

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION – July 14, 2025**

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in regular session on Monday, July 14, 2025, in the Commissioners' Board Room, 69 N. Main Street, Marion, NC.

Members Present

Chairman, Tony Brown; Patrick Ellis, Trisha Garner, and David Walker

Members Absent

Vice-Chair, Lynn Greene

Others Present

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Madalyn Robinson, Clerk to the Board; Fred Coats, County Attorney; William Kehler, ES Director; Aikman Kazee, Parks and Recreation Director; Jessica Sigmon, Friends of Fonta Flora Interim Executive Director

Call to Order

Chairman Brown called the meeting to order at 5:00 pm. The Prayer was given by Commissioner Walker. The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Commissioner Garner.

Approval of Minutes

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the June 9th Regular Session Minutes, June 24th and 27th Special Session Minutes, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Approval of Agenda

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to approve the agenda, with a second by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Parks and Recreation Update

Aikman Kazee, director of the Parks and Recreation, gave a department update. Mr. Kazee gave a summary of the programs provided by the Parks and Recreation department and noted the number of participants in Little League is the largest McDowell County has ever had and one of the largest in the state.

Youth Leagues

- 2025 Little League Spring: 900 participants
- 2025 Little League Fall: 366 (capped) participants
- 2024 MCYBL (Basketball): 760 participants
- 2024 MCYFL (Football): 360 participants

Adult Leagues

- 2025 Adult Basketball: 108 participants
- 2024 Adult Softball: 270 participants
- Grow and Go (New for 2025) participants

The Grow and Go program has been added to take the place of the stroller-cise program and will be more inclusive. Mr. Kazee moved on to the 2025 events, noting the beginning of a new Little League Baseball and Softball camp. This program is a push towards making programs accessible to children during the summer.

Events

- MCYFL Football and Cheer Camp
- Punt Pass & Kick
- Little League Baseball & Softball Camp
- MLB Pitch Hit & Run
- Mountain Glory 5K (Last race 2023)
- McDowell County Senior Games
- McDowell County Special Olympics
- Youth Archery Tournaments
- Dick's Sporting Good Shop Weekends

Mr. Kazee gave an overview of the current initiatives offered by the Parks and Recreation Department.

Current Initiatives:

- Train Up A Child
- Never Too Late To Learn
- Free Physical Day(s)
- Bicycle Helmet Safety
- Have A Ball!

Mr. Kazee covered the Black Bear Campground and Park. May 2025 was the best month of all time for the campground, future plans are ongoing for the campground. Mr. Kazee noted that the campground is performing 32% better in 2025 when compared to 2024 year to date and that 2025 revenue is expected to surpass 2024 by the month of August. A \$41,000

grant has been received to improve the grounds post-Helene. Chairman Brown asked if plans for extended parking were discussed with Duke Energy. Mr. Kazee stated that preliminary conversations have taken place, but the current focus is on rebuilding from Helene.

Mr. Kazee gave updates on the McDowell County Shooting Range. The McDowell County Shooting Range has a new camera system installed. A survey will be released for the public to gauge public interest in the classes provided. Additional revenue-generating opportunities are planned, such as NRA-certified training that can be taught by instructor-certified staff members. These include:

- NRA Basics of Pistols
- NRA Basics of Rifles
- NRA Basics of Shotguns
- NRA Personal Protection
- NRA Concealed Carry

Mr. Kazee moved on to the 2025 Pool Season in Marion and Old Fort. The Marion pool averages 225 patrons per day and over 7,000 patrons (year to date) between the Marion and Old Fort pools. On July 25th, the first 100 adults and 100 students will swim for free, and the McDowell Library will have Shark Week-themed programming from 12:00 to 2:00 pm. This event is sponsored by Barefoot Baby Foundation.

