

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION – August 11, 2025**

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in regular session on Monday, August 11, 2025, in the Commissioners' Board Room, 69 N. Main Street, Marion, NC.

Members Present

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

Members Absent

Others Present

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Madalyn Robinson, Clerk to the Board; Fred Coats, County Attorney; William Kehler, ES Director; Shannon Odom, Executive Director of McDowell Tourism Development Authority; Jason Hollifield, Director of McDowell Transit; Linda Onufrey, McDowell County Tax Collector; Chuck Abernathy, Historic Carson House Board of Directors Chairman.

Call to Order

Chairman Brown called the meeting to order at 5:00 pm. Vice-chair Greene gave the Prayer. The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Commissioner Walker.

Approval of Minutes

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to approve the July 14th and July 21st Regular Session Minutes, with a second by Vice-chair Greene. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Approval of Agenda

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the agenda, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Historic Carson House Update

Chuck Abernathy gave an update on the Historic Carson House and introduced Theresa Shadoin, the new Carson House Director. She will be working on various projects for the Carson House, including updates to the website. Ms. Shadoin is excited to serve McDowell and work for the Carson House.

In 2023, restoration of the Moore Cabin began. This cabin will be dedicated on September 28th when the OVTA comes to the Carson House. The building of the Interpretive Center began in the Spring of 2024. Mrs. Shadoin explained the renovations that have taken place at the interpretive center and noted that there will be a genealogical research center dedicated to Martha Jordan and a library dedicated to the Greenlee sisters. Mrs. Shadoin gave an overview of upcoming events at the Carson House. The soft opening will be 9/28, including the dedication of the Moore Cabin, and the next day, approximately 400 4th graders will attend the Carson House for tours. The Carson House will continue to be open through December for the candlelight tours. Commissioner Ellis expressed his gratitude, and Chairman Brown welcomed Theresa Shadoin to the Historic Carson House and the community.

Tourism Update

Shannon Odom gave an update on the McDowell County Tourism Development Authority. Mr. Odom covered tourism in McDowell. The former trade name of Blue Ridge Traveler has been retired in favor of Destination McDowell. The visitor guide has been rebranded, and they are exploring the possibility of creating a proper magazine guide. McDowell TDA has taken each destination in the county and rebranded it. The City of Marion has been rebranded as well. Examples of rebranding include Lake James as the Blueway and Old Fort as Basecamp. The Wayfinding Project is moving forward, and they have accepted a bid for eleven signs. The signs are being fabricated as of now. The first 11 (phase one) will be installed this fall. More signs will be installed during phase two later this year.

Strategic Plan Projects being funded now include:

- McDowell County Wayfinding
- Old Fort Fonta Flora Trail Arrowhead Park
- Old Fort Streetscape
- Foothills Trail Conservancy – Wolf Pen Loop Trail
- Mill Creek Park

Annual Occupancy Tax revenue is only down four percent year over year. The biggest year was 2024, and there are hopes to meet this again. September and October were down close to 40% around the time Hurricane Helene took place. Monthly occupancy tax revenue through 2025 shows tracking ahead of previous years.

Mr. Odom remarked that Zartaco Insight Reports tells the TDA where advertising needs to be focused. It's important to know how visitors spend when they visit McDowell. Geolocation data, such as where visitors are coming from, and spend-data is also gathered by McDowell County Tourism. Occupancy rate is averaging about the same as years prior, despite the closing of Western NC due to the hurricane. Mr. Odom presented the numbers on the Economic impact. The data shows that domestic and international visitors to and within McDowell County spent \$111.96 million in 2023, an increase of 3.8% since 2022. McDowell directly employs more than 661 people, and the total payroll generated by the tourism industry in McDowell was over \$27.3 million.

Mr. Odom covered marketing on the website and the new relaunch. Organic traffic is very strong since the relaunch. A new digital billboard is outside of Charlotte, and they hope to use this more next year to advertise festivals. Mr. Odom covered the current brochures and programs, including the McDowell Heritage Trail and the High Spirits Trail.

