

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA  
MCDOWELL COUNTY  
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS  
REGULAR SESSION – July 8, 2024**

**Assembly**

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in Regular Session on Monday, July 8, 2024, at 5:00 p.m., in the Commissioner's Board Room, 69 N Main St., Marion, NC.

**Members Present**

Tony Brown, Vice-Chair; Lynn Greene and Patrick Ellis

**Members Absent**

David N. Walker, Chairman and Chris Allison

**Others Present**

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Sena A. Allison, Clerk to the Board; Fred Coats, County Attorney; Taylor Guzman; Animal Services Director, Bobbie Sigmon; DSS Director and Jeff Emory, Economic Development Planner with NC Commerce.

**Call to Order**

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

**Approval of Minutes**

Commissioner Greene made a motion to approve the June 10, 2024 Regular Session minutes; the June 17, 2024 Regular Session minutes; with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

**Approval of Agenda**

Commissioner Greene made a motion to approve the Agenda with the request of a brief closed session, this was seconded by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

**Animal Services Staff Introduction**

Vice Chair Brown introduced the Director Taylor Guzman to give an update and introduce the staff of the Animal Shelter. Ms. Guzman stated she had been with the Shelter for almost a year with telling of the hard work of keeping the Shelter's 10% euthanasia rate, in which they will be granted a plaque for this achievement. She introduced the staff that were present in the Board Room. Ms. Guzman also thanked the Sheriff's Office for their assistance

to the transition in taking over Animal Control. She reviewed the high volume of calls associated with this program.

Commissioner Ellis thanked the staff for their diligent endeavors to take care of the Shelter and the difficultness of euthanasia. Commissioner Greene gave his appreciation of the transition from the Sheriff's Office to the Shelter and their willingness to take over the operation. He asked Ms. Guzman to provide to the County Manager what the qualifications for the Animal Control Officer was and what their duties include. Ms. Guzman answered to take any calls for stray, abandoned or injured animals, with the exception of barking dogs as the Sheriff's Office handles those. Commissioner Greene asked if the Shelter handles the enforcement component, in which the Director answered they could not charge anything; however, the Sheriff's office comes in for these situations.

Vice Chair Brown welcomed the staff with gratitude, telling how he and his wife are animal lovers and asked if the regulations of the Shelter were governed by the State. The County Manager interjected that the Shelter is inspected by the NC Department of Agriculture, with a standard to follow, the enforcement is also governed by statutes including rabies control and a County ordinance. He told they have been looking at a revised Animal Control Ordinance, but there have been delays in the revision due to staff turnover and the Animal Control being transferred to the Shelter. Vice Chair Brown advised the Director to have stringent rules concerning abuse of animals, specifically tying up an animal with no water or food, with the belief in treating animals with love and respect.

### **DSS Update**

Vice Chair Brown introduced Bobbie Sigmon to give a DSS update. Ms. Sigmon told of a meeting she attended with Rutherford County's DSS Director, (who is in the same Judicial District) the Dogwood Foundation, several of their State partners, Rutherford County's DSS Attorney, McDowell County's DSS Attorney, Judge Martelle, and approximately 30 of her staff to tackle several challenges. Ms. Sigmon mentioned some of the issues as DSS staff turnover, substance abuse, mental health treatment, court delays and Foster Parent access.

She introduced a new program called The Safe Baby Program, in which she and Judge Martelle will meet with their liaison on July 11<sup>th</sup> for the possibility of being selected for this program. Ms. Sigmon told if McDowell was chosen we would be the 5<sup>th</sup> County to Pilot it.

The Director also told of a meeting with NC Child to help navigate some policy questions, such as the filing of a 12-month permanency policy and stronger mental health programs.

She moved to a Back to School drive they are sponsoring for school supplies from now until August 26<sup>th</sup> with the drop off being McDowell DSS or Root Salon located in Old Fort. Commissioner Greene asked about picking the supplies up and where they will be, in which Ms. Sigmon answered the supplies would be taken to the DSS office for the foster children, with left over supplies going to the children in child protective services, food nutrition, parents on Medicare, to then the schools. Commissioner Greene told her he would give her the contact information to the Operation Back Pack Coordinator within the school system.

Ms. Sigmon addressed having looked at a study done in NC regarding one foster family being sponsored from every church in the community. This would result to foster children placed in homes within their own County. The findings lead to having 150 churches in McDowell County, with the current number of foster children at 93, which would mean if each church had a foster family, the conclusion would be DSS would not have to look outside the County for placement. She told of committing to working with Foster Parent Alliance of NC on a 1 child, 1 church program and the kickoff is a movie currently in the theatres called Possum Trot. This movie is based on a church community who started fostering and adopting children that evidently lead to no foster children within 100 miles. Ms. Sigmon believes this can be done within our faith community as well and spoke on ways churches or other organizations can contribute without being a foster parent, such as fostering a meal or a night out at the skating rink for the children.

