

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

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in Regular Session on Monday, April 14, 2025, at 5:00 p.m., in the Commissioner's Board Room, 69 N Main St., Marion, NC.

Members Present

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

Members Absent

Others Present

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Sena A. Allison, Clerk to the Board; Fred Coats, County Attorney; William Kehler, EMS Director; Kendall Waugh, McDowell High CTE Counselor; Chuck Abernathy, MEDA Executive Director; Ronald Harmon, Planning Administrator and Kim Effler, McDowell Chamber of Commerce President

Call to Order

Chairman Brown called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m. 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 March 10th and March 17th Regular Session minutes, March 31st Special Session minutes and April 1 MTCC Board of Trustees meeting minutes, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. 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 Vice Chair Greene. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

McDowell High Impact Project

Chairman Brown welcomed McDowell High Students that are members of the Chick-fil-A Leader Academy to speak to the Board on a request they have. Katelyn Finley, Stella Webb, Jeremy Berry and Reid Waugh all spoke to the Board about their club that focuses on

leadership and servant leadership, and they complete projects that impact the community. The club chose as their project - Hurricane Helene and the lockdown McDowell High School had on January 21st to recognize and honor the first responders that show up and they show out to protect and to serve our community. They took turns highlighting their project called "McDowell County Hero Day", dedicated to honoring the first responders who serve and protect our community. The club cited the actions during Hurricane Helene saved multiple lives involving evacuation measures and rescues. Continuing to the January 21st incident, the students spoke about the protection they were given on to the campus by an alleged shooter in the building. This included the SBI, all levels of law enforcement and EM who were exemplar in their response as well as making the students feel safe. This led to the inspiration of the project through such selfless acts, and showing what true heroism looks like.

The Chick-fil-A Leader Academy requested the County Commissioners to officially declare May 27th to be McDowell County Hero Day as an annual event. They will honor the first responders, sheriff deputies, state troopers, 911 operators, EMT's, paramedics and firefighters with a celebration lunch. The meal will be provided through raising funds by a 50/50 raffle, community and local businesses participation and donations. Lastly, the academy members thanked the Board for allowing them to speak, in which Chairman Brown thanked them for their great presentation and declared the talent of these students.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to declare May 27th as McDowell County Hero day annually, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Vice Chair Greene noted being at the High School on January 21st, and spoke on seeing how the children's response to this ordeal was heroic as well. Commissioner Walker added his thanks to the excellent presentation and the room gave their applause to the club members.

MEDA Update

Chairman Brown welcomed Mr. Abernathy to give an update, as Mr. Wooten cited the Commissioners had directed that each non-profit gives an update, history, background, new projects and what each non-profit provides for the County.

Mr. Abernathy began with the MEDA budget being \$179,000.00, operating with one full time position and one part time position. He explained they are a non-profit with the NCEDPNC being their point of contact and are largely dependent on the County for their existence. MEDA has broadened in not only being focused on existing industry, expansion and new locations to the community but commercial recruitment, housing and trails. Mr. Abernathy spoke on housing, education, skill level and jobs that the County faces, adding they have assembled a package that shows they have identified commercial and housing sites. He told of trying to speak with local companies, recruit larger companies on filling the shortages. Mr. Abernathy mentioned a Gateway Foundation study concluded McDowell County was 900 homes short prior to Hurricane Helene, with the amount now being in the 1300 range – which affects our tier ranking.

Mr. Abernathy moved to reviewing workforce development, as we are 3rd in NC and one of the highest in the nation. This is due to the percentage of workforce being manufacturing which puts us at 3 times the state and national average. He cited the need to support education and the community college, in which MEDA is strategizing in this area as well.

Mr. Abernathy noted his appreciation to Commissioner Ellis, who is on the on the MEDA Board, as well as Mr. Wooten's attendance to the meetings.

Mr. Abernathy asked Heather Cotton, City of Marion's Planning and Development Director, to accompany him before the Board. He told of a TIA (Transportation Impact Assessment), which is an engineering tool that analyzes ingress and egress of areas for recruiting businesses. He cited Sugar Hill Road from Walmart to the Meadow Lane area, to be a potential study for a traffic signal, for commercial interest opportunities for the County. The MEDA Board has endorsed the cost of \$12,000.00. He asked the Board for their endorsement to split these funds, with the City and the property owners as each will be positively affected. Ms. Cotton cited the effectiveness this will be for our community.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the request for the County's involvement with the other partners at \$1500.00, in which the County Manager noted the County's part would be \$2000.00. Commissioner Walker amended his motion to \$2000.00, with a second by Vice Chair Greene. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed. Commissioner Walker asked if this would influence retail and eateries, in which Mr. Abernathy commented that is what is needed to entice those entities.