A public relations representative with Audobon Marketing has been hired. NC Weekend visited Old Fort on June 6th to shoot stand-up shots for the *Ways to Cool off for Summer* Edition. Staff for McDowell TDA have been guests on various North Carolina morning shows where they focused on the recovery efforts and businesses reopening after Hurricane Helene. Partnership with Outdoor NC continues, where Old Fort is a specific trail town in the trail guide. North Carolina is the number two for National Park spending, and this continues to be a strong market for our area. Blue Ridge Parkway still ranks second in the Annual Park Ranking Report. Many of the sections of the parkway are still closed. Little Switzerland to Craggy Gardens is still closed, with the fall of 2026 being estimated for opening. They continue to work with the parks service for up-to-date information on openings and closings.

Chairman Brown expressed his gratitude for the update. Vice-chair Greene expressed his gratitude for tracking the data regarding tourism in the County.

Transit Public Hearing Update

Jason Hollifield gave an overview of the Transit Department and held the Transit Public Hearing. The figures discussed are for the annual funding hearing for Fiscal Year 2027. The administrative amount increased \$204,000. The County's share of 15% equals \$30,660. The combined capital request for new vans is \$315,000. This figure represents three ADA-equipped transit vans priced at \$105,000 each. When vehicles reach 100,000 miles, they're eligible for replacement. The request will replace three vans received in 2021. Mr. Hollifield expressed the importance of having ADA-compliant minivans in the fleet. Chairman Brown expressed his gratitude for the transit system and all of the work they do for the citizens of the County.

Chairman Brown declared the meeting would go into public hearing at 5:43 pm and asked if any members in attendance would like to speak. With no attendees requesting to speak, Vice-chairman Greene made a motion to come out of the public hearing at 5:44, with a second by Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Vice-chair Greene made a motion to approve the submission from Mr. Hollifield for the fiscal year 2027, with a second from Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Mr. Hollifield gave an update on Transit. The new express service started in May and has taken on over 1500 riders so far. This has been a success for the community and has been performing better than expected.

Helene Update/ReNew NC Program Update

Will Kehler gave an overview of the ReNew NC Program along with the Helene update. Mr. Kehler expressed his appreciation for Jason Hollifield and Shannon Odom.

At the time of this meeting, the county is day 321 since the Emergency Operation Center was activated. Recovery operations include debris management, private roads and bridge repairs, hazard mitigation, and emergency watershed protection (EWP). Mr. Kehler covered debris operations and stated that USACE has ended waterway debris operations. They are currently assessing remaining waterway debris for the potential state SMART Mission. The intent is to move towards the state SMART program for the remaining projects now that USACE has ended.

Mr. Kehler explained that the move made by Mr. Wooten to move towards direct federal assistance after Hurricane Helene kept millions of dollars related to debris removal from being run through the County, because FEMA paid USACE directly. The SMART program works similarly because the state of North Carolina will pay state debris contractors, keeping millions from being run through the County's books. Mr. Kehler noted that this is the optimum way to manage these disasters. 1,334,702 cubic yards of debris have been removed from McDowell, with 15.5% of all debris in the state of NC coming from McDowell County. The removal of personal property debris (PPDR) is still active, with 1441 parcels requested. FEMA has vetted 1326 parcels, leaving a little over 100 pending with FEMA for eligibility. Rain forecasts are causing delays.

The Emergency Watershed Protection Program is administered through the McDowell County Soil & Water Office. EWP is designed to install recovery measures. Activities include providing financial and technical assistance to:

- Remove debris from stream channels, road culverts, and bridges
- Reshape and protect eroded banks
- Correct damaged drainage facilities
- Establish cover on critically eroding lands
- Repair levees and structures and
- Repair conservation practices.

Citizens can submit an online interest form by visiting mcdowellgov.com/helene

The deadline to apply for Private Road and Bridge Repair is August 31, 2025. NC Emergency Management received over 300 applications from McDowell County citizens. EOC staff have made significant efforts to cross-check the state list with the 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.

The last bill from NCGA included funding for reimbursement of prior repairs since Helene. Mr. Kehler stated that he anticipates that after September 1st, the state will release a program for citizens that repaired their private road or bridge after Helene to be eligible for up to 50% reimbursement for the costs they paid out of pocket. More information is soon to come.

