certified social workers who live within the County or no more than 30 miles outside of it to go see the children. This allows McDowell's staff to stay in the County and does not take up their day with travel, with DSS receiving the paperwork on that child quickly to file. Commissioner Greene asked if the social worker works for Vanguard or a County, whereas Ms. Sigmon answered both. She told they typically work full time for a County and part time for Vanguard on the weekends or evenings.

The director moved to children who enter foster care are at 20% with establishing permanency within 12 months, which is data from a 3 year look back. Chairman Walker asked what was the outcome of the 80% that did not establish permanency and what is the States % on this, in which she responded the parents have at least 12 months to work the case plans and per the statute, DSS cannot request termination to parental rights (TPR) for 12 months. She stated the time line of this statute is a barrier to achieving a higher percentage, and with the latter question, she answered the State is at approximately 24%. Chairman Walker asked if there was a Plan B where on that 12th month under TPR, all the paperwork is ready to be filed, to ensure the child is ready to move to permanency, in which Ms. Sigmon answered they do have all the paperwork ready and file with Jim Goldsmith, who is the TPR attorney. Mr. Goldsmith then files the documents to the court. She explained a TPR hearing could take 2-3 months to get in front of a judge, in which Commissioner Greene asked how many are there currently past the 12-month period, whereas Ms. Sigmon told that number was possibly 5 and she would get the Board the answer but added the number does change constantly. Commissioner Greene asked for her to also let them know how many months for each case and how many continuances each has. Ms. Sigmon spoke on the delays with how the Federal Government is emphasizing reunification and kinship rights to make sure the parents are given every opportunity to get their child back and noted in some TPR cases, the child is not mentally prepared to be adopted when they are able. Chairman Walker asked for clarification to that, to which she explained by law age 12 and up have to consent to be adopted by signing an adoption packet. She told of a case where a 14-year-old had mental health issues and would not consent to adoption, in which case the DSS will have to split up the siblings. In cases with mental health issues they go through treatment to see how their future can be determined. She clarified the judge has the final decision on cases with their recommendations given. Chairman Walker made a point for DSS to make sure during the CFT meetings all required and associated parties are present to ensure proper details for the wellbeing of placement and to advocate for the betterment of the children for the recommendations given to the judges. He also stated the workers are never to tell foster parents they are not welcome to come to a CFT meeting, nor are they to be coached in any way. Ms. Sigmon updated the new staff are being trained on CFT meetings to have a better understanding of the all the aspects cases go through, including the court room.

Commissioner Greene asked Ms. Sigmon to get him the number of how many social workers they have employed, that has a college degree in something other than social work, in which she responded with what she thinks is 5 for the entirety of the departments, but will get this number to him.

Ms. Sigmon brought to the Board's attention in December ,GAP Funding will end, which is funding for group homes to pay for the care of children placed in these residences. She noted the State has supplemented the funds for the last 2 years, and it will now go to the County to supplement, to which she requested a letter of support be sent to the North Carolina Board of State Commissioners. Chairman Walker asked how much money has been used, with the director stating she would get him that figure.

Vice Chair Brown made a motion to honor the request to send a letter of support to the North Carolina Board of State Commissioners, with a second by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Ms. Sigmon spoke on having 56 wards under Adult Protective Services guardianship cases, 10 applications for child support, 45 child support court cases, 56 applications for energy, Work First 10 regular applications, 21 EA applications, food and nutrition services are at 336 applications and 305 recertifications with 157 clients served for August.

She went over the vacancies for jobs in all the DSS offices and moved to showing the movie Sound of Hope at Grace Community Church, with 4-5 families interested in foster care. The Church is allowing the foster parent classes to be held there, supplying the meals and childcare. Chairman Walker asked how many foster parents do we currently have, in which Ms. Sigmon stated 26 fully licensed and 2 pending in the State system.

Lastly the director noted being chosen along with Rutherfordton to be the 5th jurisdiction in NC for the NC Safe Babies Court and the date for the Foster Parent Meet and Greet being held on September 17th, with a meal and her answering their questions.

Administrative Items

Chairman Walker spoke of the Recreation director consulting with Duke Power on changing out the lights at Maple Leaf to LED's , that was quoted as \$65,000.00 with the suggestion of taking the money from the ARPA funds. He noted it would save on the power bill going forward, in which Mr. Wooten told there is approximately \$195,000.00 non-obligated funds currently. A brief discussion was had on the safety of the players with the upgraded lighting with Commissioner Greene requesting the information on how long it would take to get the money back.

Commissioner Allison made a motion to approve as presented by Chairman Walker, with a second by Vice Chair Brown. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Vice Chair Brown addressed Mr. Wooten on follow up from a previous meeting, regarding placing cameras around the County for the litter concern, in which Mr. Wooten told he had spoken with Sheriff Buchanan who is currently exploring tech vendors with a possible partnership on this. Vice Chair Brown requested follow up and

specified the Convenient Center and problem areas in the County to control people discarding their waste.

Adjournment

Vice Chair Brown motioned to adjourn the meeting, with a second by Commissioner Allison. By a vote of 4-0, the meeting adjourned at 12:52 p.m.

Attest:

Sena A. Allison
Clerk to the Board

David N. Walker
Chairman