STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION – August 18, 2025

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in regular session on Monday, August 18, 2025, in the Commissioners' Board Room, 69 N. Main Street, Marion, NC.

Members Present

Chairman, Tony Brown; Vice-Chair, Lynn Greene; Commissioner Garner, and Commissioner Walker

Members Absent

Commissioner Ellis

Others Present

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Madalyn Robinson, Clerk to the Board; Alison Bell, Finance Director

Call to Order

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

MPSA Update

Kitty Wilson gave an overview of the McDowell Partnership for Substance Awareness. September is Recovery Month with the second annual recovery walk at the Joseph McDowell Greenway on September 5th, 2025. September 11th will be Recovery Spirit Night at Pelican's, September 20th will be the Blue Ridge Recovery Rally, and September 27th is family movie night. There is a very robust recovery community in McDowell, and this is a perfect time to celebrate recovery in McDowell. Substance Recovery Month recognizes folks on their recovery journey. There are plenty of events that can be celebrated. The biggest goal is to engage all residents in McDowell County and heal substance use by 2035, with fewer individuals needing help and services easy to access and almost available on demand. It is a lifetime initiative to get folks integrated back into society after recovery. Foothills Recovery Employment Ecosystem is the biggest partner, being a 4-county effort that gets folks in recovery ready for employment and employers ready to accept folks who are trying to overcome substance abuse.

Ms. Wilson has invited the McDowell County Commissioners to attend the recovery walk and proclaim September as Recovery Month. The recovery rally has been supported for a long time. This year, Seth Addison, will be headlining for this event. He is a voice for the broken facing real battles. He is closing out the Recovery Rally from 4-8 pm at the Carson House. They will be giving away t-shirts they had from last year, as well as local entertainers, and an information zone. The Phoenix Competition Zone, Competitive Games, Safety Education Zone, Mobile Gun Galley, SWAT transport (McDowell Sheriff's Department), bat mobile (Marion Police Department), and EMS booths, and more will be in attendance. The Mobile Recovery Gallery will be displaying art from folks who are in recovery. Ms. Wilson requests that the commissioners attend these events and show support for folks in the community.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the proclamation, seconded by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

FEMA Workbook Overview

Will Kehler stated that they continue to follow the recovery roadmap following Helene. Desiree McLaughlin is in attendance to give a project overview. Desiree McLaughlin presented an overview of a project flow. Initial meetings to discuss damages and site inspections were performed with FEMA's specialty teams. Significant documentation is needed to perform these. Ms. McLaughlin gave an overview of various projects, including three Category A (debris removal), five Category B. projects (emergency protective measures), two Category E. (buildings and equipment), Category F(utilities) has one project, Category G (parks) has four projects with 8 damages. Different facilities and different locations are grouped. For Category A, ROE Collections total $10,857.75. Labor hours for a temporary employee responsible for removing debris from waterways totaled $17,769.72. As far as protective measures, the first project submitted was for the fire department response; total reimbursements were $458,699.51. No reimbursement has been received for the HOA project yet; work was conducted to have a temporary bridge replaced, and they are still working with FEMA on this project. The project at Black Bear Park (debris removal) received a total reimbursement of $18,141. A temporary PIO has been hired to serve for Helene's recovery and updates. This work is a continuing effort, and the total cost cannot be calculated yet.

Ms. McLaughlin covered large projects (anything over 1 million for FEMA) and requires more extensive documentation. Large projects from McDowell have been through all of FEMA's reviews. The large projects total $1,566,473.93. The cost breakdown shows the extensive response that McDowell County had.

Category E (building and equipment) work is all complete and pending FEMA's review. $46,697.71 has been submitted for reimbursement and this is not for certain what will be reimbursed, as it has to undergo an extensive insurance review. Some have still not received insurance from this. The McDowell House has not documented any work at this time and is expected to be a complicated project due to it being a historic building. They are working with FEMA on this project to see if they can estimate for total costs. Category F (14 waterpoints damaged) projects are pending scheduling site inspections with FEMA and are expected to be complicated due to EHP concerns. Engineering services are expected to be required due to the complexity of these projects. Category G (Parks) includes Park and Rec facilities. Most of these projects are complete, and documentation has been submitted, but there are two pending projects. An engineer for Sandy Andrews' repair has been selected, and the initial development phase is pending with Greenly and Lindley Parks at the same stage.

Chairman Brown expressed his gratitude for the report. Vice-chair Greene asked if labor from county employees was being reimbursed, and Ms. McLaughin stated that this was included in the reimbursement. The private road and bridge repairs are open till the end of August.

Commissioner Walker asked if the 14 water points were available for use at this time, and several remain completely out of service. Ms. McLaughlin stated that around half are available. Mr. Kehler expressed his appreciation for her hard work and help, as this was her first disaster. They are very grateful to have her on their team.

DSS/CHSA Update

Mr. Wooten gave an overview of the DSS Memorandum of Understanding. Mr. Wooten explained that some figures accumulate over time and are low due to being a month into the new fiscal year. Mr. Wooten said employee vacancies have been reduced, with 4-5 new employees hired. Mrs. Reid is working to fill vacant positions, and her presence in the new role has helped fill these positions. There is a mix of folks from different backgrounds starting. Mr. Wooten relayed the importance of preservice training, especially in that area, when dealing with various situations that may arise. It's important to attract people who have experience with this field. Conversations with staff continue to take place for continuing training. Things are looking up regarding the number of employees.