Mr. Kehler moved on to Emergency Housing and Rebuilds. VOAD coordination meeting held biweekly at the EOC. Led by Jerry Lewis and Victoria Geurink. Mr. Kehler stated that there were 458 completed projects, 34 pending, and 26 rebuilds remaining. Mr. Kehler expressed his appreciation for the work that VOAD has done and his gratitude for the volunteers who continue to make this possible day in and day out.

Chairman Brown requested a special proclamation to recognize Jerry Lewis and the work he has done in helping the County recover from Hurricane Helene. Mr. Kehler expressed

his appreciation for the community and volunteers coming together to help and referred to the Hawkins Family situation as an example of things coming full circle.

Hazard mitigation update remains the same as last month and is the slowest-moving program at the state level. The next thirty days will be focused on the critical needs of citizens via VOAD coordination. Mr. Kehler is working with the SMART program on the city's water intakes to complete debris removal and permanent repairs. Lake Tahoma debris removal is an eligible applicant for the debris removal program because $\frac{3}{4}$ of the city's drinking water comes from Lake Tahoma. 16 FEMA reimbursement applications are being managed by the ES office, and a full briefing will be given on that next week. Mr. Kehler stated that the Helene Hotline remains active nearly eleven months after the storm to ensure recovery is done right. We are prepared for this hurricane season. Mr. Kehler added that as we move into hurricane season, we are prepared. Mr. Kehler suggested that folks sign up for Nixle alerts, keep their phones on emergency alerts, and maintain a 72-hour preparedness kit with non-perishable foods and at least a gallon of water per person per day. Basic preparedness tips and focus on emergency alerts will keep the people of this County safe.

Chairman Brown expressed his appreciation for this update and asked for data on storm activity. Mr. Kehler stated it is something being watched every day, and it only takes one storm on the right or wrong path to create a historic event like Helene. Commissioner Walker asked for a detailed list of preparedness information. Ready.gov is a great resource for this.

An event is being planned on 9/27 at 9:30 am at Old Fort Elementary School to commemorate one year since Helene, remember those who were lost, and recognize the hard work that has gone into recovery. More information to come on this event.

Mr. Wooten expressed that Ms. McLaughlin will be giving an update next week on the FEMA workbook and applications on the County's behalf and the fire department to seek maximum reimbursement from FEMA. Ms. McLaughlin has worked diligently with Mr. Kazee on park restoration. A dollar amount will be provided by FEMA as a target amount for repairs. An RFQ for engineers to oversee repairs at Sandy Andrews, Greenlee, and Lindley fields has been sent out. Submittals are reviewed by staff, and hopefully have this information back to you next week. Staff are working as fast as they can on this process.

Chairman Brown expressed a special thanks to Samaritans Purse for their help with housing rebuilds.

Order of Collection and Settlement

Lind Onufrey will be covering the Order of Collection and Settlement. Ms. Onufrey presented the submitted tax year settlement for fiscal year '24-'25 along with a copy of the twenty-four unpaid real, personal, and business property taxes. They finished with a 99.55% collection rate, which was an increase from last year's 99.50%. The levy was \$33.6 million, and the ending balance for the fiscal year was \$152,000. Prior years from 2014-2023, delinquents collected a total \$144,852. Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the tax settlement and order of collection as presented, seconded by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Water System Projects

Mr. Wooten gave an update on the East End Project. The contractor for the East End Project has been delayed from the original start time in June. The contractor has initiated the work, and a meeting took place on the afternoon of August 11th. Mr. Wooten performed an inspection of Phase 2 (A and B), and Phase 2 is almost complete. There have been requests for additional waterlines, but time-wise, it is too late for funding for additional extensions at this time. Staff is taking notice of these requests as future funding opportunities arise. Mr. Wooten met with Mr. Riddle about Phase 3 (Near Randolph Road). This has been approved by NCDEQ, but complications with NCDOT have arisen regarding encroachment areas. Mr. Wooten plans to discuss this with the District Engineer. Mr. Wooten will keep everyone posted on these projects.

