

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
COUNTY OF MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION – DECEMBER 7, 2020**

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in Regular Session on Monday, December 7, 2020, at 5:00 p.m., at the Universal Conference Room, 634 College Drive, Marion, North Carolina.

Members Present

David N. Walker, Chair; Tony Brown, 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 Walker called the meeting to order. The invocation was given by Commissioner Allison, followed by the pledge of allegiance, led by Commissioner Ellis.

Approval of Minutes

Commissioner Vaughn made a motion, second by Commissioner Ellis, to approve the November 9, 2020 Regular Session and November 16, 2020 Regular Session minutes as presented. By a vote of 5-0, the motion carried.

Approval of Agenda

Chairman Walker called for any additions or deletions to the agenda. There were none.

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

Chairman Walker welcomed Commissioner Patrick Ellis and Commissioner Chris Allison to the Board.

For the record, he also noted Commissioner Ellis was the son of former Commissioner George Ellis. This was the first time a father and son have both served as Commissioner in our county history.

SELECTION OF CHAIR AND VICE-CHAIR

Chair Walker noted the first item of business required by NCGS 153A-39 was the selection of a Chair and Vice-Chair. Chairman Walker turned the meeting over to the Clerk for this purpose.

Ms. Mitchell asked for nominations for Chair. Commissioner Vaughn nominated Commissioner Brown, second by Commissioner Ellis.

Vote for Commissioner Brown for Chair: By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed. Commissioner Brown did not vote.

The Clerk took nominations for Vice-Chair. Chairman Brown nominated Commissioner Walker, second by Commissioner Allison. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed. Commissioner Walker did not vote.

Recognition of Election Officials

Ms. Kim Welborn, Elections Director introduced her staff, Jane Propst, Deputy Director, and Karen Burrell, Elections Asst. Also, in attendance were Elections Board Chairman Dean Buff, and Board member Tom Cline. Mr. Buff thanked the Elections staff for their hard work and their efforts to keep everyone safe during the election process and the COVID virus.

Chairman Brown presented the following Resolution for approval:

RESOLUTION OF APPRECIATION FOR MCDOWELL COUNTY BOARD OF ELECTIONS

WHEREAS, the United States, the State of North Carolina, and McDowell County held a General Election on November 3, 2020; and

WHEREAS, the 2020 General Election ballot had United States President, United States Senator, United States House of Representatives, as well as numerous state and local races of great importance; and

WHEREAS, the high interest of the races on the ballot resulted in a turnout of 77.21% in McDowell County; and

WHEREAS, the Nation, State, and County have experienced the COVID-19 Pandemic since March 2020; and

WHEREAS, the Board of Elections staff provided registration services throughout the summer and fall during the Pandemic; and

WHEREAS, the Board of Elections staff and poll workers operated early voting sites in Marion and Old Fort during late October with precautions in place; and

WHEREAS, all precincts were open on November 3 and handled the record turnout with great professionalism.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the McDowell County Board of Commissioners do hereby recognize the McDowell County Board of Elections for an excellent 2020 General Election.

ADOPTED this day, the 7th of December, 2020.

Attest:

Cheryl L. Mitchell, Clerk to the Board

David Walker, Chairman

Vice Chairman Walker made a motion to approve *Resolution of Appreciation for McDowell County Board of Elections*, second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed.

COVID-19 Update

Karen Powell, Foothills Health Director, gave an update on the COVID-19 response:

- Day 267 of EOC operations
- 123 new positives today, for a total of 2,067 positives; there have been 41 deaths
- Testing continues every Monday, Wednesday, Friday at the Health Dept
- Continue to push the 3 W's—wear a mask; wash your hands; wait six feet
- McDowell will stay Code Orange in Governor Cooper's map
- County has 14% positivity rate
- The Pfizer vaccine will be released the week of December 14th
- Pardee Hospital in Hendersonville will receive the vaccine for distribution to other hospitals in WNC; due to they are the only hospital in the area with subzero storage capabilities.
- The Moderna vaccine will be released the week of December 21st
- The county should receive 900-1000 Moderna vaccines
- The State will determine the order of who will be vaccinated first

Mr. William Kehler, Emergency Services Director gave an update:

- EOC was moved from a Level 2 to Level 1 today since the incident has expanded
- 20% of 911 staff absent due to COVID exposure
- EMS staff is affected but not to the effect of 9-1-1 center; staffing plans are available if needed
- Winter storm preparation/planning

Chairman Brown on behalf of the Board expressed his appreciation to the Emergency Services staff.

