

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA  
COUNTY OF MCDOWELL COUNTY  
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS  
REGULAR SESSION – DECEMBER 21, 2020**

**Assembly**

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in Regular Session on Monday, December 21, 2020, at 11:30 a.m., at the Universal Conference Room.

**Members Present**

Tony Brown, Chair; David N. Walker, Vice-Chair; Brenda Vaughn; Chris Allison; Patrick Ellis

**Members Absent**

None

**Others Present**

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Cheryl Mitchell, Clerk to the Board

**Call to Order**

Chairman Brown called the meeting to order at 11:30am.

Vice Chairman Walker made a motion to approve the agenda as presented, second by Commissioner Allison. By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed.

**Approval of Minutes**

Commissioner Vaughn made a motion to approve November 23, 2020 Recessed Session minutes, and November 16, 2020 Closed Session minutes, second by Commissioner Allison. By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed.

**Code Purple Program**

Niki Palmer, with East Marion Pentecostal Holiness Church; Jason Seidel, with Let's Act Army-McDowell; Debora Workman, with Marion East Community Forum; and Crystal Sweatt, with McDowell Mission Ministries gave an update on advocacy and raising awareness for the homeless population. They recently created a Code Purple Hotline 828-764-1295 to aid the local community with finding basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing.

**McDowell Mission Update**

Ms. Awren March, Director of McDowell Mission Ministries, gave an update on serving the homeless men, women and children in the county. Ms. March has worked in the nonprofit sector for more than 20 years and is committed to community building and helping those in need. Ms. Laura Pool, Director of the State Street facility; and Ms. Crystal Sweat, Director of the Women's facility also gave an update.

There are currently 22 women and 12 children at the women's facility. In addition, they are supplying a couple of beds at night for Code Purple; which is a program for overnight stay when the temperatures dip below 32 degrees.

There are 11 men currently in the men's shelter, with four to five men coming in for Code Purple.

Also, the Mission supports rapid rehousing which helps individuals move into their own housing from the shelter. The Mission has 14 households they are currently supporting on a monthly basis.

The Mission was also able to assist 192 families thru their food pantry last month.

The State St. thrift store has been relocated to Main Street. Plans are for a family shelter with six rooms similar to a hotel suite; back section of the facility can have overnight stay for homeless during Code Purple. Code Purple program will also provide meals to the homeless staying overnight.

Vice Chairman Walker serves on the McDowell Mission Board of Directors. He expressed his appreciation for the work of the staff on meeting the needs of the homeless in the county, and the good coordination with other organizations.

Mr. Wooten noted the County funds \$14,000 to the Mission, domestic violence shelter gets \$24,000, and mental illness issues will connect to VAYA and RHA.

### **DSS Update**

Ms. Sprouse, DSS Director, noted DSS has worked closely with Mission Ministries for several years due to the facility being the only homeless shelter in the county. She pointed out that Ms. March has received \$700,000 in grant funding for the Mission. She added mental health illness is harder to address during the pandemic due to tele-health visits which does not address the homeless issue.

The low-income program is seeing several individuals with \$2,000 to \$3,000 power bills, and behind on rent, after receiving \$10-\$15,000 in unemployment since March. The homeless population has grown, and a lot of transients are moving into the county coming to DSS for assistance.

Ms. Sprouse added the Mission Ministries had never turned away a DSS request for beds.

Commissioner Vaughn added the mental illness issue has been ongoing and is getting more prevalent.

Ms. Sprouse gave a report on the DSS agency for the benefit of the two new Commissioners:

- There are 111 staff at DSS in three locations
- budget is \$9-10M of federal, state, and county funds
- 2<sup>nd</sup> largest county department in revenue

She then reviewed the state standards of each department; a copy is with the agenda materials.

She also reported there were 125 children in foster care due to a lot of use of heroin in the household. She also distributed an organizational chart for DSS.

Vice Chairman Walker added Ms. Sprouse does a great job and is very responsive to questions.

Mr. Wooten noted the Board had received a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) for all social services programs excluding medical assistance (Medicaid) for January 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022.

Vice Chairman Walker made a motion to approve the MOU, second by Commissioner Vaughn. By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed.

### **Economic Development Public Hearings**

Chairman Brown declared a public hearing setting at 12:19pm, pursuant to North Carolina General Statute 158-7.1 for the purpose of receiving public comment concerning economic development incentives offered by McDowell County for economic development activities. The incentive proposed to be offered by the county was \$5,000. The existing company is seeking a \$50,000 grant from the NC Building Reuse grant. The capital investment of \$500,000 in machinery and building improvements and the employment of 10 people within one year. The proposed wages paid by the company would exceed the County average.

There were no comments from the public.

Vice Chairman Walker made a motion to go out of public hearing setting at 12:26pm, second by Commissioner Allison. By a vote, of 5-0 the motion passed.

Chairman Brown declared the Board in public hearing setting at 12:26pm for the second public hearing pursuant to North Carolina General Statute 158-7.1 to receive public comment concerning economic development incentives offered by McDowell County for economic development activities.