The small project (near Exit 90) is going through an environmental review, and after this, it should be able to go to bid. Any grant opportunities are being applied for, especially in the West Marion area. Mr. Wooten believes there will be enough funding to get to the school (phase 1). Phase 2 will be funding to complete the loop up Marlor Road and Zion Hill Road. The application for phase 2 will be submitted by the deadline at the end of September. Commissioner Walker asked for the total dollar amount to complete the whole project and the dollar amount to get West Marion Elementary. Mr. Wooten stated the total amount was around 5 million to reach West Marion Elementary (including the pumping station). Mr. Wooten requested time to get back to Commissioner Walker on the exact number for the completed project as not to misquote the dollar amount. Commissioner Walker asked for this information by next Monday (8/18/25).

Mr. Wooten covered the asset inventory assessment (AIA), a \$400,000 grant received from DEQ last August. McGill Associates has been selected for this project as the most qualified. Mr. Wooten presented the proposal and stated that the coordinator from DEQ has signed off on the proposal except for one recommendation. Mr. Wooten noted that a 1.5 % fee be held back by the DEQ for administrative costs. The coordinator for DEQ recommends modifying the section for asset management software (Pg. 56 of the proposal) to be reduced so payment would not be coming out of County funds. This would be reduced to the equivalent of a 1.5% fee. Mr. Wooten asked for approval of the proposal with the change to the software, allowing for the state fee to be withheld. Commissioner Walker motioned to approve, with a second from Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

County Property Matters

Mr. Wooten recalled that last month it was approved to lease the former convenience site to Blue Ridge Processing. Mr. Wooten presented the draft resolution authorizing that. The recommended lease rate is \$3600 a year. Commissioner Walker asked if it was market rate. Mr. Wooten stated that it was market rate, and Blue Ridge Processing would be responsible for maintenance, insurance, and other things. It would be no longer than a one-year lease, and then move to month-to-month after. Commissioner Walker made a motion to put Commissioner Ellis as chair until Chairman Brown returned from stepping out of the boardroom. Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the lease agreement as presented, with a second from Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 3-0, this motion passed.

Mr. Wooten moved on to the Davita Building. With the unusual layout, both areas have not had a lot of potential private tenants. Space has been shown to potential folks. A local day program has contacted the County regarding renting the space. Mr. Wooten noted that no

improvements will be made to the space; it will remain as it is. Mr. Wooten suggested a rate of \$10 per square foot, with a \$66,000 lease rate per year (\$5,500 a month). Mr. Wooten asked about the lease terms being until June 30th so the lease aligns with the fiscal year and the board agreed to this. Commissioner Ellis made a motion to accept the lease agreement as presented, with a second from Commissioner Walker. 4-0 motion passed. Mr. Wooten will contact them tomorrow and let them know of the approval.

Mr. Wooten moved on to the Health Department Building. Staff were asked to report back on the McDowell Health Department building and who resides in the building. The McDowell Health Department (Foothills Health District) resides in the building, and around 2015, the vacated space was leased to Viya Health. The lease with Vaya, along with anyone else leasing office space, is directly with the Health Department. The County owns the building, and the building was constructed primarily with revenues from the health district (in the 90s), but the County is not leasing to tenants. There are various reasons to make lease decisions, including insurance. No written agreement can be found, and outreach to the previous county manager about this has taken place. The recommendation is to lean towards one of two options: either leasing the entirety of the building to the district outside of what the County uses and allowing them to do what they want with the space, or the County leases out the space to the District and to Vaya and is in ultimate control of what the space is used for. Mr. Wooten urged the board to consider arrangements that affect the lease if the second option is chosen. Mr. Wooten recommended that, upon receiving the funding, the funds be passed somehow back to the district because they're receiving funding from the rent payment to help pay for their function. Mr. Wooten asked the board to keep this in mind with either option they prefer. Commissioner Ellis asked about the repair to the building. Mr. Wooten said it is a County function to repair this facility.