Universal Lease Proposal

Mr. Chuck Abernathy, MEDA Director presented a request from Auria Solutions to lease space at the Universal building. Currently there are four companies and two public service entities in the warehouse, and approximately 35,650sf vacant. Auria requested to lease the vacant space for \$1.80 per sf.

Mr. Abernathy noted there had been informal discussion with the school system and the college to use the space for expanding early college. He advised Auria they would have a one-year notice to vacate the space if the space was needed.

Mr. Wooten had spoken with Mr. Garrett, and after the new MTCC President takes office the three administrators would meet and talk about future plans. He noted he felt comfortable bringing the three-year lease option to the board for their approval.

Vice Chairman Walker noted approving the lease would bring in revenue as well as supporting local industry.

Mr. Wooten added there was a 30-day advertisement requirement for the lease before the Board may approve the lease. Commissioner Ellis asked if the \$1.80 rate was a fair price for the space. Mr. Abernathy noted the \$1.80 per sf was low and suggested the Board review the lease rate for the facilities. He added the average was \$2.25 for manufacturing warehousing. He noted several tenants were paying \$2.00sf. The vacant space has a modest office space and bathroom, and no upfit would be required for the warehouse lease.

Vice Chairman Walker made a motion, second by Commissioner Ellis to advertise the intent to lease the space and bring this item to next month's meeting. By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed.

Sheriff's Office Staffing Update

Sheriff Buchanan presented an update via conference call, due to being in quarantine for exposure to COVID. In attendance was Chief Deputy Nathan Mace; Capt. Jason Grindstaff-Patrol Division; Capt. Kent Smith-Support Division; Capt. Heath Helms-Jail Division; Deputy Jack Gouge provided security for the meeting.

Currently there are 82 fulltime positions – sworn and non-sworn, there are three (3) vacancies on the Patrol division; one (1) vacancy in Support division which is a school resource officer; and one (1) vacancy in the jail.

Sheriff Buchanan noted his office assisted in a pay study with Burke County two years ago. Since that time the starting salary range has not been changed. A hiring pay scale spreadsheet was distributed to the Board of the surrounding counties Sheriff's Dept. A copy is with the agenda materials.

Sheriff Buchanan requested the Board to consider a pay increase in order to fill the vacancies. He proposed increasing the baseline salaries; detention officers 10% increase; and 15% increase for all sworn jobs. Also, requested those currently employed receive a 10% increase-for some that will be an increase to get them to the baseline, some will be 10% increase on top of what they are making. He encouraged the Board to review salaries every two years.

To help meet the funds needed for the increase he suggested moving \$150,000 from the jail inmate revenue this year, and \$150,000 again next year to help cover the cost of the increase effective January 1,2021. He added applicants would like to work in McDowell County, but they go outside the county for higher salaries.

Chairman Brown expressed his appreciation for the job the Sheriff's Department does. He noted the underpaid county salaries were created several years ago, due to the Board not looking at salary studies and addressing the issue. He added the current Board was proactive and he was talking with the Finance Officer and the County Manager about addressing salary issues.

Commissioner Ellis asked for 30 days to research due to this was his and Commissioner Allison's first meeting, and the extra time was needed for due diligence.

The Commissioners expressed their appreciation to the department and agreed to see what could be done for the salaries.

Commissioner Allison asked Sheriff Buchanan what dollar amount would be needed to give all his employees a 10% increase. Sheriff Buchanan said it would take \$400,000.

Approval of Bond for Register of Deeds

Per NCGS 161-4 the Board was required to approve a bond for the Register of Deeds, Lydia Tilley Effler. The amount of the bond was \$50,000.

Ms. Effler gave an update on her first day in office as Register of Deeds.

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

Firewise Project Presentation

Ms. Jen Haas, Outreach Coordinator, Mtn. Valleys Resource and Conservation Development Council, gave a presentation on the McDowell Community Wildfire Network (MCWN) project called Firewise. The program educates members of the community on how they can mitigate wildfire risk. Four years ago, wildfires in WNC burned more than 62,000 acres, which was more acreage burned than over the last 50 years combined. Ms. Haas added the cause of wildfires in WNC was 99% human cause.

MCWN received a \$40,000 grant that will support the program coordination, tracking mitigation activities, and acquiring mitigation equipment. Ms. Haas distributed a list of tasks residents could do around their property to create defensible space and protect their home in the event a wildfire threatened the area.

Facilities Update

Mr. Wooten gave the following updates:

- Staff had met with Mr. Chuck Hamrick, Engineer, regarding staff office needs at the former Kirksey building. There will be draft drawings hopefully by the December 21st Board meeting.
- Staff had received quotes for removing the two buildings on Garden Street for additional parking. There were three bids received for removing the buildings, grading and gravel. The lowest bid received was for \$26,500. The bids did not include paving costs.

