

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION – May 12, 2025**

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in Regular Session on Monday, May 12, 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 R. Wooten, County Manager; Sena A. Allison, Clerk to the Board; Fred Coats, County Attorney; Dr. Tracy Grit, McDowell County School Superintendent; William Kehler, EMS Director; Jason Hollifield, Transit Director; Tammy Wylie, Tax Appraiser and Fred Pearson, Pearson Appraisal

Call to Order

Chairman Brown called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m. The Prayer was given by Vice Chair Greene. The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Commissioner Ellis.

Approval of Minutes

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the April 14th and 21st Regular Session Minutes, April 28th Special Session Minutes and May 5th Recessed Session 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 request by Mr. Wooten to adjust the agenda from Item B. under Old Business and Item A. under New Business be moved under Appointments as Item B. and C. as well as striking the closed session, with an amended motion by Commissioner Walker, second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

School Property Update

Dr. Tracy Grit thanked the Board for his allowance to speak, with giving his appreciation to the partnership between the Schools, School Board and the County Commissioners, stating they are blessed to have this relationship.

He spoke on two studies that were conducted a few years ago on consolidating schools, density and population and a future building site for a new school. The recommendation was to find property approximately 1.5 miles from East McDowell Middle School. Dr. Grit told the State will award grants up to \$42 million for an Elementary School, \$52 million for a Middle School and \$62 million for a High School, with the stipulations being Tier 1 Counties (McDowell), combining 2 schools and be shovel ready. He expressed this is a good year to seek funding as WNC has been greatly affected by Hurricane Helene, and had the Board look at two parcels of land for a possible school site. One is the Gurley property located at East Court & Ridge Rd in Marion, for \$1.7 million and the second at the WNC Dry Kiln Property in Jacktown for \$1.5 million. The Superintendent revealed they have entered into the 120-day due diligence period to conduct Phase 1 on both properties and clarified they are not buying 2 pieces of property they are letting the Board and experts determine the best location. He added if anything is found during the 120-day due diligence on either property during the testing, they are able to negotiate the price. Dr. Grit told the Board of Education has approved the 2 sites, evaluated the contracts and is requesting, under General Statute the County Commissioners approve the locations in order to purchase the desired property at the end of the 120 days. Vice Chair Greene asked if this would be covered under sales tax funds in reserve, in which Dr. Grit answered yes, explaining they are Capital Funds that are part of the school system.

Vice Chair Greene made a motion to approve the McDowell County Board of Education, to purchase the Jacktown Property of \$1.5 million, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Vice Chair Greene made a motion to approve the McDowell County Board of Education, to purchase the East Court property for \$1.7 million, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Dr. Grit acknowledged his thanks to the Board for taking care of the children of McDowell County and proclaimed this is a big deal and a step forward. Chairman Brown noted the Board is a strong advocate for the children and education, with always doing what they are able to assist. Commissioner Walker added to let the Board know if any letters of support or Resolutions need to be sent to the State legislators for this matter.

Animal Control Ordinance

Mr. Wooten started by explaining the Board had authorized the Planning Board to review the current Animal Control ordinance for modifications based on concerns that had been expressed to the Commissioners. The process includes the Planning Board being tasked to go over various appointed ordinances, to work with County staff and the County attorney in investigating changes and recommendations, then bring the Commissioners their proposals.

The concerns where such items as keeping animals on property, dogs roaming at large with injury to live stock. The County Manager spoke on operating a managed intake shelter, whose staff does a wonderful job of working with various rescues in the area and out of State, as well as participating in out of State transports. He told the concern was brought to the Planning Board of the shelter being overrun with an abundance of animals, whereas this was addressed in the draft. A maximum holding period was included in the draft, in which the Commissioners had not asked the Planning Board to review. Mr. Wooten spoke with the staff liaison on where the item came from, and found this concern came up within their review due to the surrendering of animals or animal control having to remove an animal from the community, and the assurance there was holding space.

Vice Chair Greene interjected the ordinance covers much more than just dogs and cats, he noted the staff at the animal shelter did a tremendous job of working to get their animals adopted out, telling he adopted recently from the shelter with great ease.

Vice Chair Greene made a motion on the Ordinance that was proposed to include language that pet owners keep their animals on their property by control or commands, putting the responsibility on the owner, and to accept the proposal with the exception of the 14-day euthanization period, with a second by Commissioner Walker. Mr. Wooten asked to be clear, that one clause be removed from the draft and keep the other parts intact, in which Vice Chair Greene answered yes. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Chairman Brown voiced the Board did not ask or recommend the date of 14 days, and the Board does not want to see animals destroyed, reiterating all the Commissioners care about animals.

