

Draft

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR MEETING June 19, 2023

ALEXANDER COUNTY
STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA

PRESENT: Marty Pennell, Chairman
 Josh Lail, Vice-Chairman
 Kent Herman
 Ronnie Reese
 Larry Yoder

STAFF: Ben Faulkenberry, County Attorney
 Shane Fox, County Manager
 Jamie Starnes, Clerk to the Board

The Alexander County Board of Commissioners held a regular meeting on Monday, June 19, 2023 in Room 103 of the CVCC / Alexander Center in Taylorsville, North Carolina.

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Pennell called the meeting to order at 6:00 PM.

INVOCATION & PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Commissioner Reese gave the invocation and Commissioner Herman led the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

COUNTY MANAGER OATH OF OFFICE

Shane Fox took the County Manager oath of office, administered by Jamie Starnes, Clerk to the Board. Mr. Fox introduced his wife, Jennifer, and children Ryan, Caroline, and Owen. Also in attendance were current Town of Blowing Rock Councilman Albert Yount and former Councilwoman Sue Sweeney.

COMMISSIONER'S REPORT

Chairman Pennell asked Ashley Starnes, Chief of Bethlehem Fire & Rescue, to speak about the Caleb Benfield Challenge, an event held annually to train junior firefighters and memorialize Mr. Benfield, who died in a motorcycle accident in 2012 on his way to the station.

The weeklong camp requires juniors from across the state to move into the station; they cook and clean while also learning the many aspects of being a full-time firefighter such as vehicle extraction, water rescue, ladder climbing, turnout gear, etc. The juniors also respond to actual calls. This year's participants (14 total) were in the audience.

Shelly Benfield, Caleb's mother, was appreciative of the continued support and encouraged the Board and the public to stop by the station this week to see what the juniors were doing. In addition, a closing ceremony will take place on Saturday, June 24th and each participant will present a research project.

Vice-Chairman Lail mentioned an incident where both Shelly and her husband Bob responded to an emergency at his home involving his son, noting that the world would be a better place if everyone conducted themselves like the Benfields.

On June 17, 2023, Commissioner Yoder attended a ribbon cutting for the Bethlehem Ice Cream Shoppe as well as the Juneteeth Celebration at Courthouse Park.

ADOPTION OF AGENDA

Commissioner Yoder made a motion to adopt the agenda as presented. Commissioner Herman seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

PUBLIC HEARING: FARMLAND PRESERVATION ORDINANCE REVISIONS

Pamela Bowman, Soil & Water Conservation District Education Coordinator/Admin., explained that the Voluntary Farmland Preservation Ordinance was originally adopted in March 2022 to protect and preserve farmland, agriculture, horticulture, and forestry land as well as notify prospective property buyers of existing nearby farms. She reviewed proposed amendments as follows, several of which were necessary to reflect changes to N.C.G.S. 106-737:

- Allows "bona fide farm purposes" as qualifying farmland.
- Changes wording of "increased protection from nuisance lawsuits" to "decrease the likelihood of legal disputes."
- Clarifies language regarding the jurisdiction and responsibilities of the VAD Board.
- Updates application requirements and changes the application review process to 90 days to reflect the VAD Board's quarterly meeting schedule.
- Eliminates the need for paper maps in governmental offices due to availability on GIS.
- Allows for automatic renewals instead of needing to reapply every 10 years.
- Changes the condemnation hearing timeline to conform to the 30-day legal requirement.
- Reorganizes the overall structure of the ordinance to be similar to other County documents.

Ms. Bowman advised that the VAD Board, Sarah Weavil with NC Agricultural Development & Farmland Preservation, and County Attorney Ben Faulkenberry, had approved these revisions.

After a motion by Commissioner Yoder, second by Commissioner Herman, and unanimous vote, the public hearing was called to order and comments requested. There being none, Commissioner Yoder made a motion to close the public hearing. Commissioner Reese seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

Commissioner Reese made a motion to approve amendments to the Voluntary Farmland Preservation Program Ordinance. Commissioner Herman seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

ADOPTION OF 2023-2024 ALEXANDER COUNTY BUDGET ORDINANCE

Shane Fox, County Manager, began by thanking Finance Director Jennifer Herman, Deputy Finance Director Linda Pennell, and department heads for work done to prepare the 2023-2024 budget prior to his arrival. He provided several slides related to General Fund revenues by type, property taxes and the value of a penny since FY 2021, expenditures by function, and changes to the proposed budget since the June 5th Commissioners' Meeting that reduced the amount of fund balance needed to \$2,820,826. These changes included updated tax revenue projections, removal of unfilled positions, insurance savings, and preferences related to contingency funds.