Mr. Kazee covered the damages the parks have seen from Hurricane Helene. Greenlee Park, Sandy Andrews Park, and Lindley Park were all heavily damaged. Site visits have been completed at all parks. Site visits at all damaged parks have been completed. Debris Removal completed by Ashbritt and the Army Core of Engineers. Greenlee Park is waiting on Private Debris Removal for asphalt removal. Damage Reports for all parks have been approved and forwarded to FEMA Rapid Response Teams. Exception: Recreation Center (not yet received). RFQ for Greenlee Park, Lindley Park, and Sandy Andrews has been advertised.

Greenlee Park:

- The majority of the Storm Debris has been removed by Ashbritt and the Army Corps of Engineers with the exception of the asphalt displaced in the storm. Awaiting Private Debris Removal to release a contractor for remaining debris removal with an estimated completion date of July 31st.
- Initial Disaster Damage Report was rejected due to no mention of subbase below the trail. I received and approved the updated DDD report.
- Main Damage Sites include 304' of the Paved Entrance and 188' of the Paved Trail.

Sandy Andrews Park:

- Debris removal completed by Ashbritt and the Army Corps of Engineers.

- Approved DDD was sent to the FEMA Rapid Response Team.
- Main damage sites include the outfield fence (destroyed), perimeter fence (destroyed), bathrooms and concessions (significant water damage), third base dugout (destroyed), scoreboard (destroyed), outfield turf (significant erosion), playground and pavilion (destroyed).

Lindley Park:

- Debris removal completed by Ashbritt and the Army Corps of Engineers.
- Approved DDD was sent to the FEMA Rapid Response Team.
- Main damage sites include outfield fencing on Field 3 (destroyed), Gravel Walking Trail (Destroyed), Outfield Turf (Significant Erosion), Bathrooms and Concessions (Significant Water Damage)
- Repairs made by staff to get Fields 1 and 2 operational for the Little League season, repairs were documented and reported to FEMA. Porta-Jons were brought in for restrooms.

Commissioner Walker asked for the timeline at Lindley Park, and Mr. Kazee relayed that everything was completed in the departments and they are awaiting FEMA's response. Mr. Kazee covered the recently completed projects and future projects.

Completed Projects:

- Marion Pool and Pool Deck
- Exterior Bathroom Building at Recreation Center
- Interior Bathroom Floors at the Recreation Center
- Front Parking Lot Repaved at the Recreation Center
- Back Parking Lot expansion at the Recreation Center
- Pot Hole Remediation at Maple Leaf Entrance
- Gravel Parking Lot at Hemphill Park
- Hurricane Helene Related Repairs

Future Projects:

- Recreation Center
 - Gym Floor resurfacing, adding new coating to improve playing surface.
 - Permanent rollout bleachers at the Recreation Center Gym. (October Timeframe)
 - Greenspace area at the Recreation Center. Drainage and leveling work are currently underway.
 - Painting of the interior restrooms and replacing damaged wood benches.

- Hemphill Park
 - Construction of a Pavilion between Fields 1 and 2. 83% of the total cost covered by a Grant we received from NCAS.
 - Close in and climate control press boxes on all fields.
 - Update and remediate batting cages behind Field 1.
- Maple Leaf
 - Add a vault toilet system with an ADA oversized changing table at the playground area (Covered by Grant).
 - Sow grass and plant small bushes around the playground area, replacing the gravel. (Covered by Grant).
 - Pave the gravel parking area and line off parking spots beside the playground. (Covered by Grant).
 - Replace canopy shade cloth that was damaged during Hurricane Helene.
 - Replace fence posts and chain link fabric that are damaged throughout the park.

Commissioner Walker expressed his appreciation for Mr. Kazee's hard work and the outstanding report provided during the meeting. Chairman Brown stated that the parks have come a long way in the past ten years and expressed his appreciation for the positive changes made to the department.

Helene Recovery Update

William Kehler thanked Mr. Kazee for the presentation and expressed how he does an outstanding job. Mr. Kehler stated that he appreciated the opportunity to speak and noted it will be the 293rd day in EOC operations for Helene. Mr. Kehler referred to the Roadmap for Managing a Disaster and stated that we are continuing in the recovery phase with multiple operations ongoing. The ongoing recovery operations include debris management, private roads and bridges/housing, and hazard mitigation.