Lastly, Mr. Wooten spoke on two transportation challenges in Old Fort for traffic safety concerns. One is at the Bat Cave Road interchange at I-40, where the two-way ramp going to Catawba River Road having no signal. Second, at McDonald's there is a new convenience store with a fast food restaurant opening, citing increased traffic to Catawba Falls. Mr. Wooten revealed meeting with DOT to express concern prior to Helene in which they said they would study the situation, then with Helene there has been a delay for necessary reasons. Mr. Abernathy did speak with the DOT's District Engineer, as well as Mr. Wooten the Mayor of Old Fort and the Town Administrator to get this initiated again. The request of the Board is for a letter addressed to the Division Engineer in Asheville requesting to improve that interchange for safety and access.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the letter as requested by Mr. Wooten, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Helene Update/Staff Recognition

Chairman Brown welcomed Mr. Kehler who began with recognizing McDowell County's 911 Telecommunicators Amberlie Buff and Lieutenant Stepp, as it is National Public Safety Telecommunicators week. He told of the tremendous work they and their staff do as the first point of contact in an emergency.

Mr. Kehler moved to the Helene updates with the following:

Current EOC Operation

- EOC currently addressing the citizens needs on: Debris Removal, Human Services, Situation Unit, Finance Section and Public Information.

Roads

- NC 80 Hwy is the only road not fully open, it is for local traffic only and school bus turnaround. Temporary bridge still up on US 70 West and 221 N. at Mtn. Paradise Campground.

Lakes

- Lake Tahoma: continues work with FEMA and the US Army Corp of Engineers to define a scope of work and the City of Marion regarding the Water Plant.
- Lake James ongoing debris removal by Duke Energy.

Community Comfort Station

- Now closed

FEMA Disaster Recover Centers (DRC)

- McDowell County Emergency Services located at 129 Barnes Rd. opened Hours are Mon-Friday 8 a.m. – 5 p.m.
- Representatives from FEMA, the Small Business Administration, EM and EOC staff to assist with current applications.
- The deadline to apply for FEMA ended April 7th, with assistance available on active applications.

Temporary Housing Update

- TSA Hotel Voucher's currently 5 families in hotels, down from 15 families on March 10th.
- Direct Housing currently 0 (Needing FEMA trailer or direct lease) down from 3 on March 10th.

EOC and VOAD Coordination for Housing

- Emergency Operation Center (EOC) and Volunteer Organization Assisting in Disasters (VOAD) is led by Jerry Lewis and Victoria Geurink who have focused on Emergency – Rapid – Repair to ensure homes are safe, sanitary and secure from damages caused by Helene.
- 30 plus groups have been involved with the housing response. The lead organization is Baptist on Mission, along with other faith based, charity groups who continue to grow and are focused on repairs for citizens to move back in their homes safely.
- 489 total requests for emergency repairs, 349 have been completed, 64 are pending and have been adopted, with 76 have not been able to contact, with the EM team trying to locate.

Debris Removal

- Right of way (ROW) debris is complete, with Army Corps and Ashbritt looking at a list compiled for further cleanup.
- Waterway Debris Removal is ongoing with significant progress.
- Personal property debris assistance should be applied for in person at the ES Headquarters (129 Starnes Rd. Marion, NC). The EM has been working with calls, door hangers and social media outreach for residents with storm debris on their property. This deadline is May 1st. If this program is approved by FEMA the Army Corps contractor will remove eligible storm debris free of charge which includes leaners, hangers and trees that pose a danger to property. This does include small businesses but does not include forest or farmland, in which they are referring people to the FSA office,
- 861 applications submitted to McDowell EM
- JBW was awarded the PPDR contractor
- Work begins on April 15th.
- ROW first pass completion March 1, 2025, ROW final pass estimated for April 1, 2025, visible and hazardous waterway debris 100% complete estimated for May 1, 2025, waterway debris mission estimated completion is June 1, 2025, public property debris removal estimated completion is June 30, 2025 and commercial property debris removal estimated completion is June 30, 2025.
- 762,563 cubic yards of debris removed thus far, with hundreds of thousands of waterway debris still to remove.

Private Roads and Bridges

- Residents should complete the online interest form via NCEM, whereas EM staff will cross check their data on applications filed.
- For assistance call the EOC hotline at 828-652-3241.
- There are still lots of residents that cannot reach their homes.

Hazard Mitigation Programs

- FEMA/ NC Emergency Management Program are for residents whose structures were destroyed or heavily damaged by floodwaters to apply to have their structure evaluated to make it more resilient for future floods.
- Another alternative (that is voluntary only) for residents, is to apply for a buyout, which would be evaluated at fair market value one day before the storm, with no commitment until you sign paperwork.
- Residents apply online at www.NCDPS.gov/HM
- Currently 34 Parcels have been applied for in Acquisition buyout, 21 Elevation applications, 17 Generator Projects, 12 Landslide and Wildfire Mitigation in the design phase.