Lastly, Ms. Sigmon displayed yard signs for the need for foster parents, that are at the DSS building. Vice Chair Brown thanked her for the presentation and asked for listeners and watchers of this meeting to give the information to their churches for involvement to the care and well fare of the children.

### **Strategic Planning Presentation**

Vice Chair Brown recognized Jeff Emory, with NC Commerce to go over the Strategic Plan for McDowell County. Mr. Wooten spoke briefly in regards to Mr. Emory stepping in to meet with a work group in the County to come up with this first draft to present to the Board and stated his encouragement to any County to reach out to NC Commerce with this process. Mr. Emory described his position as serving the Southwest Region, covering 10 Counties and how he has taken over this district as a fill in until the new person is placed. He stated this proposal is the first and possible final draft for adoption by the Board. Mr. Emory cited there is no money to assist on costs to the implement Plan from NC Commerce, however they can provide funding sources and ideas for funding.

Mr. Emory presented the highlights, as the Plan is fifty pages long, and he was told the Board would like the general public to have a review as well. The information to the Plan was shown at this time, with attention to 6 priority areas identified by the Commissioners. He and a local work group used these areas as guideposts for the appointed, elected officials, serving residents and visitors alike. These are listed as:

1. Public Service/County Organization
2. Economic Development and Infrastructure
3. Natural Resources and Recreation
4. Education
5. Health and Public Safety
6. Housing

Mr. Emory declared that number system is not based on what is the priority of the County first through last, it is simply a listing of priorities of the County. A demonstration of the

plan was given with the goals set, surveys, interviews, and the vision board endorsed by the work group. The following is the Vision Statement favored by the group for McDowell County:

## **Vision Statement**

***Ideally located in the foothills of western North Carolina, with an abundance of beautiful natural resources, McDowell County offers an unparalleled work and leisure experience for residents and visitors alike. Our economic prosperity, enjoyable living, and superior health and safety are driven by our dedicated workforce, excellent county services, and high-quality education system.***

Mr. Emory completed his presentation showing the Work Plan including the Organizations, Goals, Objectives and Actions. Vice Chair Brown cited he did notice the items the Board wanted addressed in the Plan. Commissioner Ellis suggesting in regards to the adoption, looking to September and for staff to get a submission from the school board for the education portion, along with a public forum established for the possibility of any revisions. Commissioner Ellis also requested the full packet having all the details and spoke thanks to the work group and to Mr. Emory for the attentiveness given on this assignment. Mr. Emory cited Mr. Wooten along with the work group as being great in coming together to follow instructions to the vision and plan.

## **Water Projects Update**

Mr. Wooten began with telling there was a partial shut down of the Nebo system due to new lines being tied on to the expansion area, with one coming in a couple of weeks. He told Phase 1 is almost complete, which comprises NC 126, Wildlife Road, Lonesome Pine Dr., Jack Corpening Road, Sunny Acres and Bentwood Dr. He mentioned incoming calls from citizens who would like to connect. He told of Hoppy Tom Hollow starting, expressing the funding that is received does come from different sources and can be dissimilar, such as Hoppy Tom residents will have their plumbing paid for by the grant, whereas Phase 1 project residents received funds that was unlike that. Mr. Wooten went on to mention that Nebo Phase 2A and 2B, which will start soon.

He spoke on moving the master meter at the bottom of Stacy Hill to the west side of Beaman Rd. as a tradeoff of projects we completed for the City resulting with some citizens becoming County customers.

The County Manager has signed permits on the East End project to which is being paid for by a grant. Exit 90, starting and funded by ARC ( Appalachian Regional Committee). He said a developer in the Nebo area is paying for a waterline to go into his development, by our

specs to be turned over to the County once completed. Lastly for the waterline to West Marion Elementary, the engineering contract is being negotiated.

### **Building Projects Update**

Mr. Wooten began with the DSS building with he and Ms. Sigmon working with the Little Architecture firm to develop a marketing package with a rough outline of a floor plan, cost etc. and has been presented to the legislative delegation to receive State funding assistance. He mentioned the State passed a 2-year budget, in which they do not have to adjust however they can in regards to inflation, salary changes and other items that come up. He told the Senate and House have not been able to agree on certain items, which may mean there is no budget adjustment and no directed appropriations in 2024.