Mr. Wooten has been researching retention in this field. The biggest area of focus is training and ensuring that ongoing employees are comfortable, trained, and receive support from staff. Ms. Reid is ensuring that supervisors are constantly meeting with staff to hear concerns and struggles from staff. There is an emphasis on constant communication. Commissioner Garner agrees that preservice training is important before dealing with cases. It's important to emphasize that the child comes first. Commissioner Garner appreciates the direction that staff is taking and the big moves being made to keep children safe in the county.

Mr. Wooten referred to Path NC (similar to Traverse System) and noted that it went online last week, and the state was there to support. Things are going relatively well with that switch over, focusing on intake and assessment only. In-home foster care will be later in the year. The intake tool has been tweaked, and a 30-page guidance document that explains how to complete intake properly has been provided. Mr. Wooten will provide that intake tool to the board so they can understand the process.

Regarding Human Services, Mr. Wooten noted that the County is moving towards a consolidated human service agency, and part of this conversion requires a public hearing. The public hearing will be on September 15th, at the 11:30 am meeting. Mr. Wooten has been discussing potential changes with the involved departments. Information has been requested regarding the financial aspects of leaving the health district and having the county operate the department. Budgetary Information based on how things operate was provided by the current health director. Spreadsheet calculation errors are located in the staffing section of the information provided. The county contribution is not included in the numbers, and the numbers provided are the best we can tell so far without a third-party review. Commissioner Walker asked the finance director if the county has funds to make this switch, and Ms. Bell stated that they did not at this time. Commissioner Walker made a motion to stay where we're at and follow the data on this decision. Chairman Brown seconded the motion by Commissioner Walker to follow the staff recommendation and stay with the current Health Department model, and opened this up for discussion. Commissioner Garner asked if employees were split between the two counties, and Mr. Wooten relayed that certain positions are split. Vice Chairman Greene requests to continue working towards this goal, but now may not be the time to leave the district.

Conversations need to be had with nurses and employees, and further discussion needs to be had before pulling out of the health district. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Mr. Wooten moved on to the other related item surrounding the health department, the building itself. The building was built in the 1990s with mostly health district revenues. Operationally, the health district has free range of the building, with the building being owned by the county, and the county providing the property insurance for the building. The operating costs and utilities are paid for by the health district. Commissioner Walker asked what the power bill was, and Mr. Wooten said 30k a year for utility costs, including the water bill. The health district pays for a lot of the day-to-day items as well, like mowing. Chairman Brown asked what insurance claims had been taken out on the building, and Mr. Wooten stated that two came to mind with damage from hail and flooding. The Health District is not paying rent on the building, and the discussion comes back to excess space being rented out to external entities. Mr. Wooten asked if they wanted to lease the entirety of the building and let them sublet or lease however the district chooses, or lease every single entity that uses the building directly to the county (including the Health District at no cost). Commissioner Walker asked for details surrounding the use of the offices. Most spaces have been taken up by Vaya Health, and they pay rent to the district at around $31,000 a year. Other offices are used by McDowell County Building Inspections Staff, and there is an arrangement with a nonprofit that is in two offices. Commissioner Walker asked what organizations are being sublet. Mr. Wooten stated that West Marion Community Forum sublets two offices for $100 a month. Vice-Chairman Greene asked how the leases would work if the county pulls out of the district, and that the building leases need to be consulted with the commissioners beforehand because the county ultimately owns the building and has insurance on the property. Chairman Brown stated that the county should utilize space for businesses that would promote jobs in the county. Vice-Chairman Greene stated that entities that focus on one particular group need to be careful and include every group and support every group.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to allow the Health Department to utilize the space free of charge, and any lease for the building needs to be approved by the board, current leaseholders, and future leaseholders, and that staff write up a lease agreement for approval by the September 15th, 11:30 am meeting. The health department can stay, and the other two leases need to be reviewed by the board at the next 11:30 am meeting. The costs of rent by Vaya are going back to the district, so the contribution remains where they are. Mr. Wooten asked if the current leases would remain with the health district or if the county would be on the lease agreement. Vice-chair Greene stated that the county wouldn't need to be on the lease to retain the authority to approve or disapprove of who is in the building, and regardless of the outcome, there needs to be a written lease agreement for records. Mr. Wooten suggested the lease document contain language that states the county's ability to do this. Commissioner Walker stated that the current leases need to reflect the mission of the Health Department. Staff will bring back a lease with everything included in the health department Building for review. Vice-Chair Greene seconded the motion from Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Administrative Items

Mr. Wooten stated that they continue to work towards securing grant opportunities. Two have arisen as possible opportunities, and Mr. Wooten wanted the go-ahead to pursue them. The first one is the Freedom Life Housing Project, with a big part of the project being sewer installation on 70 East. That design is underway with the engineer. The Foothills Food Hub has moved to the old Badcock Furniture store. The Food Hub has reached out about tying on to the sewer project, and it doesn't appear that the project has funds to add them into this. The Golden Leaf Foundation has an open grant category that seems to be a good fit for this opportunity. Mr. Wooten asked if the board would allow staff to apply for the grant and not commit any county funds to it. Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve this request, seconded by Greene. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

The second grant opportunity is related to Cooperative Extension. Moving Cooperative Extension to a different facility and freeing up space at the Service Building have been discussed in the past. CBBG has funding available for community facilities as long as space is provided for the community to interact. Mr. Wooten requested permission to explore this grant opportunity. Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve this request, seconded by Vice-chair Greene, 4-0, motion passed.

Adjournment

A motion to adjourn was made by Commissioner Walker, seconded by Vice-chair Greene. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed, and the meeting adjourned at 12:41 pm

Attest:

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Madalyn Robinson	Tony Brown
Clerk to the Board	Chairman