Debris Operations:

- USACE has ended waterway debris operations.
- Assessment for remaining waterway debris for potential State SMART Mission continues via Mr. Kehler's team. SMART is the debris program executed and managed by state personnel. The state pays contractors for the clean-up, preventing the County from fronting the money and filing for FEMA reimbursement.
- Personal Property Debris Removal (PPDR):
 - 1400 plus applications submitted by County citizens
 - 1300 parcels have been awarded to a USACE contractor
 - Timeline to complete all work is August 30th
 - 22 demolition applications. The end of December is the timeline for this group.

Mr. Kehler noted that over a million cubic yards of debris have been removed from the riverbeds. Mr. Kehler covered private road and bridge repair is ongoing. Significant efforts have been made from County staff to cross check with applications submitted to the state.

Private Roads and Bridge Repair:

- NC Emergency Management received over 300 applications from McDowell County citizens. Citizens with damage to a private road or bridge can apply online at www.ncdps.gov/Helene/PRB
- EOC staff has made significant efforts to crosscheck the state list with local damage assessment master sheet.
- Local EM is assigning a priority to each project.
 - Priority 1 – Has no emergency access
 - Priority 2 – Compromised structure / approaches / head walls
 - Priority 3 – Has access but needs repair.
 - Last bill from NCGA included funding for reimbursement of prior repairs since Helene.

Emergency Housing Repairs & Rebuilds:

- VOAD coordination meeting held biweekly at the EOC. Led by Jerry Lewis and Victoria Guerink.
- 434 completed projects
- 46 Pending, 32 Rebuilds

The hazard mitigation program:

- 35 acquisition
- 21 elevation
- 17 generator projects
- 12 Landslides

On the Hazard Mitigation acquisition update, 25 parcels were included in batch one, mostly located in the Buck Creek. The next step will be an appraiser visiting the property within 90 days. The plan from the state is to get these families a proposal back as soon as possible. Commissioner Walker asked what model the appraiser is using upon visiting the property. Mr. Kehler stated they'll be using the tax card value a day before the hurricane and COMPS. Chairman Brown asked if there was anything that could be done to speed the process along. Mr. Wooten stated he could reach out to congressional staff and FEMA about this issue, but this will be a time-consuming process.

Mr. Kehler stated this month will be the 10th month since Helene. The EMS team continues to work on Helene's damages to this day, with months ahead to go. Priorities include addressing critical needs for the citizens, continuing personal property debris removal, housing repairs with VOAD, hazard mitigation, and the FEMA reimbursement applications. Mr. Kehler stated they continue to look for patterns as we approach hurricane season.

Mr. Kehler introduced Jerry Lewis. Jerry Lewis gave an overview of the VOAD Update. Mr. Lewis stated they have completed four hundred and thirty-four projects, not including

complete rebuilds. Forty-six active projects are underway, ninety percent are completed. Thirty-two potential rebuilds, sixteen of which are already adopted by partner organizations. Collaboration allows these projects to continue. Moving forward, the remaining forty-six projects will be completed. Mr. Lewis noted that every project they have is not a project; they're a person whose life remains upended. Samaritans Purse has agreed to fund every single rebuild in the County, with a commitment exceeding 10 million dollars. Samaritans Purse also has a bridge program offering grants up to one hundred thousand dollars.

Mr. Lewis gave an overview of the new team member, Victoria, who has been hired for Hurricane Helene damage. She has been working closely with Mr. Kehler. Mr. Lewis expressed his gratitude for the collaboration that makes this all possible. Mr. Lewis noted the importance of preparedness during times of crisis and introduced the new *Joseph Project*. All pastors and church leaders who could attend met about food distribution in the previous weeks. The *Joseph Project* plans for 24 points of distribution moving forward via churches throughout the County. Churches will begin collecting enough materials to provide for their area for three days. Supplies collected will include nonperishable food, water, diapers, baby formula, and paper supplies. This will allow for resources to be provided immediately after EOC Activation if another storm similar to Helene were to take place. Baptist on Mission will continue their partnership with Grace Community Baptist Church in the event of another natural disaster.

