

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION – November 10, 2025**

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in Regular Session on Monday, November 10, 2025, in the Commissioners' Board Room, 69 N. Main Street, Marion, NC.

Members Present

Vice-Chair, Lynn Greene; Patrick Ellis, Trisha Garner, and David Walker

Members Absent

Chairman, Tony Brown

Others Present

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Madalyn Robinson, Clerk to the Board; Fred Coats, County Attorney; Aikman Kazee, McDowell County Parks and Recreation Director; Jason Masters, Foothills Health Director

Call to Order

Vice Chairman Greene called the meeting to order at 5:00 pm. Commissioner Ellis led the group in prayer. Commissioner Walker led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Approval of Minutes

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to approve the October 13th and October 20th Regular Session Minutes and the October 24th and October 29th Special Session Minutes, with a second by Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Approval of Agenda

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the agenda with an addition regarding opioid funding and homelessness under new business, seconded by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Recreation Center Renovation Grant Approval

Mr. Kazee began with a general update.

- NRA Basics of Pistols Class - 8 participants
- First Baskets Divisions - 40 Registrations

- Youth Basketball and Cheer - 789 Children
- Campground Helene Repairs underway
- Campground Fonta Flora Trail Designation Pending
- Paving at Maple Leaf Playground was completed
- Vault Toilet at Maple Leaf Playground
- Widening of the Road at Hemphill Park to allow a better flow of traffic

Mr. Kazee covered the Rural Downtown Economic Development Grant. The grant provides funding to help local governments invest in downtown infrastructure, building reuse, public spaces, and community facilities that stimulate private investment, create jobs, and enhance quality of life. Its goal is to strengthen the economic vitality of rural downtown areas by supporting projects that attract businesses, increase tourism, and encourage long-term sustainable development. Up to \$850,000 in funding for eligible upgrades, \$12,500 per job created/retained in the designated area, with a 5% Local Cash Match.

The total eligible award is dictated by every job created or retained within a designated area (Recreation Center on 25 Academy Street). Following the guidelines of the grant, Mr. Kazee was able to account for 40 jobs within the designated area, a total of \$500,000 in potential grant funds.

Mr. Kazee presented a list of proposed renovations:

- Door Replacement
- Glass Atrium Replacement
- Bathroom Remodel (ADA Compliance)
- Hallway Flooring
- Gym Floor Replacement

Mr. Kazee presented the project cost of \$318,733 for completion of the proposed renovations, and the local cost match of \$15,937 taken from the current budget Mr. Kazee's department has. Mr. Kazee is seeking a resolution committing to the project, along with approval for the 5% local match.

**RESOLUTION BY THE MCDOWELL COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
SUPPORTING THE RURAL DOWNTOWN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GRANT
APPLICATION FOR THE MCDOWELL COUNTY RECREATION CENTER**

WHEREAS, the North Carolina Department of Commerce, Rural Economic Development Division, has established the *Rural Downtown Economic Development Grant Program* to assist rural communities in strengthening downtown areas and promoting economic vitality; and

WHEREAS, the McDowell County Board of Commissioners recognizes the importance of recreational, cultural, and economic development projects that improve the quality of life for

residents and encourage community investment; and

WHEREAS, McDowell County seeks to enhance public recreation opportunities, attract visitors, and stimulate local economic growth through the development of the **McDowell County Recreation Center**; and

WHEREAS, McDowell County intends to apply for funding through the *Rural Downtown Economic Development Grant Program* to support the development of the McDowell County Recreation Center; and

WHEREAS, the terms of the grant require a local cash match equal to five percent (5%) of the total project cost; and

WHEREAS, the McDowell County Board of Commissioners is committed to providing the required five percent (5%) match from county funds to ensure the successful completion of the project;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the McDowell County Board of Commissioners hereby authorizes the submission of a *Rural Downtown Economic Development Grant* application to the North Carolina Department of Commerce for the McDowell County Recreation Center project, and commits to providing the required local match in the amount of five percent (5%) of the total project cost.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the McDowell County Manager, or their designee, is hereby authorized to execute all necessary documents, agreements, and assurances on behalf of McDowell County in connection with said grant application.

Adopted this the **10th day of November, 2025**, by the **McDowell County Board of Commissioners**.

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to approve the resolution as presented, seconded by Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed for the resolution. Vice-Chairman Greene expressed his appreciation for Mr. Kazee and the wonderful job he's done as the Director for Parks and Recreation. Commissioner Walker stated that the focus on handicapped accessibility is greatly appreciated as well.

Introduction of New Health Director and Public Health Update

Mr. Wooten introduced Jason Masters, the new district health director. Mr. Masters was the Environmental Health Director before this position. Mr. Masters gave an overview of his background. Mr. Masters is originally from Mitchell County and started in Cleveland County in 2000 as an environmental health specialist. In 2002, he moved to Buncombe and continued to do environmental health work for the next seventeen years. In 2019, he had the opportunity to move to environmental health in McDowell County, and in 2020, he became the assistant health director. As of July 1st, 2025, he became the official Public Health Director.

