

MINUTES
WATAUGA COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2025

The Watauga County Board of Commissioners held a regular meeting, as scheduled, on Tuesday, February 18, 2025, at 5:30 P.M. in the Commissioners' Board Room located in the Watauga County Administration Building, Boone, North Carolina.

Chairman Eggers called the meeting to order at 5:30 P.M. The following were present:

PRESENT:	Braxton Eggers, Chairman
	Todd Castle, Vice-Chairman
	Emily Greene, Commissioner
	Tim Hodges, Commissioner
	Ronnie Marsh, Commissioner
	Nathan Miller, County Attorney
	Deron Geouque, County Manager
	Anita J. Fogle, Clerk to the Board

Vice-Chairman Castle opened with a prayer and Chairman Eggers led the Pledge of Allegiance.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Chairman Eggers presented the February 4, 2025, regular meeting and closed session minutes.

Commissioner Greene, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to approve the February 4, 2025, regular meeting minutes as presented.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

Commissioner Greene, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to approve the February 4, 2025, closed session minutes as presented.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Chairman Eggers called for additions and/or corrections to the February 18, 2025, agenda.

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to approve the February 18, 2025, agenda as presented.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION UPDATE AND REQUESTS

Mr. Richard Boylan, Area Agent, updated the Board on Extension matters and request authorization to apply for a Tobacco Trust Fund (TTF) grant in the amount of \$46,906.15 for shared use equipment grant, as well as approve a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Working Landscapes for shared use equipment.

Mr. Boylan stated that he was pursuing small farm equipment that could be shared with those who could use it from gardeners to farmers in the area at no cost. The Extension was using seed money for the TTF grant to expand the project. If the grant was awarded, the equipment would stay with the Extension. Mr. Boylan stated that he had worked with the County Attorney in preparing the MOU and lease. County Attorney Miller stated that he was good with the contract.

When concerns were brought up about liability, County Attorney Miller stated that government had sovereign immunity and the County had insurance to cover what immunity didn't; however, he wasn't sure if this would be exempt from immunity.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to authorize the application for the Tobacco Trust Fund (TTF) grant in the amount of \$46,906.15 for shared use equipment and approve a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Working Landscapes for the shared use equipment.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

PROJECT ON AGING MATTERS

A. Request for Acceptance of FY 2025 Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act (MIPPA) Grant/Contract

Ms. Angie Boitnotte, Project on Aging Director, requested the acceptance of a Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act (MIPPA) Grant from the Seniors' Health Insurance Information Program (SHIIP). The grant was in the amount of \$3,030 with no local match required and would be used to expand low income subsidy outreach and for supplies.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to accept the MIPPA Grant in the amount of \$3,030.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

B. Requested Appointment of Home & Community Care Block Grant (H&CCBG) Advisory Committee and Lead Agency

Ms. Angie Boitnotte, Project on Aging Director, stated that each year it was required to appoint a lead agency and advisory committee to make recommendations on how to best expend the County's allocation from the Home and Community Care Block Grant (H&CCBG) funds. These funds were previously established by the Older American's Act and were administered by the North Carolina Division of Aging.

Ms. Boitnotte requested the Project on Aging be appointed as the Lead Agency and presented the following names for appointment to the H&CCBG:

Name	Representing
Braxton Eggers	Board of Commissioners
Zack Green	High Country Council of Governments
Dustin Burleson	Vaya Health
Brooke Whitman	Daymark Recovery Services
Karina Romero	Appalachian District Health Department
Christie Markham	Social Services
TBD, Patient Resource Specialist	High Country Community Health
Kat Danner	Senior Citizen
Mary Moretz	Senior Citizen (STHL Alternate)
Ed Rosenberg	Senior Citizen

Commissioner Hodges, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to appoint the list of nominations as presented by Ms. Boitnotte to the Home & Community Care Block Grant Advisory Committee for FY 2026 and to appoint the Watauga County Project on Aging as the Lead Agency.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

MAINTENANCE MATTERS

A. Request for Exemption of Mini Brooks Act

Mr. Robert Marsh, Maintenance Director, presented a proposed resolution exempting the County from the quality-based selection process required by the Mini-Brooks Act, per G. S. 143-64.31. The statute allows local governments to exempt specific projects from the provisions of the general statute if the estimated fee is less than \$50,000. An engineer was needed for the purpose of conducting a feasibility study of the Old Cove Creek Gym sports field which was destroyed by Hurricane Helene. The reason for the requested exemption was the specialty of the scope of services for the project and Blue Ridge Environmental Consultants existing knowledge of the project and past experience with the County.

Commissioner Greene, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to adopt the resolution as presented by Mr. Marsh.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

B. Request to Procure Engineering Services

Mr. Robert Marsh, Maintenance Director, requested approval of a contract with Blue Ridge Environmental Consultants in the amount of \$45,000 for a feasibility study for the Old Cove Creek facility grounds which was needed due to Hurricane Helene leaving the sports field unusable. The County's insurance provider and FEMA recently concluded their inspections with the insurance company committing to restoring the facility to pre-storm condition provided the County completes the restoration project and pays the \$500,000 policy deductible. FEMA officials have stated that there is a possibility that FEMA would pay the deductible, engineering fees, and costs associated with the designing and restoration project as well as covering the cost to mitigate the site from future damage where opportunities exist. The cost of the study should be a reimbursable expense through FEMA recovery funds as well.

Mr. Marsh recommended the feasibility study be conducted to document existing conditions and to define the area where site amenities can be restored without violating floodplain regulations by Blue Ridge Environmental Consultants, PA. (BREC). BREC has the ability to fly the site with LIDAR and determine how the site has been changed by the flood and the information gathered by doing so would be valuable in determining the amount of fill which would either need to be exported or incorporated into the site. The survey would also be a part of a larger feasibility study which was vital to planning a successful project. Staff recommends the County.

Discussion was held regarding whether enhancements could be made to the property during the repair phase. County Manager Geouque stated that there was an opportunity for the Tourism Development Authority (TDA) to fund enhancements as the site was included in the Imagine Watauga Plan.

County Attorney Miller stated that a line of liability needed to be removed from the contract and the venue needed to be changed to Watauga County.

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to approve the contract with Blue Ridge Environmental Consultants for a fee of \$45,000 to conduct a feasibility study of the facility contingent on the County Attorney's approval.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

C. Bid Award Recommendations

Mr. Robert Marsh, Maintenance Director, requested approval of a contract with Tarheel Basement Systems in the amount of \$39,606.11 for restoration of the crawlspace at the Old Cove Creek gym. The crawlspace was flooded during Hurricane Helene where the floodwater left behind a layer of

silt on the moisture barrier and damaged some of the fiberglass floor joist insulation. The County's insurance company inspected and approved the crawlspace for restoration.

Bids for the repair work were solicited with three contractors submitting bids on February 13, 2025, as follows:

Bidder	Amount
Tarheel Basement Systems Greensboro, NC	\$ 39,606.11
AFTER DISASTER Greensboro, NC	\$124,897.11
Wolfe Construction Group Cornelius, NC	\$ 36,349.02

Mr. Marsh recommended Tarheel Basement Systems be awarded the project as the second lowest bidder as their proposal contained a much larger scope of work than the lowest bidder's proposal and it was deemed by staff to be the actual lowest responsible bid based upon the quality and performance factors stated in their proposal.

County Attorney Miller stated that there were some issues with the contract which were corrected with initials and could, therefore, be approved as presented.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Chairman Eggers, moved to award the contract to Tarheel Basement Systems in the amount of \$39,606.11.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

SHERIFF'S OFFICE MATTERS

A. Requested Award to Retiring Officer

Captain Preston Russell, stated that Detective Terry Julian recently retired after working many years in the Sheriff's Office. G.S. 20-187.2 allows governing bodies of a law enforcement agency to award a retiring member the service side arm, at a price determined by the governing body. Law enforcement personnel may retire at age 55 with 25 years of credible service with full retirement benefits. Captain Russell stated that Mr. Julian planned to act as a reserve officer and provide firearms training. Captain Russell requested Mr. Julian's respective side arm and badge be awarded to him due to his retirement and that the price of the side arm be set at \$1.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to award retired Detective Terry Julian his badge and side arm.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

B. Out-of-State Travel Request

Captain Preston Russell requested out-of-state travel authorization for training and travel expenses for members of the K-9 team to attend the “Hold the Line K-9 Conference” in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, as it would provide advanced instruction in critical areas such as tracking, detection, and handler techniques. The request included the use of a County vehicle for travel, meal allowances, and registration fees.

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to authorize the out-of-state travel to South Carolina for members of the K-9 team.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

C. Patrol Vehicle Purchase Request Due to Loss/Damage from Hurricane Helene

Captain Preston Russell requested authorization for the purchase of two (2) vehicles, one (1) 2025 Dodge Durango in the amount of \$41,556.78 from Deacon Jones Dodge of Clinton and one (1) 2025 Chevrolet Silverado 1500 Truck from McNeil Chevrolet of Wilkesboro in the amount of \$48,744.36. The replacement was due to losses from Hurricane Helene. The County received \$38,591 (including the \$1,000 deductible per vehicle) leaving a \$51,710.14 shortfall from the amount received from insurance. Staff would recommend the shortfall come from the Sheriff’s budget and if adequate funds were not available then contingency funds be used to cover the shortfall.