If no storm, all of these supplies held in the churches will be distributed to their local communities in November along with a Turkey/Ham. These churches will continue this in the future. Chairman Brown expressed his appreciation to Mr. Lewis's faith and dedication to this cause. Commissioner Walker stated that McDowell County is known for its ability to work together to create a better McDowell and stated that this was a wonderful idea. Commissioner Ellis asked about the seniors who are not on social media and how this message would be relayed to folks who do not use social media. Mr. Lewis stated that churches will go door to door in rural areas, and noted that the goal is to meet the needs of 20% of the County. Mr. Lewis stated that they realize they don't have the capacity to meet the needs of everyone, but the goal is to allow resources for those who don't have the resources. Commissioner Ellis expressed his thanks from the County for the collaboration and stated the impact they're making in the County is honorable. Commissioner Walker expressed his appreciation for the timeline for collection and the pushing of resources to the community if a storm does not happen.

Friends of Fonta Flora State Trail Update

Jessica Sigmon introduced herself as the Interim Executive Director and advocate for the trails in McDowell. The Fonta Flora State Trail is a 100-mile trail that will connect Morganton to Asheville. This trail is not only beneficial for outdoor activities, it served as a commuter trail during Helene. This allowed for transportation during Helene and the ability to provide medicines and supplies. Several sections of the Fonta Flora trail pass through McDowell.

The vision for the trail is a continuous safe and scenic trail that showcases North Carolina's beauty. Ms. Sigmon relayed that outdoor recreation is a powerful tool for community engagement, connecting and creating healthy communities. The Fonta Flora State Trail prioritizes accessibility. Economically, outdoor recreation generates around 28 billion and supports over two hundred thousand jobs statewide. This promotes the local economy by putting money into Western North Carolina. Ms. Sigmon expressed her appreciation for the

connection that McDowell County has with its community. There are three focus areas in McDowell. These include the Old Fort Fonta Flora Complex, Phase 3 for the County Greenway, and Black Bear County Park. Closing gaps between all the trail segments is a priority as well as the continuation of strong partnerships between local governments and land owners. Ms. Sigmon expressed her appreciation for the County's support and asked if there were any questions. Chairman Brown expressed his appreciation for Friends of Fonta Flora and all that has been done within McDowell.

Water System Projects

Mr. Wooten gave an update on the Water System Project with mobilization for the East End Project beginning on June 1st. This is anticipated to take off within the next two weeks. Phase 2A and 2B are under construction with a road closure on Roland's Chapel Road due to the waterline being ran under the road. Phase 3 is soon to be started and preferably under bid within 2 months. All of the Phase 3 project must be completed and reimbursed by December 2026.

A small project is taking place near Harmony Grove Road and authorization to construct has been received. The Providence Area project (West Marion Elementary area) does not have enough funds for the completion of the full loop discussed (West Marion Elementary to Marler Road, Sugar Hill to Zion Hill Road). However, it is believed that there is enough funding to get to the West Marion Elementary. Mr. Wooten stated that he is looking at the Helene-related grant to complete this project. Commissioner Ellis asked if this project was on hold until the funding is received. Mr. Wooten recommended holding off for the time being and allowing the engineer to complete design plans while trying to ensure that the SRF Grant is feasible. Commissioner Ellis asked the timeline, and Mr. Wooten predicted two months for finalization of the selected design. Commissioner Walker is in favor of moving forward as soon as possible to provide the area with water and stated that they should move forward as quickly as possible. Commissioner Ellis asked staff to report next month on the engineering and funding. Commissioner Ellis made a motion to accept phase one of the school, while staff look for grant money to complete the project in its entirety, seconded by Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passes.