Priorities Next 30 Days:

- Continue addressing critical needs of citizens
- Debris Operations
- Housing Repairs
- Hazard Mitigation
- FEMA Reimbursement/FEMA Building & Parks Repair Projects
- Implement long term recovery strategies

EOC Staff Recognition

Mr. Kehler recognized his team who work vigorously all the time, as well as speaking on the whole staff being instrumental behind the scenes each day doing more than their work load. He told of the honor it is for him to work alongside of all EM personnel and brought in his core staff that has been his privilege to serve with. Mr. Kehler gave a picture presentation to commemorate what they did during Helene, telling how many of them did not go home for days, nor did they sleep for days and were made to get rest. He spoke on how they took on every task that needed to be done, understanding why it needs to be done, and gave each person their own accolades as he called their names. The staff acknowledgement's:

- Operations Section Chief Andrew Pressley (Dep Director EM/Fire Marshal)
- Division Supervisor Andrew Worley (EM Planner)
- Division Supervisor Sam Robinson (EM Planner)
- Division Supervisor Taylor Leopold (SUD Coordinator) Assisting with HMGP
- Division Supervisor Brad Washburn
- Debris Coordinator Lisa Morgan
- Planning Section Chief John Reese
- Situation Unit Leader Angie Wright (911 Addressing Coordinator)
- COMM Unit Leader Aberlie Buff (911 Manager)
- COMM Unit Karen Stepp (911 Lt.)
- Helene Hotline Coordinator Brenda Agreda (EMS Training Officer)
- Medical Unit Leader – Mitchell Ledford (Captain/EMS Manager)
- Medical Unit Support – Callan Calloway (CP Coordinator)
- Captain Jake Leopold – Served in Interim supervisor role during Helene
- Angie Wright, Sherry Dixon and Carol Wolfenburger (Finance)
- Adrienne Jones – Deputy IC & PIO (Deputy Director ES) Leading Hazard Mitigation Program
- Desiree McLaughlin – Liaison Officer (EM Planner)
- Kelly Solesby – Public Information Officer
- Sam Dirks – Logistics Section Chief
- Human Services Coordinator – Shannon Jones (CP Program)
- VOAD Coordinator – Jerry Lewis
- VOAD Asst. Coordinator – Victoria Geurink

Mr. Kehler asked if he missed anyone and Vice Chair Greene respectfully said yes, you did – meaning that Mr. Kehler needed to be honored as well. The Vice Chair thanked the Director for building this team, who are the top in the nation. He told of Mr. Kehler carrying a scanner since he was 5 years old, as well as a story of being with him where he saved a man's life at Lake James, adding that was only 1 of many. The board room gave him a standing ovation for what he does and he continued with giving his staff praise with their commitment to McDowell County's recovery and safety.

National Weather Service Recognition

Mr. Kehler publicly thanked and recognized Trisha Palmer who is the Warning Coordination Meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Greenville Spartanburg, adding she is the best of the best and a trusted voice the team listens to. He told of the split decisions that have to be made and with Helene, the briefings that did not deescalate and how Ms. Palmer and her team saved lives with their accuracy. The information given justified the EM to get out public warnings, messaging and prepare citizens for early evacuations. Mr. Kehler told of Mr. Palmer (her husband) who is a hydrologist at Greenville Spartanburg giving precise information regarding rivers, lakes and crests that guide the EM on evacuations. He added without them they would not be able to function with precision as their assignment is critically important. The Director asked Ms. Palmer to come front of the Board, who thanked her for her service. Ms. Palmer noted her appreciation to be in the board room and gave a briefing of what the National Weather Service mission is, with Helene's impact coming in as catastrophic. She thanked Will as well for how he and his team handled the storm, with the Chairman thanking her for her knowledge in helping save many lives.

Zoning Public Hearing

Ronald Harmon presented the Board with a temporary Zoning Ordinance amendment to allow for RV's and mobile homes to be placed in zoned areas of the County that is prohibited. He explained the need is based on Helene recovery, for homes that were damaged or lost from the effects of the Hurricane. Mr. Harmon relayed 3 sections that have zoning with only 1 request thus far, adding this would allow for temporary housing for 18 months based from the date the permit is issued. Permits must be in place within 12 months of the adoption of the amendment, adding If extensions are needed the Planning Board staff will review anything over 90 days. The temporary zoning would allow a mobile home or RV to be placed on the property that is being renovated or built.