Mr. Fox presented the 2023-2024 Alexander County Budget Ordinance that totaled \$55,970,932, a 2.4% increase (approx. \$1.2 million) over FY 2022-2023 excluding transfers and included a 67-cent property tax rate.

Vice-Chairman Lail felt only a 2.4% increase was noteworthy when considering the cost of doing business across the nation had increased much more.

Although he hoped for a smaller budget, Commissioner Reese understood that providing services required money to be spent and he did not want to drastically reduce expenses now, only to be forced to increase taxes later. He also mentioned that the proposed tax rate had been reduced by 12 cents (from 79 to 67 cents per \$100 valuation).

Commissioner Herman conveyed his appreciation to Mr. Fox as well as the Finance Committee for moving the budget in the right direction; however, he felt more reductions should be made to align the County's spending with our population, eliminating "big government."

Commissioner Yoder would have liked a few requests to have been funded at a higher amount, including the School System, but overall was happy with the budget. He also thanked Mr. Fox and Finance staff.

Chairman Pennell pointed out that staff had been pushed harder this year than before to decrease spending and be as conservative as possible and he thanked Ms. Herman, Mr. Fox, and department heads for those efforts. He was hopeful more reductions could be made through the year.

Commissioner Yoder made a motion to approve the 2023-2024 Budget Ordinance. Vice-Chairman Lail seconded the motion. The Board voted 4 in favor (Commissioners Lail, Pennell, Reese, and Yoder) and one against (Commissioner Herman). The motion carried.

BUDGET ORDINANCE AMENDMENTS #73 & #74

Shane Fox, County Manager, reviewed the purpose of Budget Amendments #73 and #74 as follows:

Budget Amendment #73 – To increase the Detention Center budget for estimated medical supplies and inmate medical bills for the remainder of FY 2023, including a single invoice of over \$15,000 as well as a safe keeper inmate held in State custody.

Budget Amendment #74 – To increase the General Fund for implementation of GASB Statement No. 96, which changes the accounting treatment of Subscription-Based Information Technology Arrangements. This is only a book entry required for financial statement presentation; no additional expenses will be incurred and there will be no effect on the fund balance.

Commissioner Reese made a motion to approve Budget Amendments #73 and #74. Commissioner Yoder seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

BOARD APPOINTMENTS & REAPPOINTMENTS

Jamie Starnes, Clerk to the Board, requested the following reappointments:

Region E Aging Committee – reappoint Billie Walker to the Region E Aging Committee for two years.

Planning Board – reappoint Bud Caywood, Don Harrington, and William Mitchell (town rep) for 3 years.

CVCC Board of Trustees – reappoint Jeremy Fortner to the CVCC Board of Trustees for 4 years.

Vice-Chairman Lail made a motion to approve the reappointments. Commissioner Yoder seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

OTHER BUSINESS

There were no items discussed during Other Business.

CONSENT AGENDA

- A. Tax Abatements & Adjustments (\$1,567.02) for Tax Refunds (\$1,301.11) for May 24 – June 8, 2023.
- B. Minutes from the May 15, 2023 Regular Meeting.
- C. Agreement renewal with the Town of Taylorsville for planning and zoning services.
- D. Contract renewal with Alexander Rescue Squad for rescue services, secondary EMS, and staffing.
- E. Lease agreement with Alexander County Ancestry Association for the old jail property.
- F. Fire Protection Contracts with all volunteer fire departments (Wittenburg, Taylorsville, Bethlehem, Stony Point, Ellendale, Hiddenite, Sugar Loaf, and Vashti).
- G. May and June 2023 line item transfer report.
- H. Resolution to approve the bonding of Alexander County officials.

