

MEETING MINUTES
WATAUGA COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
TUESDAY, AUGUST 19, 2025

The Watauga County Board of Commissioners held a regular meeting on Tuesday, August 19, 2025, at 5:30 P.M. in the Commissioners' Board Room located in the Watauga County Administration Building in Boone, North Carolina.

1. CALL REGULAR MEETING TO ORDER

Chairman Eggers called the meeting to order at 5:31 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
 Katie Hancock, Clerk to the Board

Vice-Chairman Castle offered a prayer and Commissioner Greene led the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Chairman Eggers presented the August 5, 2025, regular and closed session meeting minutes.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to approve the August 5, 2025, regular meeting minutes as presented.

VOTE: Aye – 5
 Nay – 0

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to approve the August 5, 2025, closed session minutes as presented.

VOTE: Aye – 5
 Nay – 0

3. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Chairman Eggers called for additions or corrections to the August 19, 2025, agenda; there were none.

Commissioner Greene, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to approve the August 19, 2025, agenda.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

4. PUBLIC COMMENT

- **David Smith**, a 14-year resident of Powder Horn Mountain and a 9-year member of the Stewart Simmons Volunteer Fire Department, expressed support for the construction of the Powder Horn Mountain communications tower, stating that the tower was greatly needed for communication purposes.
- **Shane Vaughan**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain since November 2020, provided the Board with a handout containing a photograph of the communications tower proposed for relocation and a drawing from the project plans. He cautioned that “good intentions can sometimes have unintended consequences” and expressed concern about potential health risks posed by the tower, noting that his wife suffers from chronic Lyme disease. He also stated that he values the sense of escape Powder Horn currently provides and feared that it would be disrupted. Mr. Vaughan’s comments concluded when the three-minute time limit expired.
- **Andy Cox**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain, provided the Board with a six-page handout containing photographs and diagrams that he referenced during his remarks. He stated his opposition to the tower and used the materials to support his concerns. Mr. Cox expressed concern that four homeowners would be unable to access their houses during construction. In addition, he noted that the curves on the road already made it difficult for small trucks and would likely prevent semi-trucks or crane trucks from reaching the construction site. He questioned whether ice and wind had been considered in determining the fall zone, adding that the closest house was 100 feet away and the water tank was 50 feet away. Mr. Cox’s comments concluded when the three-minute time limit expired.
- **Curtis Johnson**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain, began by noting that the issue extended beyond the tower itself. He questioned whether Watauga County should be permitted to disregard the laws and covenants governing the Powder Horn Mountain community. Mr. Johnson stated his belief that the Stewart Simmons Volunteer Fire Department sold the land to Watauga County without notifying the Property Owners Association (POA). He further argued that the lot on which the tower was being built was designated for single-family residential use and that, without a two-thirds vote of the POA, its designation could not be changed. He also expressed concern that the tower would ruin the view for many residents. Mr. Johnson concluded by urging the Board to abandon construction of the Lot 21 tower.

- **Jill Williams**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain, reminded the Board that she had spoken at the August 5 meeting. She stated that the community had been subjected to a “bait-and-switch.” While expressing respect for the government and emergency workers, she emphasized her desire to protect her “sanctuary” and urged the Board to halt the project.
- **Lisa Sheppard**, discussed the covenants that have governed the community. She noted that, for 55 years, people have purchased and built homes based on the area’s natural beauty. She asked the Board whether they would choose to buy a home or rent an Airbnb with a 180-foot steel tower in the view, questioning why Powder Horn Mountain residents should receive any less consideration. She stated that there were no compelling arguments in favor of the tower and concluded by asking why the Board seemed intent on “destroying a nature conservancy.”
- **E.J. Farese**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain, noted that her family initially bought their home as a vacation property from Florida but have since moved in full-time. She expressed concern over the lack of transparency regarding the tower construction and questioned whether Powder Horn Mountain is truly the best location for it. She also cautioned that the tower could lead to cancer clusters, cause irreversible environmental damage, and diminish trust between residents and the County.
- **Don Farese**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain, stated that his primary concern with the tower was its location in the middle of a neighborhood. He noted that he had flown his drone and 3D-scanned the topography to evaluate the area and had identified potentially better locations for the tower. Drawing on his experience in building resorts, he remarked that no resort would place a tower within a community. He also raised safety concerns, including the impact of rain and ice accumulation on neighboring land, houses, and vehicles. He urged the Board to reconsider the tower’s placement to ensure it is not situated within a family neighborhood.
- **Terry Thompkins**, a part-time resident of Powder Horn Mountain for 20 years and a full-time resident of Wilmington, NC, noted that the community was designed for nature lovers. As a realtor, she stated that the tower construction would negatively affect property values, potentially rendering them worthless. She urged the Board to visit the site to see firsthand what was being built and its location.
- **Maria Jamell**, a retired Watauga County Schools teacher and resident of Powder Horn Mountain, acknowledged the importance of a communications tower but emphasized that there must be a better location than within the Powder Horn Mountain community.