Mr. Harmon asked for a public hearing to take comments, then for a vote by the Commissioners. Chairman Brown declared in the meeting go to a public hearing, asking the right side of the room for comments, none were made. On the left side, was a question from Joanne Deyo, (VP and Acting Executive of Lake James Environmental Association), on the concern for temporary arrangements and the need that none of the waterways would be contaminated from the wastewater discharge. Mr. Harmon answered all requests go through the building inspections process prior to anyone moving in for environmental or sewer hookups. Chairman Brown gave they would have to be approved by the Health Department, then asked for any other comments, in which there were none.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to come out of public hearing, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

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

McDowell Chamber of Commerce Update

Chairman Brown welcomed Ms. Effler to give the Board her update. Ms. Effler began with recognizing the Chamber's staff and their Board in the room. Ms. Effler spoke on the Chamber's duty being to fuel growth, recovery and resilience. They are a 501 (c)(3) Foundation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, focused on small business support and sustainability. The Chamber connects and eliminates barriers for long standing and startup businesses, providing hands on aid through marketing, leadership development and personalized guidance.

Ms. Effler spoke on the financial support by the County that is vital to the Chamber to operate in their role to McDowell County, and supplied the revenue breakdown funding model for 2025 for appropriated funds. She showed what the Chamber accomplished in 2024 on events, new memberships, volunteer hours, their allocation of mini grants, trail projects and Helene recovery efforts that will continue.

Ms. Effler told McDowell County Chamber won an award for their Business Resource Guide from the Carolina's Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives. She told of a project set to 2026, for a work space to assist in manufacturing businesses that will be located in Old Fort. The incubator will be one of a kind in the 4 County region, housing office suites, a state-of-the-art conference facility and educational programming aiding entrepreneur's growth. Lastly, she thanked the Board for their investment to the Chamber to keep McDowell County thriving.

Water System Projects

Mr. Wooten spoke on Nebo Phase 2 being underway, the East End project to have a pre-construction meeting this week that will serve approximately 100 homes and both are funded by the American Rescue Fund Act. Phase 3 design work is in progress, with Exit 90 lines being under review, which is a federally funded project. The West Marion Elementary project has two thirds of the design complete with the master meter location determined. He mentioned the possibility of a booster station for that project being necessary due to the elevations of the school.

Broadband Updates

Mr. Wooten told of speaking with Skyrunner and Spectrum who have picked up where they left off with pre-Helene, as well as telling he and Mr. Harmon participating in the process of identifying a company that would be under the second round of CAB funding. This may be announced next week, with approximately 800 homes being served. There are 1300-1400 unserved homes that will hopefully be coming by Federal funding. Commissioner Walker directed staff to advocate for those homes to have Broadband provided for.

Budget Update

Mr. Wooten spoke on the FY 2026 Budget process being underway, with the presentation set for May. He referred the Board to the property tax collection and sales tax report.

Gold Rush 5K Road Closure

The County manager requested the annual road closure at 1250 SR 1781 Polly Spout Rd. for the Gold Rush Run 5K, on June 7, 2025.

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to accept the road closure ordinance, with a second by Vice Chair Greene. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Administrative Items

Mr. Wooten cited 3 items being: the monthly EMS uncollectible accounts; changes from the Transit Director for riders who display poor behavior and a reimbursement resolution allowing to purchase vehicles for the Sheriff's office and seek financing at a later date.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve EMS write offs, the Transportation changes and the reimbursement resolution, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Board Appointments

The Clerk to the Board told of a request from staff for the Historic Preservation Committee to change their members from 7 to 5, in order to reach a quorum.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the request for the committee change from 7 to 5, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

The Clerk spoke of 2 applications to be the Library Board Trustee, by Karen Nilsen of Old Fort and Vickie Blankenship of North Cove.

Vice Chair Greene made a motion to approve the Library Board Trustees applicants, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

The Clerk gave Terry Wilson of Old Fort to be approved for the Focal Point Advisory Board, mentioning 2 came off.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve Mr. Wilson for the Focal Point Advisory Board, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Tax Matters

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

Motor Vehicle Tax Refunds: \$ 1,083.40

Releases over \$100.00:	\$ 212.40
Releases under \$100.00	\$ 539.14
Refunds:	\$ 27,745.66
Discoveries:	\$ 0.00

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

Citizens Comments

Kenneth Wegman spoke on Exit signage and dump fees and Teri Stohara spoke on affordable housing.

Commissioners/Staff Reports

None

Closed Session [NCGS 143-318.11 (a) (6)]

Commissioner Walker made a motion to go into closed session at 6:41 p.m., with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Vice Chair Greene made a motion to come out of closed session at 7:46 p.m., with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Adjournment

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to adjourn at 7:46 p.m., with a second by Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Attest:

Sena Allison
Clerk to the Board

Tony Brown
Chairman