

MINUTES
WILKES COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
BUDGET WORK SESSION
May 10, 2016

The Wilkes County Board of Commissioners met on Tuesday, May 10, 2016 at 5:00 P.M., with the following members present: Chairman Eddie Settle, Vice Chairman Greg Minton, Commissioner Keith Elmore, Commissioner Gary D. Blevins, and Commissioner David Gambill.

Also present for the meeting were John Yates, County Manager; Jerry Shepherd, Finance Officer, and Acting Clerk to the Board.

Chairman Eddie Settle welcomed everyone to the meeting.

AUSTIN FIRE DEPARTMENT – Chairman Eddie Settle recognized Austin Fire Department. The members present for Austin were David Spicer, Billy Vanhoy, and Nick Tharpe. Commissioner Blevins asked if the Fire Department Board is required to have a public hearing or do they accept public input on their budget. He asked if the community is aware that the Fire Department is asking for a fire tax increase, which is not a tax increase from the Board of Commissioners. The members replied the budget is public record and anyone that wishes to view it or their statements are welcome to. They said they do not get input from the community on their budget. They added they would probably hold a public meeting so the community is aware they are asking for an increase and the reasons why this is needed, but it is not required. Chairman Settle stated the request is to go up 5¢. They replied yes from 7 to 12. Chairman Settle asked if the Fire Department has had a public meeting. They replied no they have not. Chairman Settle stated they needed to have one as soon as possible as the Board has to approve the increase in fire tax and they are not in favor of raising taxes. He added the Fire Department knows what they need, but they need to hold a public meeting and convey this. Commissioner Blevins agreed and added the department needs to convey this request and why to their community, it should not come from the Commissioners.

The Fire Department stated they must have the means to protect the person first, property second and they need upgrades and equipment. They said they also hold fund raisers bi-monthly. He added they have \$82K in the bank that will not last long. Commissioner Gambill said he agreed with all they have said, but their community needs to know they are requesting this and why, not just see it on their tax bill. They stated if they do their PR and homework they do not expect much opposition from their community if it is conveyed by them as it needs to be.

Commissioner Blevins said the property tax system in North Carolina is failing, the cost of equipment has gone up astronomically, but the amount of taxes collected in the districts have not. He added they have talked to the State about this and it causes issues for the County just

like it does in the fire districts. This is not keeping pace with inflation and the cost of things, he noted.

The Fire Department stated they have projected at the end of 10-years to lower the fire tax from the 12 requested now to 10¢. Which is still higher than what it is today, they added. Vice Chairman Minton asked what the cost to complete the building is. They replied they need \$141K to build the next two bays and are working with a bank for this funding. They have applied for a \$30K grant through the State, they will know on May 15 or soon after if they received this.

Chairman Settle asked the number of fireman Austin had. They replied they have 29 fireman and run about 200 calls per year. Chairman Settle said the Board understands why they need this. Commissioner Gambill agreed, and added they call them volunteers but being Fire Chief is almost a full time job, just as being a Commissioner is. He noted they must have 36 hours of annual training and to be a rescue department 40 more hours of training are required. The Board appreciates what the Fire Departments do, he added. Commissioner Elmore said they know their needs and the Board can't second guess them. He noted they live in the community and will have the increase as well.

The Fire Department stated they must advertise the public meeting two weeks prior to the meeting so they can't hold it for a few weeks. He added the ad that has already been in the paper also helped to inform the Community of this requested increase, it was well written.

Chairman Settle and the Board thanked the Austin Fire Department for what they do and for the rescue calls they make. The Board said they are not second guessing them or their request they want to make sure the community knows why they have requested this increase.

CHAMPION FIRE DEPARTMENT – Chairman Eddie Settle recognized Champion Fire Department. The members present for Champion were Craig Hollar, Chris Breden, and Keith Severt. Chairman Settle asked how much they are requesting. They replied 3¢. They said they are in a little different situation than Austin. They purchased property 3-years ago, their community is aware they made this purchased and have paid for it. They did this with the intention of building a new station and it is beside where they are now. They said they have not had a public meeting for this request, but they have discussed the new building at their annual meeting and it was very much supported.

Commissioner Gambill asked how many members on their Board are from the community. They replied it is half community (non-fireman) and half fireman. Chairman Settle asked how many fireman they have. They replied 41 members and they have the largest district in the county in square miles. Chairman Settle asked if they have a sub-station. They replied Champion has two. Chairman Settle asked their current tax rate. They replied it is currently 8¢ and going to 11¢. Commissioner Blevins said if the increase is approved they will have the largest fire department budget in the county and it is a strong station. They replied the Stony Fork area hurts them as there is not enough revenue to cover that area. They added the other two areas financially support Stony Fork so they can give them coverage this way.