Mr. Wooten stated that the County received an asset, inventory, and assessment grant of four hundred thousand dollars and should be sufficient to cover the project's assessment aspect. A smaller grant of one hundred thousand dollars was received from the state for post and pre-disaster coordination between Old Fort, Marion, and McDowell. Mr. Wooten referred to the resolution for the grant. Commissioner Ellis made a motion to accept the resolution as presented, seconded by Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 4-0, this vote passes.

Old Convenience Center Site

Mr. Wooten referred back to the presentation by Blueridge Processing that was given a few months ago. Blueridge Processing purchased the old Foothills Pilot Plant (Ag Services Drive) and requested to lease the old convenience center site nearby. Mr. Wooten stated that Blueridge Processing would like to have access to this site for events and overflow parking, and a rough outline of the property is included in the packet. Chairman Brown stated that he agreed to this request and noted that Bluer

idge Processing has excelled with their business. Commissioner Walker asked if the County had the intent to use the property moving forward and how long the lease is. Mr. Wooten relayed that the lease would be for one year, and there are no plans to use the property at this time. Mr. Wooten asked if there was a dollar amount in mind and Commissioner Walker stated the amount should be market value. Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the lease request, with the lease document being brought back for final approval, which was seconded by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passes.

Sheriff's Office Retirement Resolution

Mr. Wooten stated that Detective Shannon Smith will be retiring and requests that his gun be sold for \$1 per NCGS-20-187.2 and his badge be donated. Mr. Wooten recommends a formal presentation of the resolution at Mr. Smith's retirement reception. Commissioner Garner presented the proposed resolution.

RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING SALE OF COUNTY OWNED PROPERTY

WHEREAS, The County of McDowell owns certain items of personal property that has become surplus for its current needs: and

WHEREAS, North Carolina General Statute § 20-187.2 permits the County to donate the badge worn by a Law Enforcement Officer upon their retirement; and

WHEREAS, North Carolina General Statute § 20-187.2 permits the County to sell the service side arm to the retiring Law Enforcement Officer upon securing such permit as required by G.S. 14-402 or without such permit the weapon has been rendered incapable of being fired.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of Commissioners of McDowell County that:

The Board of Commissioners authorizes the Sheriff to donate the badge and also authorizes the sale in the amount of \$1 .00 of the following service side arms which has been declared surplus to Shanon Smith.

Glock Model 45
Serial Number: BLDT-847

This resolution shall become effective upon adoption.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the resolution read by Commissioner Garner, which was seconded by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passes.

Helene Grant Opportunities

Mr. Wooten stated that the NC Department of Commerce has been charged with providing community development block grant disaster funding that will be available to local governments. Under CDBG-DR, North Carolina was provided with many millions of dollars for single-family home repair. Mr. Wooten suggested a representative come speak on this program. Mr. Wooten hopes Mr. Lewis's project will eliminate the need for CDBG-DR funding for rebuilds

in this community. If it is the case, the slowness and complexity of federal funding will not be an issue. If the funds are needed, they are available. People who didn't want to work with VOAD can apply for this and see what's available to them.

Outside of the Renew and See program (single-family rehab and repair), there are other programs that counties and cities can apply for. Four big buckets have been established by commerce for funding. These include multifamily housing, workforce housing, community infrastructure, and commercial districts revitalization. Mr. Wooten stated that he has spoken with Mr. Kehler about the program, and they've discussed expanding the senior center in Old Fort. These programs might be a good fit for the town of Old Fort. Commissioner Ellis asked if Mr. Wooten would be working with Old Fort on the water system, and Mr. Wooten stated that frequent meetings with the town take place for potential opportunities.