Mr. Masters is working to establish and strengthen relationships with partnering agencies, such as emergency management. They're working towards more communication and

coordination with their Public Information Officer and Mr. Kehler for a more unified front when it comes to public health and safety messages. Mr. Masters and Mr. Kehler have discussed resource sharing when using the mobile unit in the community. Additionally, the Public Health Building could act as a staging area due to its proximity to the hospital. They're working on creating and implementing an incident command structure for large-scale events similar to Helene. Mr. Masters has met with Dr. Grit and is working to develop a set of presentations that are customized for each tier school. For elementary schools, they would focus on basic hygiene, nutrition, and exercise. For middle schools, the focus would be on mental health, hygiene, and emotional regulation, and for high schools, they would focus on signs of anxiety and depression, communicable diseases, food safety, and protection of groundwater. Additionally, they're working on the relationship with the Toe River Health District so that public health messages are pushed out into four counties rather than two.

Vice-chair Greene expressed his appreciation for the planned programs that are to be presented to the schools, and Commissioner Garner expressed her appreciation for what Mr. Masters does for the community.

Water System Project Updates and Approvals

Mr. Wooten gave the Water System Project Updates. The East End project is underway and is scheduled to be completed in April. This is a very complex project. As they're able to certify those sections in the system, those connections will be turned on. Approximately 80 homes are to be connected from this section. Nebo (Phase 2a and 2b) is under construction and winding down. Mr. Wooten spoke with the City Manager and Finance Director about switching over some existing customers as part of this project to the County system. Some of this is based on the County building new lines where the city had existing lines in at least two of the areas. There is one area where the city is transferring maintenance, ownership, and control of an existing waterline over to the County. Staff is working to contact those customers (roughly 45-50 customers) and notify them of the switch. January is likely the date for the first bill. Phase 3 (Randolph Road) has been bid and will be open in December. The environmental review for the small project on Exit 90 is starting to line out.

Mr. Wooten began giving updates on the West Marion Elementary/Sugar Hill area. The 90% plans have been received, and they're winding up the review for that area on the staff level. The environmental review on this project will take until February or March, and staff should know the results of the grant application submitted for this project. At that point, staff will know if there is funding to do Marler Road and Zion Hill Road. Staff is doing an Asset Inventory Assessment with the engineer they've started to do some mapping of the County's current system. Field work will be done to assess where water valves and hydrants are and ensure the older parts of the system are up to date and working properly.

Mr. Wooten introduced a partnership grant that came out of Helene for the city, town, and county. This grant will focus on how to work together on disaster response and other partnership opportunities for utility planning and system maintenance. The effort will be coordinated by the Environmental Finance Center out of the UNC School of Government. Staff is looking to schedule this workshop for January. The board discussed the need for long-term planning and partnership to ensure water capacity for Old Fort and the County as a whole.

Commissioner Walker asked for the number of current water customers for the County and Mr. Wooten stated that there are over 400 customers now, and there will be approximately 550-600 customers after the active projects are completed.

County Facility Planning Priorities and Updates

Mr. Wooten updated the board on the County facilities planning priorities. Mr. Wooten referred back to previous discussions about a DSS and human services facility that can place all of the DSS staff under one roof. Currently, DSS has three different sites, with the main building being very full. The board has recognized this need for several years, and staff have explored construction alternatives. Those construction costs are millions of dollars, and would be tough for McDowell County's size and resource availability. As last discussed, the board planned to defer on that and look for alternative options. An alternative has not been nailed down, but has been discussed, with potential for surplus property coming out of the elementary school consolidation. This alternative option has been discussed and will need to continue discussion with the Board of Education partners. If the grant is awarded to McDowell County Schools for consolidation, it'll take time for construction to start. If the school property is presented to the County for acquisition or donation, the school property would need to be made ready for a DSS/human services facility. The best-case scenario for a DSS facility is three to four years out. Mr. Wooten recommended not looking to build a new facility, but rather focusing on this potential option with McDowell County Schools. Currently, they're trying to make do with the facilities that DSS has in hopes that the facility plan discussed will come to fruition. There is no formal understanding about this plan with the Board of Education, but this is being discussed.

Commissioner Walker asked about the technicality of the property when it ceases to be used as a school, and Mr. Wooten relayed that they would have to offer it to the County for purchase or acquisition, and there would need to be some negotiated compensation. This would need to be worked out with our partners, and discussion is ongoing.

Mr. Wooten shifted focus to the two other areas previously discussed, a 911 center and an animal shelter. These two matters are more pressing because of physical capacity and condition. In the aftermath of Helene, both are inadequate for disaster response. For the 911 center, four telecommunicators are typically on shift, plus the sergeant, in such a small space. This is not suitable for 2025 or for any sort of growth. Call volume is increasing and will continue to increase as McDowell becomes more of a destination. The animal shelter has been discussed frequently and is the responsibility of the County government to provide this function. The building was opened in 1980 and was built for a much different time and for a smaller population. For those reasons and for it being a state-inspected facility, this is important to prioritize as well.