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to authorize the purchase of one (1) 2025 Dodge Durango in the amount of \$41,556.78 from Deacon Jones Dodge of Clinton and one (1) 2025 Chevrolet Silverado 1500 Truck from McNeil Chevrolet of Wilkesboro in the amount of \$48,744.36 with the funds to come from the Sheriff’s existing budget or contingency funds.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

AEROSTAR RIGHT OF ENTRY AND SITE ASSESSMENT PRESENTATION

Ms. Darlene Abbott with AeroStar, gave a presentation on the Private Property Debris Removal (PPDR) and Demolition Program Right of Entry (ROE) for private property debris removal and site assessments. Ms. Abbott provided the scope of work through program planning and implementation and then shared the simplified process walkthrough. When Ms. Abbott shared the communication plan and methods of taking applications, some discussion was held to make sure the information would get to the citizens in need. Ms. Abbott then gave a walkthrough of the ROE simplified intake process and shared the online application as well as call center information.

The presentation was for information only and, therefore, no action was required at this time.

EMERGENCY SERVICES MATTERS

A. Hurricane Helene Update

Mr. Will Holt, Emergency Services Director, provided the following Hurricane Helene update:

- *“County staff continue to work with our insurance provider on coverage limits and settlements. We have started to receive determination letters and coverage approvals for several properties with clarification requested on some projects.*
- *Right-of-Way debris removal continues with an end date forecasted of March 2nd for the public to add new debris to the Right-of-Way. This timeline was coordinated with SDR to give them time to complete their work ahead of their contract expiration date.*
- *Waterway and private property debris removal operations with the Corps of Engineers (USACE) has been approved, with contract awards ongoing for contractors. Aerostar and TetraTech are leading the intake process, Right of Entry acquisition, and site assessments for the Private Property Debris Removal (PPDR) program. Representative Foxx’s office has been very active on this issue and we appreciate her continued support.*
- *Staff completed assessments on waterways to give multiple State and federal partners access to raw data to determine eligibility for Category A (USACE debris removal), EWP, or other potential programs being discussed. We appreciate the incredible work of our Soil and Water staff and those who partnered with them in this process.*
- *Governor Stein has signed an Executive Order directing NCEM and OSBM to establish a private road and bridge program. Staff has been in met with the Director and Assistant Director of that division of OSBM and initial planning has begun on how to implement that Executive Order. This program is designed to duplicate the success seen in the southwest part of the State during the 2022 TS Fred floods.*
- *The Commissioners previously approved the proposal from Hagerty Consulting, Inc, to provide technical assistance with recovery. We are early in that process but have engaged the firm to begin operations once the final contract is executed.*
- *As a point of success, DSA and he DRC teams have largely completed their work in Watauga County but will have staff available for any issues that arise. Teams registered thousands of individuals and helped put more than \$17M at time of report into the hands of our citizens to begin their recovery.*
- *The deadline for organizations to apply for Public Assistance (PA) and individuals to apply for assistance (IA) have both been extended to March 8th, 2025*
- *After legal review, the County and all municipalities who consented with the County during Helene have terminated the State of Emergency that was in place.”*

The report was for information only and, therefore, no action was required at this time.

B. Request Bid Award for Valle Crucis School BDA/DAS

Mr. Will Holt, Emergency Services Director, received an updated proposal from Mobile Communications America, Inc. in the amount of \$102,357.71 for a Bi-Directional Amplifier and Distributed Antenna System for the new Valle Crucis Elementary School which included Foscoe Fire Department. County Manager Geouque stated that funds were included in the FF&E budget for the school project to cover the cost. When asked if the addition would delay the project, Mr. Holt stated that they would be onsite in ten days to run the equipment. The lead time would not change only the amount of materials ordered would be more.

County Manager Geouque stated that hopefully the school could be moved into by March but it would probably be April or May. Mr. Geouque stated that it would be operational by the beginning of the 2025-2026 school year. Mr. Geouque stated that Blue Ridge Energy and Skybest would help with cell coverage. Blue Ridge was working with Verizon and Skybest to put in mini towers in the area. Mr. Holt stated that it was a VIPER system and VIPER would “turn up” the system to make certain it worked with all components.

Commissioner Greene, seconded by Chairman Eggers, moved to approve the bid with Mobile Communications America, Inc. in the amount of \$102,357.71 for a Bi-Directional Amplifier and Distributed Antenna System for the new Valle Crucis Elementary School including Foscoe Fire Department.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION PROPOSED SHARED PERSONNEL MUTUAL AID AGREEMENT

Ms. Michelle Kasey with the Soil and Water Conservation Office, requested approval of a Shared Personnel Mutual Aid Agreement with the Soil and Water Conservation District. The agreement would allow Watauga County Soil & Water Conservation District to share employees as needed with other Counties in a like manner to how other counties assisted Watauga County during the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to adopt the Mutual Aid Agreement.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

TAX MATTERS

A. Monthly Collections Report

Mr. Tyler Rash, Tax Administrator, presented the Tax Collections Report for the month of January 2025. The report was presented for information only and, therefore, no action was required.