Vice Chairman Walker made a motion to accept the bid of \$26,500 to remove the buildings, second by Commissioner Allison. Commissioner Ellis asked if the bid included grading and gravel for parking spaces. Mr. Wooten replied it did, and there would be approximately 15 spaces. By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed.

Public Shooting Range Update

The range project construction continues and is on schedule. Architect Chuck Hamrick is working on the building design. Mr. Wooten presented the names of surrounding shooting ranges in the state and requested direction for naming the facility. Board members will bring back their recommendations on naming the facility.

Emergency Services Building Update

Mr. Wooten submitted photos of the construction sites at Station 4 and the Headquarters. He noted the Headquarters picture was made by the MAMA helicopter on their recent visit with the new helicopter.

Recreation Facility Update

The Recreation Department at Academy St. will soon have a topographical survey done.

Board Appointments

The Planning Board vacancies were presented as a second reading for one full member and one alternate member. The Board received applications from the following: Teresa Abernathy; Robin Bradley; Pam Forshey; Robert McCall; Andrea Parker; David Patneau; Michael Seay; Melanie Shaver; James Williams.

The vote via written ballot for Full member:
James Williams -Commissioners Ellis, Brown, Walker
David Patneau – Commissioners Vaugh, Allison

By a vote of 3-2 James Williams was elected as a full member.

The vote via written ballot for Alternate member:
Melanie Shaver – Commissioner Ellis
David Patneau – Commissioners Brown, Walker, Vaughn, Allison

By a vote of 4-1 David Patneau was elected as an alternate member.

The Foothills Industries representative, Joy Shuford, submitted her resignation on the Transportation Board. Foothills Industries submitted an application for approval from Nancy Moore.

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

The NCACC Legislative Goals Conference scheduled for January 14-15, 2021 will be held via virtual format. The NCACC requested a Voting Delegate and an Alternate Voting Delegate.

By consensus Commissioner Allison will be the Voting Delegate and Commissioner Vaughn the Alternate Voting Delegate.

The Commissioners reviewed the various boards and committees the Board serves on:

Joint Utility Committee – Chairman Brown and Vice Chairman David Walker
Joint Education Committee – Chairman Brown and Vice Chairman Walker
MEDA – Commissioner Ellis
VAYA Health Commission Advisory Committee – Commissioner Allison
Foothills District Health Board – Commissioner Allison
Isothermal Planning and Development Commission –
Isothermal RPO –
Transportation Advisory Board – Commissioner Vaughn
Tourism Development Authority – Commissioner Vaughn
Connect McDowell – Commissioner Vaughn
Focal Point Advisory Committee –

The Board will review the vacant boards again at a later date.

Universal Park Disc Golf Proposal

The Board received a request to install 15 additional Disc Golf targets at Universal Park around the ponds from Gino Pride with the McDowell County Disc Golf Association. The MTCC Early College had already placed 3 targets around the ponds, bringing it to an 18-hole course. Attorney Coats suggested looking into liability coverage before approving. He added Burke and Buncombe Counties already have disc golf courses.

The Board will review this item at a future meeting once the liability issue has been researched.

Administrative Items

Staff presented EMS non-collectible accounts as write offs totaling \$161,654.69 for approval.

Vice Chairman Walker made a motion to approve the write offs as presented, second by Commissioner Allison. By a vote of 5-0 the motion was approved.

Tax Matters

Releases over \$100	\$ 3,673.00
Discoveries	\$ 11,024.95
MV tax refunds	\$ 330.88
Write-offs	\$ 111.44

Vice Chairman Walker made a motion to approve all tax matters, second by Commissioner Allison. By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed.

2021 Meeting Schedule Approval

Staff presented the Board of Commissioners meeting schedule for FY2021 for approval. The meeting location would continue to be at the Universal Conference Room until the new location at 69 N Main Street was renovated.

Vice Chairman Walker made a motion to approve the 2021 schedule, Commissioner Vaughn second. By a vote of 5-0 the motion passed.

Public Comment – NCGS 153A-52.1

Chairman Brown opened the meeting for public comment at 6:57 pm.

There were no comments.

Public comment ended at 6:57pm.

Commissioners/Staff Reports and Greetings

Commissioner Allison read the Christmas Story from the Gospel of Luke. Each Commissioner gave their Christmas greetings.

Adjournment

There being no further business to transact at this time, upon motion by Vice Chairman Walker and a second by Commissioner Vaughn, the meeting was adjourned at 7:05pm.

Attest:

Cheryl L. Mitchell
Clerk to the Board

Tony G. Brown
Chairman