Commissioner Ellis makes a recommendation to mix the options presented so the County is protected from the responsibility of wear and tear, custody, and control of the lease. Commissioner Ellis expressed interest in agreeing to the lease, funding coming back to the general fund for repair, and allowing the health department to keep a portion of the space as well. Commissioner Ellis made a motion for staff to present something back to the board by Monday (8/18/25) regarding this, seconded by Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Discussion was led by Commissioner Walker regarding the consolidated health model with Transit, DSS, and the Senior Center falling under the health district. Discussion in Rutherford County has talked about pulling out of the district as well. \$660,000 is currently budgeted to the district. The low side to accomplish a consolidated health district was \$740,000, an \$80,000 increase from the current circumstances. Commissioner Walker stated that he favors local control and believes there will be cost savings by switching due to the maintenance costs and utility payments the County is taking on at this time. Commissioner Walker requests the data on this and information on this within thirty days, and expressed his interest in moving towards a consolidated model if the data supports this.

Commissioner Garner asked if the rental spaces in the Health Department building were at fair market value. Mr. Wooten stated that the Vaya rent is fairly close to market value and that nonprofits are getting a discounted rate. Chairman Brown stated the County should have total control over who rents the buildings. Mr. Wooten stated that the board has control of who rents the buildings, and no leasing decisions have been delegated to staff. No other arrangements

have been made for County buildings without the board's knowledge or approval. This is a unique case, and the operational decisions as far as who can rent out building spaces have been understood to be in the purview of the district leadership because no written agreement can be referenced. Chairman Brown expressed insurance concerns with renting out space.

Mr. Wooten moved on to space at Universal. The space is completely cleaned and ready for a tenant. TQA is a long-term tenant and has inquired about the space. There is no commitment to create jobs, but to adjust the space they currently have. Mr. Wooten asked if the board was agreeable to do a lease for TQA (year-long). Commissioner Ellis asked about the price differential, and Mr. Wooten stated that it was warehouse space and which accounts for the pricing. Commissioner Walker made a motion to accept as presented, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Solid Waste Enforcement

Mr. Wooten discussed the enforcement of the solid waste ordinance. For many years, we had a dedicated environmental enforcement officer at the Sheriff's Office. Currently, this budgeted enforcement officer position is not filled at the Sheriff's Department. The recommendation is to take the solid waste enforcement officer's salary and move it to the planning department. This would allow the individual to do site visits, document abandoned mobile home parks. This position will be enforced civilly. Chairman Brown requested that the ordinance be updated and clarified. Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the recommendation as presented, seconded by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Budget Update

Mr. Wooten presented the budget updates. Mr. Wooten stated that there was a project ordinance amendment for the transfer station renovation and an amendment for the recreational improvement project, along with two amendments, GF3 (Emergency Services) and GF4 (Transfer Station Repairs). Commissioner Ellis made a motion to accept as presented, with a second from Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Administrative Items

Mr. Wooten presented the administrative items, EMS write-offs, and Nebo Water leak adjustments. Commissioner Ellis made a motion to accept as presented, seconded by Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Board Appointments

The Clerk to the Board stated that this was a first reading for the McDowell Economic Development Association. There are two vacancies, with the term limits of the two board-appointed members expiring at the end of July. The current members have expressed interest in reapplying for these vacancies, but no applications have been received yet.

Tax Matters

Mr. Wooten presented the tax matters for the month of July and relayed that the majority were routine vehicle refunds. Mr. Wooten noted that the line between Little Switzerland and Mitchell County was resurveyed by the state and staff have been working to update records before bills went out. There were a few parcels not caught before the bills went out. Some of the

releases and a few refunds are related to that process. Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve as presented, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Motor Vehicle Tax Refunds: \$ 2135.00

Releases over \$100.00: \$ 6269.97

Releases under \$100.00:\$ 132.26

Refunds: \$ 1175.24

Discoveries: \$ 0.00

Citizen Comment

There was none.

Commissioner and Staff Reports:

Commissioner Walker requested an update on the animal control building and spay/neuter at the next monthly meeting

Adjournment

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to adjourn at 6:44 p.m., with a second by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Attest:

Madalyn Robinson

Clerk to the Board

Tony Brown

Chairman