Mr. Abernathy reported the incentive proposed to be offered by the county would not exceed \$590,000, paid over a five-year period. The incentive was \$2,000 a job, and the \$90,000 was based on a percentage of the investment as a grant. The capital investment of \$17.5M in machinery and building improvements and the employment of 250 people within the first three years. The proposed wages paid by the company would exceed the County average. Mr. Abernathy noted this was a new green technology company seeking incentive. The State of NC is still in the process of due diligence and has not approved the project to move forward at this point.

There were no comments from the public.

Vice Chairman Walker made a motion to go out of public hearing setting at 12:35pm, second by Commissioner Allison. By a vote, of 5-0 the motion passed.

Vice Chairman Walker made a motion to approve the incentive on the first project, second by Commissioner Allison. By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed.

Vice Chairman Walker made a motion to approve the incentive for the second company pending State of NC approval, second by Commissioner Ellis. Mr. Abernathy added everything would be reviewed contractually and by the county, and no county funds would be paid until the jobs had been filled. By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed.

### **Connect McDowell Request**

The Board previously approved \$11,000 to Connect McDowell, Inc. in the FY 2021 for the purpose of securing a study of service gaps in the community. The report actually was completed at a

lower cost than estimated. The organization requested the unspent funds be utilized for grants from the school system for student connectivity for low-income households.

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to leave the money with Connect McDowell, second by Commissioner Vaughn. By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed.

Chairman Walker left the meeting at 12:39pm, and returned at 12:41pm.

### **COVID-19 Vaccine**

Mr. William Kehler, ES Director, gave the following update:

- Positivity rate declined to 13.5% last week
- Concern of the county being placed in the red zone with the trends going up
- 800 positives for December so far – previous record was the month of November with 560 positives
- age group 25-49-year old are fueling the spread
- Rural counties receiving Moderna vaccine
- Hospitals are receiving Pfizer vaccine and medical staff received their vaccine on this date
- Foothills Health Dept. will oversee the registration of the vaccine; and the vaccination sites
- Phase 1A- front line workers who have contact with COVID individuals
- Moderna – day 1 vaccination and day 28 vaccination
- Community paramedics and ES staff will administer the vaccine
- Continue testing; contact tracing; and quarantine
- Phase 1B will be vaccines for long term care residents
- Goal is to get to elderly population as soon as possible
- Vaccines will be available at the Health Dept., CVS and Walgreen pharmacies, and later on at doctor offices
- Situation for registration is still very fluid

### **Sheriff Staffing Update**

Mr. Wooten noted at the last Board meeting Sheriff Buchanan presented his request for salary increases for the entire department due to staffing needs. He noted he and Ms. Bell, Finance Director, had met numerous times with most of the Board members since that meeting.

Mr. Wooten noted the timing of the request was unusual due to being midway thru the year, and not during the budget request time, and also during a pandemic. He added he knows the salaries are not competitive with the surrounding counties, and the county will never be able to compete with Buncombe County. Compensation is not the only reason for job retainment, work conditions, commute and other factors are considered. He noted some counties addressed the salary issue with a salary study.

He added he felt more comfortable with a 5% increase and those in public safety agencies a higher percentage since the county was in the middle of the budget year, and also in a pandemic where there are still a lot of uncertainties.

Chairman Brown said it was his opinion for a 5% increase for everyone, and 7.5% for safety personnel. Also, to have the County Manager look at the base pay grades.

Vice Chairman Walker noted the Board wanted to be equitable for all county employees. He knew the Sheriff and Emergency Services salaries were low and both departments had a hard time recruiting. He added there was a need for a salary study to be done the first of next year, and over a period of time look at phasing in higher pay across the organization where the needs were greater. Also, raises have been done without increasing the pay scale, and that issue needs to be addressed. He said also the staff should address the areas where the pay scale is low, and over the next 2-3 years bring the salaries to where they should be.

Vice Chairman Walker made a motion to approve the staff recommendation for 5% pay raise for every employee along with raising the scale 5%; and then for public safety raise the pay scale 7.5% and a pay raise of 7.5% effective January 1, 2021. Also, authorize staff to contract out the first of the year to have a pay study done so we can see where we need to improve staffing and next budget year staff can give recommendation, second by Commissioner Vaughn. By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed.

Vice Chairman Walker stated when the Board authorized the addition of a new courtroom and the courthouse renovation the tax rate was increased 3.75 cents to get the LGC approval for the debt. At that time the Boards intent was to reduce the tax rate as they could. He stated his intent effective July 1, 2021 was lowering the tax rate by two cents, pending if revenues are there and debt service was ok.

Chairman Brown agreed the Board's goal was to lower the tax rate, and the Board would be looking at that for the next budget year.

Mr. Wooten asked if the Board would like for staff to obtain proposals for a salary study. Consensus of the Board was for staff to take care of proposals.

Commissioner Allison noted his appreciation to the staff and the Board for all their hard work.

Mr. Wooten noted his appreciation for the work Ms. Bell had done in getting information together for the salaries. Chairman Brown noted she was a vital part of the County.

**Adjournment**

Vice Chairman Walker made a motion to adjourn at 1:10pm, second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed.

Attest:

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Cheryl L. Mitchell  
Clerk to the Board

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Tony G. Brown  
Chairman