

Draft

**BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS  
BUDGET WORK SESSION**

May 12, 2025

**ALEXANDER COUNTY  
STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA**

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

**STAFF:** Ben Faulkenberry, County Attorney  
Gary Herman, PIO  
Jennifer Herman, Finance Director  
Josh Mitchell, Public Works / Facilities Director  
Chad Pennell, Sheriff  
Jeff Sigmon, EMS Director  
Jamie Starnes, Clerk to the Board  
Sylvia Turnmire, Human Resources Director

The Alexander County Board of Commissioners held a budget work session on Monday, May 12, 2025 at 6:00 PM in the Administration first floor conference room in Taylorsville, North Carolina to discuss the FY 2025-2026 budget.

**FORESTRY BUDGET**

David Huffman, Alexander County Ranger, presented a budget request of \$175,151, a 67% or \$70,000 increase over current year funding, that included the addition of an Assistant County Ranger and start-up costs associated with the position (truck, fire-fighting equipment, laptop, etc.), County funds allocated to fully cover the smokechaser's salary for 3 months as previously established, and a new truck and equipment for the smokechaser. He explained that having an Assistant Ranger would help manage his existing workload and reduce the need to seek assistance from other counties.

In response to several questions, Mr. Huffman stated that truck replacements were based on a depreciation schedule and that used trucks were declared as surplus; existing Alexander County trucks are 10-12 years old. He added that most neighboring counties already have Assistant Rangers and that others within our region/district were adding them for FY 2025-2026.

Chairman Pennell was aware that Watauga County planned to eliminate their smokechaser position in lieu of adding the full-time Assistant Ranger, emphasizing that if Alexander County were to take similar action, it would also eliminate the need for a vehicle replacement.

Ben Faulkenberry, County Attorney, said he had contacted the NC Forestry Service to determine the reason behind the County's contribution of 40% to the Forestry budget rather than the statutorily mandated 25%.

## **SHERIFF'S OFFICE BUDGET**

Sheriff Chad Pennell discussed the following issues:

- Millersville Christian Academy would like to contract with the Sheriff's Office to provide a full-time SRO. All costs will be fully reimbursed by the school with the exception of summer months when the school is closed.
- He requested the Board consider a part-time position to assist the Emergency Management Coordinator with annual plan rewrites that require a considerable amount of time along with other duties.
- Staff is investigating a suitable fee to be charged to event holders to provide officers at special events, with an effective date of July 1, 2025. To date, officers are scheduled for 24 events in calendar year 2025.
- Because retention and recruitment are difficult at current pay levels a 10% salary increase is requested for employees of the Sheriff's Office, Detention, and 911 Communications. There are sufficient funds in the current salary line item for the Sheriff's Office to implement a 7.5% increase for his employees, with the remaining 2.5% to be addressed through the planned COLA for all employees in the upcoming budget. In addition, staff members who have received a recent pay raise would not be eligible for the full 10%.
- Due to required in-service training that has led to routine payouts of comp hours to keep balances below the mandatory limit, FY 2025-2026 budget requests include an increase in the salaries and benefits line item.

## **EMS BUDGET**

Jeff Sigmon, EMS Director, also discussed the need to increase salaries for EMS personnel, noting that experienced paramedics are steadily resigning for higher pay in nearby counties that have now adopted the 24/72 schedule that set Alexander County apart for many years. He explained that the department had significantly expanded capabilities in recent years and is one of only 13 counties authorized to administer whole blood. In addition, all units are equipped with ventilators since we serve the second largest ventilator-dependent patient population in NC. Mr. Sigmon requested a minimum 7.5% increase (which includes the 2.5% COLA) with an ideal increase of 10%.

Other items in the FY 2025-2026 budget include salaries and benefits for 8 new employees to operate a 6<sup>th</sup> crew in response to rising call volume, a new ambulance and equipment for the new

crew, and several fee adjustments (\$50 across the board for all services, a two-cent mileage increase, and implementation of a \$50 public assistance fee).

## **SCHOOL SYSTEM BUDGET**

Jennifer Herman, Finance Director, requested guidance on the appropriation to Alexander County Schools, pointing out that the updated request received on April 23, 2025 totaled \$8,175,308, an increase of \$682,267 or 9.1% over the current year. This increase would address funding shortfalls in the School Nurse Initiative, NC Pre-K, and SRO expenses in addition to a \$528,061 reduction in low wealth funding allocated from the state.

It was Chairman Pennell's understanding that the two-cent property tax reduction approved by the Board for FY 2025-2026 had affected the formula used to calculate the low-wealth funding; however, he wanted to meet with the Superintendent to determine the facts.

The Board agreed to postpone a decision until the Finance Committee, consisting of Chairman Pennell and Vice-Chairman Yoder, could speak with Dr. Bill Griffin.

## **FIRE DEPARTMENTS**

The Board reviewed initial predictions of fire tax rate adjustments needed to maintain current year funding levels to each of the 8 volunteer fire departments. The opinion of the Board remained that fire protection services should be funded by fire district tax revenue, which would eliminate \$328,000 from the County's General Fund budget for FY 2025-2026.

Ms. Herman will consult with Tax Office staff for final rates to prepare the Budget Message.

## **EAST ALEXANDER PARK**

Ms. Herman advised that \$100,000 had been included in the upcoming budget for engineering and design services for a future upgrade at East Park.

Commissioner Herman said he'd spoken to many citizens who were opposed to the use of taxpayer dollars for improvements at East Park, especially when considering that state grant money and sales tax revenues were used to renovate Bethlehem Park. He felt the Board should focus on prioritizing the salaries of emergency personnel to enhance recruitment and retention.

In response, Chairman Pennell said he'd received positive feedback concerning the potential updates at East Park, with many expressing their willingness to pay taxes provided that the County offer activities, such as parks, for the public.

## **SOLID WASTE BUDGET**

Josh Mitchell, Public Works / Facilities Director, reported that the proposed budget included a new rubber tire loader as well as fee increases at convenience sites and the landfill as discussed at the April budget work session. There is also an annual 3% CPI increase implemented by Republic Services.

Mr. Mitchell also advocated for employee raises for his departments, which include Solid Waste, Garage, and Public Buildings/Maintenance and he mentioned being unable to fill vacancies for several months due to low pay.

Ms. Herman stated that \$100,000 had been placed in a contingency fund to be used for salary increases and other needs in the coming budget year.

## **CLOSING COMMENTS**

After discussion, Chairman Pennell was in favor of a 12% pay increase for the Sheriff's Office, Detention, 911 Communications, and EMS departments.

Sylvia Turnmire, Human Resources Director, indicated that the current salary schedule and payroll software functioned on increments of 2.5%; therefore, a 12% increase would not be feasible. She suggested either a 10% or 12.5% increase. The consensus among the Board was to move forward with 12.5%.

Ms. Herman announced that the public hearing regarding the FY 2025-2026 budget was scheduled for Monday, May 19<sup>th</sup> during which she would also present the Budget Message.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further discussion, the meeting was adjourned at 8:31 PM.

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Marty A. Pennell, Chairman

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Jamie M. Starnes, Clerk to the Board