Animal Shelter Planning Update

Mr. Wooten began with the history of the Animal Shelter being built around 1980, and is the same structure, adding the staff does a tremendous job with the facility they have. He revealed about 3 years ago the prior Board authorized evaluations to build a new facility, and had basic drawings done, along with conversations on the funds necessary to build a new Shelter. The County Manager told of discussions to have alternative locations, explaining one was at 226 S. that the County owns. The Board authorized an architect to evaluate the site, however it was determined unsuitable due to environmental conditions. Mr. Wooten told in the meantime that Board set aside funds, such as the sale of the Small Animal Processing Facility, as well as Federal Rescue Plan Act funds that totals approximately \$1 million. The County has been looking into other sites to be formally presented once they have been identified, then to discuss how to campaign to raise funding needed.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to allow staff to continue with site selections, to present a recommendation for the next site of an Animal Control Shelter at next month's Board meeting, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Commissioner Walker made a motion for staff to proceed to form a committee on fund raising for new facility, along with the names of the potential members presented at next

month's Board meeting, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Commissioner Walker directed staff to have a larger focus of the Shelter on the website and social media for adoptions, with the Chairman asking Mr. Wooten about a presence in the schools to educate children on animal care. Mr. Wooten responded with having spoken to Dr. Grit on interested groups going into the schools for curriculum and character building in the 4th grade classes, whereas Dr. Grit is very agreeable to.

Mr. Wooten then spoke on spay and neuter that the Board has provided funding for, with partnerships as well as the State of NC Dept of Agriculture working with DSS allowing a voucher for spay and neuter. He told there is one Vet clinic in the County that works with the program, as well as another clinic that works with animals in Dysartsville that wants to sign up with the program, lastly adding this provides a no cost spay and neuter to people who qualify. Commissioner Walker asked how much did the County spend on the vouchers, in which the County Manager answered it is generally all funded through the State, but once in a while the County does assist. Commissioner Walker asked if there were any local funds set aside, in which Mr. Wooten said there was \$20,000.00 but it had been depleted.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to have staff examine sales tax to see if there is room to take \$25,000.00 out to go towards spay and neuter. The motion died for the lack of a second.

Vice Chair Greene that he would prefer the request be evaluated as part of the budgeting process for next year. Chairman Brown directed Mr. Wooten to speak to the Finance Director on reviewing the possibility of the County assisting in the spay and neuter program for next year.

Transit System Recognition

Jason Hollifield gave an update on the new Express Service the Transit System began on May 1st, telling there have been over 200 rides and how proud he is off the launch.

He told the NC Public Transportation Association awarded McDowell as the Transit System of the Year. Mr. Hollifield gave recognition to his staff who serve 34,000 trips in a year totaling 300,000 miles driven with no accidents. He spoke of the difficulty of the job and how the drivers play a significant role in keeping the County's citizens safe, honoring these drivers for the support they gave during Hurricane Helene.

Vice Chair Greene noted with the Express Service, it is \$5.00 round trip. The Board had their picture made with the Transit Department to commemorate their award.

Helene Recovery Update

Mr. Kehler began with telling it is day 230 of the EOC Activation with the following updates:

Current EOC Operation

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

Current Recovery Roadmap

- Debris Removal, Housing and Hazard Mitigation

Temporary Housing Update

- TSA Hotel Voucher 0

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.
- Marion Rotary Club has been a substantial partner to the EOC providing much support through volunteer labor and coordination.
- 501 total requests for emergency repairs, 419 have been completed, 65 are pending and have been adopted, with 17 not been able to contact.

Debris Removal

- Right of way (ROW) for State and Private Roads debris has ended. If anyone still has ROW debris, they should apply under the PPDR Program. This will close May 15th at 7:00 p.m.
- 1,079,384 cubic yards of debris removed was removed from McDowell County roadways.
- Personal Property Debris Removal assistance should be applied for in person at the ES Headquarters (129 Starnes Rd. Marion, NC). The program was granted a 4-day extension with the application ending on May 15th at 7:00 p.m. Mass calls of 20,000 were conducted on May 10th to notify residents of the extension.
- 1,265 applications submitted.
- JBW was awarded the PPDR contract.
- Work is ongoing for the first 200 applications submitted.

- Waterway Debris Removal is ongoing with the EOC; 723 sites approved with 308 cleared. There is still a tremendous amount to be removed across the County.

Private Roads and Bridges

- Residents should complete the online interest form via NCEM website at <https://ncdps.gov/Helene/PRB>, with EM staff cross checking their data on applications filed.
- Timeline to finish all work is September of 2026.
- The EOC has an internal list that can be cross referenced with the State for contact of anyone who needs assistance.

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 35 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

Hurricane Season 2025 Preparedness

- Annual Hurricane/Flash Flood Exercise is scheduled for May 28th at the EOC from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.
- EOC staff working for the past 4 months to identify 'after action' Helene items

McDowell County Helene Hotline

- Hotline # is 828-652-3241, operating 24 hours a day

Mr. Kehler spoke on the need to continue capacity, improving relationships and building new relationships during the Helene recovery period to focus on strengthening community.