5. MIDDLE FORK GREENWAY – REPAIRS AND BID AWARD

Ms. Wendy Patoprsty, Middle Fork Greenway Director at the Blue Ridge Conservancy, updated the Board on repairs following Hurricane Helene. Most trail sections were quickly reopened, but work remains at Mystery Hill and the Payne Branch Park stream access. FEMA has approved reimbursement for both projects, and staff has coordinated with Emergency Management.

Ms. Patoprsty noted that thousands of people have used the trail since reopening and highlighted completed repairs at various locations along the trail. Commissioner Marsh complimented the artwork along the trail. Chairman Eggers inquired about the scope of the work at the Payne Branch Park stream, and Ms. Patoprsty confirmed that site plans had been shared with Emergency Services Director Will Holt.

County Attorney Nathan Miller noted that he had just received the proposed contract and had not completed a full review but identified a concern with Section 4 regarding Indemnification and Waiver.

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to approve the bid from Brushy Fork Environmental in the amount of \$100,000 for the Payne Branch Park Stream Repair Project, pending revisions by the County Attorney.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

6. SDR FINAL DEBRIS REMOVAL COST (FOLLOW-UP)

Mr. Chip Patterson, President of Southern Disaster Recovery (SDR), provided an update regarding SDR's request to increase the final Not to Exceed (NTE) amount for disaster debris removal from \$6,450,000 to \$7,200,000. This increase reflected additional debris removal and punch list work. At the previous meeting, the Board had requested confirmation that all remaining debris sites had been identified and cleared before approving the final NTE increase.

SDR and Emergency Management confirmed that there were 12 remaining sites, three of which required remediation. One site, located on NC-194 at the Avery County line, was cleaned up by SDR. The other two sites were inaccessible.

Chairman Eggers inquired about the inaccessible sites, and Mr. Patterson explained that they could not be accessed due to low-height and low-weight bridges on private roads, which prevented equipment from reaching them.

Commissioner Greene, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to approve SDR's request to increase the final NTE by \$750,000 to \$7,200,000.

VOTE: Aye – 4 (Eggers, Castle, Greene, Hodges)
Nay – 1 (Marsh)

7. FY26 HOME AND COMMUNITY CARE BLOCK GRANT – REVISED ALLOCATION

Ms. Angie Boitnotte presented the revised FY26 Home and Community Care Block Grant (HCCBG) allocation. She noted that the County's final allocation of \$328,280 is \$7,492 more than originally projected, with the additional funds directed to the Home Delivered Meals program. The required local match is \$36,476, an \$832 increase from the original estimate, and is already included in the adopted FY26 County budget.

Ms. Boitnotte discussed staffing for in-home aides, noting that the program recently had six aides, but one resigned. A replacement has been hired, though certified nursing assistants (CNAs) are difficult to find. Chairman Eggers asked about the demand for home delivered meals; Ms. Boitnotte stated that demand ebbs and flows, often increasing after holidays when families recognize the need. Commissioner Greene asked about volunteer recruitment for the meal program. Ms. Boitnotte said current volunteer needs are met, though some positions are seasonal and additional volunteers may be needed later.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to approve the revised FY26 HCCBG allocation in the amount of \$328,280, with a required local match of \$36,476, and to incorporate the revised allocation into Project on Aging's FY26 budget.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

8. SHERIFF'S OFFICE MATTERS

A. Dodge Durango Fleet Purchase and Upfitting

Major Kelly Redmond presented the Sheriff's Office request to purchase six (6) Dodge Durango AWD V6 SUVs from Ilderton Dodge at a total cost of \$256,444.20 (including taxes and tags). Funding for the vehicles was included in the Sheriff's Office FY 2025–2026 operating budget.