The Champion members stated they are looking at a 50 – 75 year building and are also looking at part-time status for the firemen. They added they have shift work currently. They do not have showers or amenities of any kind. They have applied for a grant for full time status, but it is not approved at this time. They have a large territory to cover which is from South Holiness Church Road to the county line and will go all the way to Deep Gap at times. They have 78 taxed miles and 94 square response territory miles. They have almost 400 calls per year from dispatch and standby calls.

Chairman Settle asked if they are rescue currently. They replied they qualify for light rescue now, but need to get a new station before they can do anymore. They said they need to move forward due to growth, call volume, and for rescue in the future.

Chairman Settle stated the firemen place their lives on the line each time they get a call and the Board thanked them for their service. The Board added they need to make sure the community is aware of this request and why it is needed.

The fire department asked what happens next. Commissioner Blevins replied once the Budget is approved by the County, it will become official but that will not happen until after the public hearing and they receive comments from the citizens. Chairman Settle added it would be in approximately one month before the budget is approved, they are still working on it. Commissioner Gambill said he respects the Fire Department and their Board, but their community needs to know they made this request and why they need it, this is the first step in doing that.

BOARD OF EDUCATION – Commissioner Blevins said the Board understands there is an additional request from the School System beyond what was already in the proposed budget for an additional \$50K. Commissioner Elmore asked did they specify what this is for. Mr. Yates replied it will go to their general operating account and is for supplemental salaries. Chairman Settle stated the Superintendent said he thanked the Board for what they have agreed to fund so far and if they get \$50K more they are good. The Board stated they already decided to give them a 3% increase of \$341,000, plus \$500K toward the roofs. Commissioner Gambill said he would like to see the quotes on the roofs before this amount is given for the roofs. The Board discussed that the Board of Education is also trying to make cuts and find savings themselves, which is needed and good to see. The consensus was to approve the additional \$50K.

WILKES COMMUNITY COLLEGE – After some discussion the Board consensus was to leave this as presented in the proposed budget.

LIBRARY – After some discussion the Board consensus was to leave this as presented in the proposed budget. They stated there is \$75K that is set aside in the budget for repairs to the building in addition to the 3% increase.

HIGH COUNTRY GRANT – After some discussion the Board consensus was to leave this as presented in the proposed budget. The Board decided they will discuss this again once more information is received from Ms. Wiggins as Vice Chairman Minton requested during her presentation at the last Board meeting. They will research this and make a decision once the information is received and reviewed by Vice Chairman Minton.

PERSONNEL – Chairman Settle stated the first request in the proposed budget for personnel is for 2 new positions at the jail. After some discussion the Board consensus was to remove the 2 new requested positions at the jail. They stated this is because at least 10 new positions had been approved at the jail over the past couple of years.

Communications Center there is 1 new position in the proposed budget. After some discussion the Board consensus was to add 1 for a total of 2 new positions at Communications Center. They stated this was added because the Communications Center is very important to Wilkes and they have lost one employee that was transferred to another position.

Department of Social Services there are 2 new positions in the proposed budget. After some discussion the Board consensus was to keep the 2 new positions as proposed. They stated these positions are reimbursed at 50%.

Finance Department there is 1 new position in the proposed budget. After some discussion the Board consensus was to keep this new position as proposed. They stated this has been requested and denied for at least 3-years and it is time to approve it as recommended.

PAY INCREASE – Vice Chairman Greg Minton requested a 3% across the board increase for all employees. Chairman Settle stated in the past 3 years they have approved 2%, 1%, and 1%. He added in the private sector the workers are not receiving these raises. Commissioner Blevins stated the recommendation in the proposed budget is 2%, which he supports. Commissioner Elmore agree he is in support of the 2%. Chairman Settle asked when the last time a 3% increase was approved. Mr. Shepherd replied 2007. Commissioner Gambill stated the employees went 4 years with no increase at all after 2007 and staff cuts were also made during this time. Vice Chairman Minton agreed. Chairman Settle added this will help the separation in pay or the compression that the Sheriff has mentioned. Vice Chairman Minton stated this raise is for current employees only, the starting salary remains where it is, which will help the compression issue slightly. Commissioner Gambill stated this has been done in the past to help as well.

Commissioner Blevins asked if this amount can be found in the proposed budget. After discussion the Board consensus was to approve a 3% pay increase if the money to cover it could be found in the proposed budget. If this is not located in the proposed budget, the consensus is a 2% pay increase for all current employees with the starting salary remaining the same.

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RECESS – Motion was made by Commissioner Gary D. Blevins to recess the Wilkes County Board of Commissioners Work Session at 6:45 P.M. and reconvene on Tuesday, May 17, 2016 at 5:00 P.M. in the Commissioners Room. The motion was seconded by Commissioner David Gambill and unanimously approved.

Jerry Shepherd, Acting Clerk

Eddie Settle, Chairman

WILKES COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

Approved: