

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION – October 21, 2024**

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in Regular Session on Monday, October 21, 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; William Kehler, EMS Director and Bobbie Sigmon; DSS Director

Call to Order

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

Change to Agenda Order

Chairman Walker announced a change in the order of the Agenda to let Ms. Sigmon give her update to the Board first, with William Kehler's update being second.

DSS Update

Ms. Sigmon spoke on the D-SNAP Program (Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Program which gives food assistance to low-income households with food loss or damage caused by a natural disaster). DSS began this program at the YMCA of Marion on Friday the 18th, from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. On that opening day they served approximately 177 applications and were opened this past Saturday and Sunday from 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. She explained the transactions for applications are logged and keyed automatically in real time for expediate service. These have to be keyed in within 24 hours and she explained if they were to get overwhelmed, Cumberland County was set up to assist them.

She told how Mr. Wooten assisted with getting the schools to do an alert to reach families in need, with a NIXLE Alert from the EOC in hopes of reaching the vast majority of the County. Ms. Sigmon noted this was successful as they had as many applicants this morning by 10:30 a.m. as they had on Saturday all day.

Ms. Sigmon told of extenuating rules they have to comply with, such as always knowing the card counts, having 2 personnel with the cards, security and medical on site and are currently under the observation of the USDA and the State. The USDA will follow 2 staff back to the office to ensure the cards are kept under double lock.

Vice Chair Brown asked what were the factors to qualify for D-SNAP, in which Ms. Sigmon stated it is based on persons income from 9/25/24 to 10/26/24 (she may be off a day or two), subtract their expenses from the storm to determine approval.

Chairman Walker inquired about applying online, whereas Ms. Sigmon said they could start the process online but to qualify they have to call the hotline or come in person for verification of being a US Citizen, proof of identity and the number of members in the household. The director told there were 771 persons in the que currently.

Ms. Sigmon noted having 2 DSS bilingual speaking staff is helpful, she recognized Shannon Jones from the EOC assisting with their needs to operate as well as the YMCA's cooperation.

Ms. Sigmon told how Dare, Surry, and Cumberland County DSS Directors had been more than gracious to volunteer their staff for assistance to us with the process, in which Chairman Walker asked the County Manager to somehow honor those counties from the Board's level for their assistance.

Ms. Sigmon moved to the MOU data, stating the numbers would be off this month due to their office closures with the storm as well as the Data Warehouse being down for approximately for 1 week. For face to face visits, they are ordinarily 100%, however there were a couple of children that were out of state during the storm, which led to them not being able to achieve this goal. She allowed the children were safe, each in a hospital. For the Adult Services, one ward lost her home from the storm and DSS has already established her in a new home. They are working with community partners to get the resources she needs. One CAP client living in Little Switzerland lost his home and was contacted by DSS to get resources to him as soon as possible. Energy decreased for the month of September, the applications on Family and Children increasing from last year's number and lastly reporting they have had some new employees who started.

Helene Recovery Update

Chairman Walker welcomed William Kehler to give updates on Helene Recovery. Mr. Kehler began by recognizing Desiree Wood to the Board as a lead paramedic who runs the internship program that links students from the high school with the EMS.

Mr. Kehler pronounced today as day 27 the Emergency Operations has been activated, with updates as follows:

- Isolated power outages remain, but have been determined by sending out staff to do ground discovery along with daily briefing with Duke Energy as the map has been inaccurate due to the storm.
- 7 of the 83 cell sites remain down with significant fiber outages in the Northern and Southern parts of the county.
- Spectrum remains at 527 customers down, no numbers from Frontier to give.

- NCDOT updated NC 221 North at Coxes Creek is open; NC226A has one lane open; US 221 North has a bridge at Mountain Paradise out but being worked on; contractor working on a landslide on Linville Mountain; NC 80 has a landslide north of the school bus turnaround being addressed; US 70 West at Curtis Creek has one way into Old Fort currently with the DOT to do temporary repairs on the damaged bridge past Old 70 – then moving down Curtis Creek to repair the other bridge that was in a rehab state prior to the storm.

- Old Fort is still supported by the EMS with team management by requesting resources from the State to bring in agencies to assist them with recovery efforts. The Town Manager from Carteret County and the Moore County Emergency Services Director have been sent to aid the mayor and staff. The other agencies that have come to Old Fort for assistance includes a Public Works Director and engineers for continual reinforcement to the Town. There are several houses that still do not have water due to significant infrastructure issues, whereas EM has deployed potable and non-potable water to these homes.

- Support of temporary sleeping quarters were deployed to EMS Station 2 for assistance to responses due to the bridge on Curtis Creek. The operational procedure at the EOC changed to sending out their division supervisors to each community to speak with citizens, assess their needs and relay the resources available.

- Lake Tahoma was evaluated by the Army Corps of Engineers in regards to the substantial amount of debris, including construction waste. Duke Energy has begun working with a contractor to remove floating docks, piers, refrigerators and other large items. The dam was assessed by engineers after the storm and deemed safe and is regulated heavily by NC Dam Safety and FERC (Federal Energy Regulatory Commission).

- Lake James and Catawba River cleanup will organize on November 2nd, with Duke Energy running the lead by contracting debris removal.

- Baxter's requested the EOC to resource the Army Corps of Engineers to evaluate stream flows around the property and their debris. Mr. Kehler cited several water ways not flowing in the previous way after the storm and will take action now for the possibility of another flood, to prohibit less water going into the facility.

- Damage assessment gathered with FEMA thus far are 150 structures with total damage, 175 with major damage and 140 with minor damage. Mr. Kehler cautioned these numbers will change.

- Human Services assessment gathered this morning reports of 50 people in the shelter. They are working with the Homeless Shelter to assist in transitioning those people back into the community. There are 5 families who were displaced due to the storm in which EM is seeking substantial support for them.

- Comfort Stations and Medical Clinics are still operating in Old Fort and Woodlawn. These include bathroom facilities, laundry service and free medical needs. The EM will look at getting on a demote plan as usage starts to decrease.

- PODS (Points of Distribution) needs have begun to decline, First Baptist Church in Old Fort and the 4215 US 221 N are currently open for supplies.
- Recovery Front priorities are devoted to the direct housing needs to citizens who have been displaced, with the assistance of FEMA, NCEM and locals.
- Disaster Recovery Centers (DRC) are still in place, with 2 locations being McDowell Senior Center upper level and Old Fort Senior Center from 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. seven days a week. This is a one stop shop for residents to apply for assistance. The EOC has asked FEMA to send DSA workers as boots on the ground to move through remote areas, such as Pleasant Gardens, Buck Creek, Woodlawn, Turkey Cove, Little Switzerland and North Cove.
- FEMA and NCEM met successfully this morning to discuss reimbursement of public assistance including the Town, City, County, College and School systems that are eligible under the Public Assistance Program.
- Volunteer work update from Coordinator Jerry Lewis reports continuation of substantial amount of work within the churches, organizations, individuals and especially the Baptist on Mission organization who have given a long-term commitment to the County. He told how they had 600 volunteers last weekend to help muck out houses, cleanup of personal property and much more work done geared towards relief to get to recovery.
- Fire Chief and Rescue Squad Meeting to take place at the end of the week for filing applications seeking reimbursement assistance.
- Fatalities for the County are 2, with 1 missing person still on the list in which law enforcement continues searching for.

Mr. Kehler spoke on Helene being the largest disaster McDowell has incurred and the recovery process. He gave his and the Emergency Management's commitment to providing the right resources to anyone suffering in any way, including mental health. He shared how their emergency personnel dealt with all sorts of rescue situations and how it was by the grace of God to have not lost any of them.

The Chairman gave accolades to FEMA for their presence, promptness and safe procedures in serving the county and the Board thanked Mr. Kehler for the update.

Administrative Items

The County Manager began his update on debris removal stating instructions have been pushed out to citizens for all informational purposes. He explained the State granted McDowell County the Army Corp of Engineers for this task, with the projected start time of next week in Old Fort. Mr. Wooten noted this will have a large impact on the visible damage being lifted off the communities as to the storm's reminder. Commissioner Greene asking what this process will look like, in which the County Manager assessed to the best of his knowledge, a door to door advisory of their arrival with instructions on getting debris to the road and passes through each community. He noted there may be several passes done, as an illustration for anyone who felt left out. Commissioner Greene asked where the debris would be taken, in which Mr. Wooten answered that he was told as far from the County as possible. He added there is a process of burning and grinding that will be determined. Vice Chair Brown asked about any reimbursement

coming back to the County for the removal, in which Mr. Wooten told this is a free source that we were blessed to acquire, therefore no reimbursements to obtain. He advised that if the County had been held responsible for the debris cleanup, whomever we hired would have a tedious process including to photograph each twig, each piece of material they removed and records of identifying every item for verification on seeking reimbursement.

Vice Chair Brown asked what the future holds for the Rail System that has been destroyed, in which Mr. Wooten told of communicating 13 days earlier with Jason Orthner (the NCDOT Rail Division Director) who said CSX should in service in Spruce Pine early November. Mr. Orthner had no dates for Norfolk Southern west of Old Fort. Mr. Wooten added they were limited on railway access due to the abandonment of the Saluda Grade, for travel from the West to East

Chairman Walker asked if there was a set date the shelter at the Senior Center would close, in which Mr. Wooten stated there is not a date yet, however it would be clear on November 5th, election day.

Mr. Wooten presented the Board a request of a Project Ordinance, which is based on early estimated costs, in seeking 100% reimbursement. He also requests action authorizing Mr. Kehler as primary in seeking reimbursement with Ms. Bell as secondary.

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

Commissioner Greene made a motion to approve the action to authorize Mr. Kehler as the designee with Ms. Bell as the second, with a second by Vice Chair Brown. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Chairman Walker brought up that FEMA typically covers 75% of eligible costs, whereas the federal government increased the cost share to 100% in first 180 days of the incident period. Mr. Wooten added FEMA is paying out the 100% to allow the State to save money for the future expenses.

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 12:25 p.m.

Attest:

Sena A. Allison
Clerk to the Board

David N. Walker
Chairman