In addition, the Sheriff's Office requested approval to purchase upfitting equipment, including emergency lighting, sirens, partitions, and other patrol-related equipment, from Campbell-Brown, LLC in the amount of \$42,184.12.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to approve the purchase of six (6) 2025 Dodge Durangos from Ilderton Dodge in the amount of \$256,444.20 and the upfitting from Campbell-Brown, LLC in the amount of \$42,184.12.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

B. Ford F-150 Fleet Purchase and Upfitting

Major Kelly Redmond continued the Sheriff's Office presentation, requesting approval to purchase three (3) Ford F-150 Special Service Vehicles from Parks Ford at a total cost of \$145,085.54 (including taxes and tags). Funding for these vehicles was included in the Sheriff's Office FY 2025–2026 operating budget.

In addition, the Sheriff's Office requested approval to purchase upfitting equipment, including emergency lighting, sirens, partitions, and other patrol-related equipment, from Campbell-Brown, LLC in the amount of \$16,540.17.

Commissioner Hodges, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to approve the purchase of three (3) 2025 Ford F-150 Special Service Vehicles from Parks Ford in the amount of \$145,085.54 and the upfitting from Campbell-Brown, LLC in the amount of \$16,540.17.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

C. Purchase of Dual-Band Police Radios

Major Kelly Redmond reported that the Sheriff's Office requested approval to purchase seven (7) dual-band police radios, including programming, from Two Way Radio of Carolina at a cost of \$32,690.00. He noted that two radios were recycled from other vehicles, which reduced the total number of new radios required for the nine recently approved vehicles. Funding for this purchase was included in the Sheriff's Office FY 2025–2026 operating budget.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to approve the purchase of seven (7) dual-band police radios from Two Way Radio of Carolina in the amount of \$32,690.00.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

9. EMERGENCY SERVICES MATTERS

A. Hurricane Helene Update

Emergency Services Director Will Holt provided an update as the County approaches the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Helene. He reported that right-of-way debris removal was complete, though staff had shared concerns with the vendor's overall progress. Staff continued validating the punch list provided by SDR.

Mr. Holt stated that waterway debris removal with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was complete, with all eligible sites addressed and temporary debris sites closed out by NCDEQ. Some sites damaged by contractors were still undergoing remediation.

He noted that Private Property Debris Removal (PPDR) had begun, with the contract awarded to Bering Strait, the same contractor that performed the waterway work. Weekly coordination continued with USACE, Watauga County Soil and Water, NRCS, and FEMA regarding debris management and future restoration of waterways.

The first batch of Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) projects had been approved by NRCS, and staff was coordinating with Soil and Water on an RFQ to bid the projects. The NCEM Private Road and Bridge Program had begun inspections in Watauga County. At the time of the update, 557 projects had been submitted, 537 of which had already been assessed, serving 1,552 households. The registration deadline is August 31.

Mr. Holt also reported that Hagerty Consulting was assisting staff with Public Assistance (PA) projects. Staff met weekly with Hagerty and biweekly with FEMA to track progress and priorities. Additionally, the Multi-Agency Resource Center (MARC) had closed due to extremely low census.

This update was for informational purposes only; no action was required.

B. EMS Fleet Equipment Purchase

Emergency Services Director Will Holt presented his request for six (6) Power Pro 2 stretchers, four (4) spare batteries, and four (4) Power Load devices to outfit both the existing and newly ordered EMS fleet. He noted that the equipment represented an upgrade and expansion of the stretchers currently utilized by Watauga Medics, Inc. Mr. Holt stated that these devices greatly reduce the risk of injury to EMS personnel when loading patients into ambulances.

He further explained that the ProCare agreement included a comprehensive warranty covering parts, labor, technician travel, battery replacement, and annual preventative maintenance throughout the service life of the equipment. The only exclusions were for misuse or gross abuse. Funding for this purchase would come from the accelerated payments received from Appalachian State University on the old high school property.