Mr. Wooten provided some possible solutions for these matters. Mr. Wooten referred to the Community Development Block Grant for Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR). This has been made available after Helene for Western North Carolina. The state will be making decisions on multi-family housing and community infrastructure. Mr. Wooten has met with the grant writer from Foothills Regional Commission to talk about housing, waterlines, and these two projects. For the project applications, you need to have a tie back to Helene and both the 911 center and the animal shelter were taxed during Helene. The grant writers are looking at both the 911 center and the animal shelter as far as the applicability back to the CDBG-DR grant. Mr. Wooten

has presented the property on Spaulding Road adjacent to the Law Enforcement Center as a possible animal shelter site. Mr. Wooten asked that the board allow staff to keep working on grant funding, preferably for both projects, and identify the Spaulding Road property as a potential site for both projects.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to allow staff to proceed forward with exploring the option of the site identified on Spaulding Road to see if it's feasible for a new 911 Center and Animal Shelter, since they both fall into the CDBG Disaster Relief recovery program's eligibility requirements, and report back to the board with these findings. This motion was seconded by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Board Appointments

The Clerk to the Board presented the board appointments. Nikki Pittman applied to be reappointed for the Foothills Workforce Development, and Kimberly McDonald applied for the commissioner-appointed vacancy on the Juvenile Crime Prevention Council.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to waive the first reading and appoint both applicants to their respective boards, seconded by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed

Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Update and Approvals

Mr. Wooten covered the budget updates, sales tax, and property tax reports.

- GF 10 - Appropriates grant revenue and loan proceeds in Emergency Services.
- GF 11 - Appropriates Library fund balance for renovation work at the Marion Library
- GF 12 - Appropriates inmate housing revenue for facility improvements at the Law Enforcement Center
- GF 13 - Appropriates DSS revenue for various expenditure line items.
- GF 14 - Appropriates donations for various expenditure needs at the Senior Center
- GF 15 - Appropriates program revenue and a grant for departmental expenditures and improvements
- CP1 - Appropriates fund balance from the County Projects fund for the America 250 Committee
- Opoif1 - Amends fund balance for the Narcan purchases
- SP3 - Amends the School Project Fund for various capital projects using reserved funding

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the budget amendments as presented, seconded by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Administrative Items for Review and Approval

Mr. Wooten presented the EMS write-offs, Nebo Water Adjustments, a financing resolution for one ambulance, a reimbursement resolution for the purchase of an ambulance, and a partial road abandonment for Linville Road.

Commissioner Ellis motioned to approve the administrative items as presented, seconded by Garner. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Property Tax Releases, Refunds, and Discoveries

Mr. Wooten presented the property tax releases, refunds, and discoveries.

- Motor Vehicle Tax Refunds: \$ 1294.48
- Releases over \$100.00: \$ 882.13
- Releases under \$100.00: \$ 173.27
- Refunds: None
- Discoveries: \$ 10,403.22

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the releases, refunds, and discoveries as presented, seconded by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Opioid Settlement Addition

Mr. Wooten gave an update on the Opioid Settlement. McDowell County is participating in a multi-jurisdictional lawsuit against opioid distributors, retailers, and manufacturers that has been ongoing in Ohio for roughly five or six years under the assumption that it would lead to a settlement, which it did. North Carolina's Department of Justice has encouraged Counties, even the non-participating Counties, to sign an MOA. McDowell has signed the MOA and is still involved in the lawsuit. As part of the MOA, funds received by the County must be spent on various areas to help prevent addiction to opioids and other substances. After about three years, they've been working to refine the process and assist local agencies in developing their infrastructure to help with addiction treatment and diversion away from addiction. Two and a half years ago, the first tranche of spending was approved, and earlier this calendar year, a second tranche was approved. These are one-year contracts, not recurring, and quarterly reports from the agencies are received.

Entities with approved funding:

- CareNet Counseling: \$18,750
- Care Reach: \$ 50,000
- High Country Community Health: \$ 50,000
- Marion PD: \$ 50,000
- Mission Ministries Alliance: \$ 50,000
- McDowell Partnership for Substance Awareness: A little over \$16,000
- NDSA Program: A little over \$1,000
- WNC Community Health Services:
- Substance Use Disorder Response Coordinator (internal): \$110,000
- Funds identified for Narcan (community distribution)

The Annual Opioid Settlement Funding Meeting is coming up. Staff present information about funding and early reports on what's being done with the provided funding. The County is bound by the MOA with the Department of Justice and the settlement agreement with the companies involved to ensure the County is spending money appropriately. There are guidelines for how the money is used per the Department of Justice and the settlement from the lawsuit.

Citizen Comment

Teri Stahara on homelessness

Terry Briggs on vacant property.

Commissioner and Staff Reports

Mr. Wooten stated that County offices would be closed for Veterans Day.

Closed Session

Commissioner Walker made a motion to go into closed session at 5:54 pm, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to come out of closed session at 6:18 pm, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed (Ms. Garner did not return to the Board Room after the Closed Session).

Adjournment

Commissioner Walker made a motion to adjourn at 6:18 p.m., with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

Attest:

Madalyn Robinson
Clerk to the Board

Lynn Greene
Vice Chairman