B. Refunds and Releases

Mr. Tyler Rash, Tax Administrator, presented the Refunds and Releases Report for January 2025 for Board approval:

TO BE TYPED IN MINUTE BOOK

Commissioner Hodges, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to approve the Refunds and Releases Report for January 2025 as presented.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

MISCELLANEOUS ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

A. Proposed Daymark Recovery System, Inc. Lease Renewal

County Manager Geouque presented a lease renewal with Daymark Recovery Services with the same terms and conditions as the current lease. The space to be leased was at the County's Human Services Building and included 13,775 square feet of space. Daymark agreed to lease the space at the rate of \$10 per square foot (\$137,750 per year) in monthly installments of \$11,479.17. The new lease term would be March 1, 2025 to February 29, 2028. Included in the lease under Section 10 was an additional fee in the amount of \$67,718 per year, to be paid in monthly installments of \$5,643, which was to cover utilities and janitorial services.

The County Manager stated that the lease had been reviewed by County Attorney Miller who stated that it was good. The advertisement period has been met in accordance with the general statutes and the lease was ready for adoption.

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to adopt the Daymark Recovery System, Inc., lease as presented.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

B. Boards and Commissions

County Manager Geouque share the following:

Tourism Development Authority (TDA)

The terms of Ms. Kim Rogers and Mr. Tony Gray on the Watauga County TDA Board were to expire at the end of February 2025. Ms. Rogers serves in one of three seats required to be filled by an owner or operator of a taxable lodging business with properties in Watauga County District U. Mr. Gray retired from Appalachian State University years ago having served as the Director of Conference and Institutes. He was also a Christmas tree grower for many years. The TDA has

requested the reappointment of both Ms. Rogers and Mr. Gray each for a 3-year terms. This was a first reading for both and, therefore, no action was required at this time.

Watauga County Board of Adjustment

The Board of Adjustment term of Ms. Sue Sweeting has expired. The revised NC General Statute 160D no longer makes any mention of appointments representing zoned areas of counties with partial-county zoning; therefore, it was not necessary to consider where appointees live. The term would be for three years. There were no recommendations from the Board of Adjustment at this time; however, Chairman Eggers shared at the last meeting that Mr. Shane Robbins was interested in serving. This would be a second reading for Mr. Robbins.

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to appoint Mr. Shane Robbins to the Watauga County Board of Adjustment for a three-year term

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

Appalachian Regional Library Board

The Watauga County Library Board voted unanimously to recommend Ms. Natalie Harkey be appointed to the Appalachian Regional Library Board for a first term, to fill the unexpired term of Ms. Sandra Basel who resigned in September before her second term expired. Ms. Basel was on both the local and regional board. This was a first reading and, therefore, no action was required at this time.

Commissioner Hodges, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to waive the second reading and appoint Ms. Natalie Harkey to the Appalachian Regional Library Board.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

C. Announcements

County Manager Geouque announced the following:

- The Annual Pre-Budget Retreat will be held on Thursday, February 27, 2025, beginning at 12:00 P.M. and continue on Friday, February 28, 2025 beginning at 9:00 A.M. in the Commissioners' Board Room.
- The High Country Council of Governments' 49th Annual Banquet was postponed due to Hurricane Helene and has been rescheduled for Friday, March 7, 2025, from 6:00 to 9:00 P.M. in the Grandview Ballroom at the Northwest End Zone Facility, Appalachian State University.
- A Groundbreaking Ceremony will be held for the new EMS Facility off of Innovation Drive on Friday, March 14, 2025, at 1:00 P.M.

- The North Carolina Association of County Commissioners will hold a District 14 Meeting on April 24, 2025, from 5:30 P.M. to 7:30 P.M. at the Avery Community Center. Commissioners are invited to attend. The deadline to RSVP is April 1, 2025.

CLOSED SESSION

At 7:08 P.M., Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to enter Closed Session to discuss Attorney/Client Matters, per G. S. 143-318.11(a)(3), Land Acquisition, per G. S. 143-318.11(a)(5)(i), and Personnel Matters, per G. S. 143-318.11(a)(6).

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to resume the open meeting at 7:57 P.M.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

ADJOURN

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to adjourn the meeting at 7:58 P.M.

VOTE: Aye-5
Nay-0

Braxton Eggers, Chairman

ATTEST: Anita J. Fogle, Clerk to the Board