Impact of Federal Legislation

Mr. Wooten gave an update on the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. Mr. Wooten's update is focused specifically on organization and relayed that community impacts are wider and broader and are still being understood. A lot of impact will be felt from Medicaid. Most of the focus relevant to us is on the Medicaid expansion population. When Medicaid was expanded (December 2023), expansion of staff was needed due to the increase in eligibility and applications. The bill will add more complexity to the expanded population due to the addition of community engagement hours. The expanded population will have to have 80 hours of community engagement (work, education, or volunteerism) and will have to demonstrate to County staff that they meet these requirements. There are other caveats to community engagement requirements, but able-bodied individuals will have to meet this requirement. Mr. Wooten noted that the other big impact on the Medicaid expansion population will be the semi-annual recertifications (rather than annual recertifications). Mr. Wooten stated that three or four people would need to be added to assist with the expected increase in workload on the Medicaid side.

Mr. Wooten moved on to SNAP. The bill increases the age for work requirements. Anybody up to the age of 64 would have to have a work requirement to receive assistance. The impact will be from the changes to current staff administration costs. Currently, those costs are 50% federal and 50% nonfederal. The federal government has shifted 25% of that cost downward, with the federal government providing for 25% and nonfederal providing 75%. Mr. Wooten suspects the brunt of the increase in cost will be on the County's shoulders. Mr. Wooten suggests the financial impact would be upwards of \$500,000. This would not hit until fiscal year 2027. Mr. Wooten wanted to start early to warn commissioners of impacts. Mr. Wooten stated that he encourages outreach to state legislators to make sure they're aware of these changes. Commissioner Walker made a motion to send a letter to the state officials on federal legislation, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, this motion passes.

Budget Update

Mr. Wooten stated that there were two budget amendments. One is related to economic incentive. The incentive payment for the hotel needs to be moved to the general fund (GF1).

The second is the annual appropriate amendment (GF2). Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve GF1 and GF2 as presented, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, this motion passes.

Administrative Items

Mr. Wooten referred to the memo from the finance staff regarding a business in McDowell and late payment fees incurred due to financial issues the business is facing. Mr. Wooten presented a occupancy tax late fee waiver of \$2,183.70 request and asked if the late fee could be waived due to the prior history of responsible payments. Commissioner Ellis made a motion to approve the request, with a second by Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passes.

The second item is regarding the spay and neuter funding requested at the June meeting. No source of funding has been found. Staff continues to research options, allowing for another thirty days of research.

Board Appointments

The Clerk to the Board stated that two applications for board appointments have been received. One request is for the Planning Board. Current Planning Board member, Tommy Stamey, has applied for reinstatement before his term limit expiration in July 2025. The second application is for the Transportation Advisory Board. A current TAB member will be retiring in September, and Cindy Bird has applied for this upcoming vacancy. Waive the two-month reading on the. Commissioner Walker made a motion to waive the two-month reading due to a lack of other applicants and appoint Mr. Stamey to the Planning Board and Ms. Bird to the Transportation Advisory Board. Commissioner Ellis seconded this motion. By a vote of 4-0, this motion passes.

Tax Matters

Mr. Wooten spoke to the Board on the releases, rebills, refunds, and discoveries for the month of June 2025.

Motor Vehicle Tax Refunds: \$ 2,054.67

Releases over \$100.00: \$ 0.00

Releases under \$100.00 \$ 0.00

Refunds: \$ 0.00

Discoveries: \$ 0.00

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve as presented, with a second from Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passes.

Citizen Comment

Teri Stehara spoke of her concerns on the Big Beautiful Bill.

Luanne Stamey spoke about her need for drinking water in the Nebo community.

Commissioner and Staff Reports:

Mr. Wooten stated that tax bills would be sent out on July 21st. If something is wrong with the bill received, please contact staff to address this issue.

Closed Session [NCGS 143-318.11 (a)(5)]

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to go into closed session at 6:36 p.m., with a second by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passes. Commissioner Ellis made a motion to come out of closed session at 6:45 pm, with a second by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passes.

Adjournment

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to adjourn at 6:46 p.m., with a second by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passes.

Attest:

Madalyn Robinson
Clerk to the Board

Tony Brown
Chairman