Commissioner Greene, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to approve the purchase of six (6) Power Pro 2 stretchers, four (4) spare batteries, and four (4) Power Load devices from Stryker Sales, LLC in the amount of \$438,411.78.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

10. TAX MATTERS

A. Monthly Collections Report

County Manager Deron Geouque presented the Monthly Collections Report for July 2025 on behalf of Tax Administrator Tyler Rash, who was home preparing for the arrival of his new baby.

There were no refunds or releases for the month of July.

The report was presented for informational purposes only, and no Board action was required.

11. MISCELLANEOUS ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

A. Guaranteed Energy Savings Contract – Board of Education Resolution (Follow-Up)

Dr. Leslie Alexander, Superintendent of Watauga County Schools, returned to follow up on the proposed Guaranteed Energy Savings Contract that was initially presented at the June 17, 2025, meeting. At that time, the Board tabled the item to allow for further discussion and review of additional information.

Since that meeting, the Board of Education and Schneider Electric had provided State Energy Office template documents and additional reference data from similar projects to demonstrate the guaranteed cost savings and cash flows.

Dr. Alexander reported that the school year had begun smoothly with a positive opening and noted her hope for an uneventful year ahead. She explained that the contract would be placed out for bid and that any energy cost savings realized would remain with the schools to be reinvested in infrastructure and utility improvements.

Commissioner Greene, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, made a motion to approve proceeding with the Guaranteed Energy Savings Contract and to confirm that the County would not reduce Watauga County Schools' funding based on potential energy savings.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

B. NCDOT Project – Dale Adams Road Construction Easement

Mr. Deron Geouque, County Manager, presented a request from the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) for a temporary construction easement to complete the bridge replacement on Dale Adams Road at the site of the Old Cove Creek School. NCDOT offered the County \$375 for use of the easement, which was located on a portion of property not currently utilized by the County.

County Attorney Nathan Miller indicated that he had reviewed the documents and found them satisfactory. In response to questions regarding how NCDOT determined the \$375 value, Mr. Miller explained that it was based on an appraisal. While members expressed concern about the low amount, Mr. Miller advised that contesting the figure would likely cost more in legal fees than the County would recover.

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Greene, made a motion to accept NCDOT's request for the temporary easement and the \$375 compensation.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

C. Boards and Commissions

Reagan Breitenstein had been nominated for a second term on the Watauga County Social Services Board, with her current term set to expire on August 30, 2025. In addition, the Board received a volunteer application from David Luther of Boone, North Carolina, expressing interest in serving on several Advisory Committees, including the Adult Care Home Community Advisory Committee, the Nursing Home Community Advisory Committee, and the Watauga County Board of Adjustment.

Chairman Eggers noted that both items were first readings. The Board decided to waive the first reading for the reappointment of Reagan Breitenstein to the Social Services Board. Commissioner Hodges commented that he had previously worked with Dr. Breitenstein and spoke highly of her service.

The Board agreed to make the volunteer application of David Luther for Advisory Committees a first reading. Mr. Luther's application highlighted his extensive volunteer experience with senior care facilities and his service as a volunteer firefighter and EMT, regularly engaging with elderly and vulnerable populations.

Commissioner Hodges, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to waive the first reading and reappoint Reagan Breitenstein to the Social Services Board.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

12. COMMISSIONER COMMENTS

There were no Commissioner comments.

13. CLOSED SESSION

At 6:33 PM, Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Greene, made a motion to go into Closed Session pursuant to G.S. § 143-318.11(a)(3) to discuss attorney-client privileged matters, § 143-318.11(a)(5) to consider matters related to land acquisition, and § 143-318.11(a)(1) to discuss personnel matters.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

At 8:11 PM, Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to resume the open meeting.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

14. POSSIBLE ACTION AFTER CLOSED SESSION

Purdue Opioid Direct Settlement – Participation Form

Commissioner Hodges, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to approve signing the Sackler Participation Form to participate in the Purdue Opioid Direct Settlement. This action allows Watauga County to share in the settlement funds, which are intended to support efforts to address the impacts of the opioid crisis within the community.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

15. ADJOURN

At 8:16 PM, Commissioner Greene, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to adjourn the meeting.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

Braxton Eggers, Chairman

ATTEST: Katie Hancock, Clerk to the Board