Commissioner Reese made a motion to approve the Consent Agenda. Commissioner Yoder seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

CONSOLIDATED HUMAN SERVICES BOARD ACTIVITIES

At 6:34 PM, the Board transitioned into the Consolidated Human Services Board Meeting and proceeded as follows:

- Public Comment – there was no one signed up to speak.
- Public Health Report – Billie Walker, Health Director, reviewed the following:
 - Current vacancies – the only open position is the Environmental Health Specialist. Recent hires include Jana Brown, Licensed Clinical Social Worker, and Kaitlyn Gansrow, Public Health Educator.
 - Community Health Assessment – submitted to the State on April 1, 2023. Staff is working on the strategic planning process.
 - Renovations – all renovation goals have been completed and include an outdoor storage building, conference room updates, expanded lab area, new electronic sign, and Environmental Health scanning project.
 - Annual policy review (Accred. 15.3) – Ms. Walker presented the Board with all administrative policy and procedures to review, make changes, and approve. There were no new policies presented or any major changes to any current policies. Chairman Pennell signed all policies.
 - What's coming – Medicaid Expansion (HB 76) that will provide \$135 million to increase access to healthcare for approx. 900,000 North Carolinians but be taxing on the Health Department and DSS, the official ending of the COVID-19 public

health emergency on May 11, 2023 causing a loss of public assistance for citizens, and hopes for a covered walkway at the Health Department to protect clients from the elements.

- CCPT / CFPT Annual Report – the Community Child Protection / Child Fatality Prevention Team met twice in 2022 to review 7 child fatalities that occurred in 2021. There were also no open DSS cases of child abuse and neglect to review for 2022. *(This item was included in agenda packets but left off the published agenda by mistake; however, it was reviewed by the Board and approved by Chairman Pennell prior to tonight’s meeting).*
- Senior Center Report – Kristy Hunt, Senior Center Director, discussed several recent events including a lift health series taught by Der Holcomb with Cooperative Extension, a ceramics class sponsored by Hiddenite Arts Center, and a gardening class sponsored by Bloom’s Greenhouse. The Senior Celebration was held on May 19th with 138 participants and a new piano was donated by a local senior. LPI Communities will begin printing the Senior Center’s newsletter at no cost (with advertising), saving approx. \$3,500 per year. Ms. Hunt was happy to report that Vicki Martin and Karla Bazuldua had completed their SHIP training and could now counsel Medicare beneficiaries, also noting that Medicare savings from January to May 2023 totaled \$144,243.

George Holleman, local delegate for the Tar Heel Legislature, made quick mention that an alternate delegate was needed.

- DSS Report – Thomas Mitchell, DSS Director, stated that 4 new employees had been hired since October and the current vacancy rate is 9.6% (8 vacancies remain). Recent employee engagement events were an Easter egg hunt in April, a Cinco de Mayo taco bar in May, and an ice cream social is planned for June. Other items discussed included:
 - Public Health Emergency termination – will result in discontinued or decreased supplements and assistance for approx. 800-1,000 Medicaid recipients that were auto-renewed during the pandemic. FNS food stamp allotments were also reset from \$95/month back to \$16/month.
 - HB 76 (Medicaid Expansion) – the “go live” date will be given once the NC budget bill is passed and sign into law. The State estimates approx. 3,000 new Medicaid cases in Alexander County and has provided funding for additional staff for a two-year period.
 - Shelter training – quarterly shelter training continues and a Stop the Bleed/First Aid/CPR refresher course is scheduled for later this month. Staff is still working with Daniel Fox, Emergency Management Coordinator, on a sheltering plan.
 - Foster care / adoptions – there are currently 11 children eligible for adoption and 51 children in foster care. The Adoption Committee is meeting monthly and 15 adoptions were completed in 2022. In response to a question by Chairman Pennell

related to average caseload, Mr. Mitchell said there was a maximum of 10 cases per social worker for child welfare, but a 15-child maximum for foster care.

CLOSED SESSION – N.C.G.S. 143-318.11(a)(5 & 6) CONTRACTUAL & PERSONNEL

Vice-Chairman Lail made a motion to enter into Closed Session at 6:56 PM to discuss contractual matters and personnel issues pursuant to N.C.G.S. 143-318.11(a)(5 & 6). Commissioner Herman seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, made a motion to adjourn at 7:48 PM. Commissioner seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

Marty A. Pennell, Chairman

Jamie M. Starnes, Clerk to the Board