Vice Chair Greene thanked Mr. Kehler for his assistance on the debris cleanup around the County's campground, which was no additional cost to the tax payers.

2027 Reappraisal Update

Ms. Wylie thanked the Board for the opportunity to present the update on the 2027 Reevaluation, in which the team has already started their procedures. This data is crucial in determining fair market value of each property as well as to ensure accuracy of the tax records for every parcel in the County. The members of the Reevaluation team carry photo ID's and their vehicles will display McDowell County Reevaluation signs. The County contracted Pearson Reappraisal to conduct the reevaluation. Ms. Wylie introduced Fred Pearson to address the Board with details of the process. Mr. Pearson thanked the Board for being selected to assist the County's reevaluations, telling their company is approved and recognized by the Department of Revenue. He spoke on the team having identification and being registered with the Tax and the Sheriff's Office, as they will be visiting each approved property. Mr. Pearson added if there is no one home upon their visit, they are leaving door hangers. The process includes taking pictures of the home, building, structures or mobile homes that may add value to the property. Their production goal is 2,000 parcels a month with completion being August 2026. He told when they are onsite they do not enter any houses, as there are no interior inspections and if the County requests an interior inspection, they have someone go in with them. He lastly said they have done 2,300 parcels thus far in McDowell, and noted any input from the Board or tax payers would be welcomed as their overall goal is to ensure a fair assessment.

Water System Update

Mr. Wooten started with the Nebo projects telling the begin of June 1st or 2nd on the East End Project that will be complex. There was a pre-construction meeting with Hyatt who will engineer a community meeting with staff for persons effected. Phase 2A and 2B are wrapping up, tying into Memorial Park Rd with a line and a master meter in the vicinity. Phase 3 and the Exit 90 projects are waiting on State approvals, with West Marion project design underway and requiring a booster station that will be between the school and the Pilot truck stop. Vice Chair Greene asked when West Marion would start, in which Mr. Wooten said the hopes are by the end of this calendar year and reminded the school will be involved in funding.

Universal Grading Phase 2 Project

Mr. Wooten spoke on this project that is funded by a Golden Leaf Foundation grant, for 10 acres to be rough graded. This allows for a contractor to be able to start a foundation at a later time. There was a pre-construction meeting last week to begin, with the end result of selling as a building site for industry.

Transfer Station Improvements

Mr. Wooten gave an update on the improvements at the 100-acre site and structure where waste is received and hauled off. He reminded that the State inspected the Station and required the upgrades. This project will be disruptive for several months, with the project to begin around June 2nd. He told the second set of scales will be installed, allowing for a more efficient trip for citizens. The project cost is covered by the remaining ARPA appropriation.

Chairman Brown asked for patience as this project is going on, noting it will be inconvenient until it is complete.

JCPC FY 2026 Funding Recommendations

Mr. Wooten told the JCPC which stands for the Juvenile Crime Prevention Council is an appointed group that is funded by the State, with a County match. This is a council that works with young persons who were involved in inappropriate matters. There is a request for the Board to approve their budget.

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

Budget Update

Mr. Wooten asked the Board to review the property tax collection and sales tax report, and asked for a Board meeting to present the recommended budget on Friday, May 30th at 11:30 a.m. This was agreed upon.

Administrative Items

Mr. Wooten requested a Reimbursement Resolution for a wheel loader the County would like to purchase for the Transfer Station as well as waiving the fee for permits of The Front Porch Project. This Project provided construction of 3 front porches for local residents, adding it was started by the owners of the Barefoot Baby clothing business in Marion.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the Reimbursement Resolution and the inspection fee as presented, with a second by Vice Chair Greene. Commissioner Ellis noted to register these with the County, to keep up with the improvement. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Board Appointments

The Clerk to the Board presented the Memo with a request from the Clerk of Court to reappoint Larry Lytle to the Jury Commission, as the Commissioner to serve another term.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to reappoint Larry Lytle as the Jury Commissioner, 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 April.

Motor Vehicle Tax Refunds: \$ 359.53

Releases over \$100.00: \$ 0.00

Releases under \$100.00 \$ 0.00

Refunds: \$ 3,971.74

Discoveries: \$ 0.00

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the tax matters as presented with a second by Vice Chair Greene. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Citizen Comment

Roxy Taylor on the Animal Shelter; Jeff Black on homeless and the Sheriff's Dept.; Susan Menard on the Animal Shelter Ordinance; Teri Stohara on the Animal Shelter and Jeff Driebus on tax evaluation.

Commissioners/Staff Reports

Vice Chair Greene spoke in regards to his vote on the 14-day euthanasia, not being based on the citizens who came tonight to the Board meeting. He cited his decisions are based on his moral, religious beliefs and what he deems is best for the community.

Adjournment

Commissioner Walker made a motion to adjourn at 6:27 p.m., with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Attest:

Sena Allison
Clerk to the Board

Tony Brown
Chairman