Mr. Wooten received word a few days ago on the Transfer Station being approved by the State for the repair plan, stressing this will be disruptive during the construction era as the entire floor will be dug out, and a smaller building will be built as a temporary Station. This bid will go out in a month or so and the scales have been ordered. Commissioner Ellis suggested to post the notice of construction, at least 30 days prior. Commissioner Greene brought up the possibility of using compactors at the centers instead of dumpsters in which Mr. Wooten said he, Mr. Riddle and Environmental Quality had this discussion with strategy of space, the costs associated and 3 phase power where there could be grants available. He explained Environmental Quality focuses on recycling and not just waste, assuring staff will look into this more.

The County Manager mentioned the Recreation Center Project retaining wall coming up behind the pool near the church where a power line crosses our property via an easement and how the County is trying to get this line buried. He told the cost was higher than expected therefore staff is reaching out to Duke Energy for assistance. Mr. Wooten talked of the Fireworks on July 4<sup>th</sup> being set off at the Rec Center in the parking lot area with no impact to the Project.

Vice Chairman Brown made a motion for staff to send letters of appreciation to both municipalities for their participation to the community's enjoyment of fireworks, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

Lastly the Manager spoke in regards to looking at County owned property on Spaulding Rd to become the Animal Shelter's new building. He asked the Board for permission to begin the necessary steps for a topographic survey, in which the attending Commissioners agreed to by consensus.

### **Broadband Update**

Mr. Wooten announced Skyrunner Inc. was awarded the Completing Access to Broadband (CAB), which is a grant agreement between the State, Skyrunner and the County to serve 795 addresses of McDowell County, mostly in the Nebo area. He told the County match is approximately \$865,000.00 of the remaining \$900,000.00 the County received from the American Rescue Act Funds.

### **Charlotte IBT Requested Update**

Mr. Wooten gave a brief update to a public meeting in Morganton, NC to be held Monday July 15, 2024 at 6:00 p.m. at the COMMA Auditorium in Morganton hosted by Charlotte Water in which staff will be attending. He told of ongoing conversations by staff with Western Piedmont Council of Governments and reminded this was who the County worked with on the Concord Kannapolis IBT approximately 20 years ago and will continue to work with them for alternatives to the request.

Vice Chair Brown stated he wanted the County's serious input in this matter, in which Mr. Wooten told of speaking with the Executive Director of Western Piedmont Council of Government about once a week and was told they are doing the essential RFP process right now and he will continue to keep the Board posted.

### **Administrative Items**

Mr. Wooten presented to the Board the EMS write-offs of \$60,819.28.

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to approve, with a second by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

Mr. Wooten gave the Board information on an HR policy, in which the language was not clear, as we are a County and not a City with different departments and offices that need more clarification due to State law.

Commissioner Greene made a motion to approve the policy changes, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

### **Budget Report**

Mr. Wooten cited the close out of Property Tax for the date of June 30, 2024 showing the report of 99.5 collection rate for the year.

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to approve the budget items, with a second by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

### **Board Appointments**

Clerk to the Board, Sena Allison read off the requests for reinstatements and new applicants. She asked for the Board's decision on the America250 Committee for Freddie Killough; Tourism Development Authority David Roe as new member, with Bridgette Walters reinstatement; Library Board of Trustees reinstatements for Pam Forshey and Amy Clark; Planning Board reinstatement of Benny Stamey and the Transportation Advisory Board reinstatement of Lloyd Cuthbertson.

Commissioner Greene made a motion to approve the reinstatements, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to approve the applicants, with a second by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

Mr. Wooten brought to the attention of the Board that the Adult Care/Nursing Home Advisory Board had been reached out to, noticing they have not met since Covid. This is in part due to serving members going in and out of nursing homes. Commissioner Greene said he has spoken to some people who are willing to serve on that Board and will get staff their information.

### **Tax Matters**

Mr. Wooten stated the typical rebills and refunds, then presented 3 applications for Board approval submitted by elderly persons who were unaware of the June 1 deadline. The reasoning is named "good cause" by the Tax Assessor.

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to approve the tax matters as presented and the applications, with a second by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

Commissioner Ellis made a motion for a hard deadline of July 1 moving forward, with a second by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

### **Citizen Comment**

Kenneth Wegman spoke on the Board of Elections.

### **Commissioners/Staff Reports**

Mr. Wooten requested the next Board Meeting on July 15 be cancelled, in which the Board approved.

### **Closed Session [NCGS 143-318.11 (a) (3)]**

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to move into Closed Session at 6:13 p.m., with a second by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

### **Out of Closed Session**

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to come out of Closed Session at 7:01 p.m., with a second by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

### **Adjournment**

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to move to adjourn, with a second by Commissioner Greene. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed to adjourn at 7:03 p.m.

Attest:

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Sena A. Allison  
Clerk to the Board

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David N. Walker  
Chairman