

**MINUTES
WILKES COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
March 17, 2020**

PUBLIC CONCERNS – None

The Wilkes County Board of Commissioners met on Tuesday, March 17, 2020 at 6:05 P.M. with the following members present: Chairman Eddie Settle, Vice Chairman David Gambill, Commissioner Keith Elmore, Commissioner Gary D. Blevins, and Commissioner Brian S. Minton.

Also present for the meeting were Tony Triplett, County Attorney; John Yates, County Manager; and Sarah Call, Clerk to the Board.

Chairman Eddie Settle welcomed everyone, thanked them for coming, and called the meeting to order. Chairman Settle stated they are living in an unprecedented time, that has not happened since World War II with shut downs such as this. He added it will all be alright in a few weeks and things will be realigned once they get this slowed down and stopped.

INVOCATION – Vice Chairman David Gambill led the Invocation.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE – Chairman Settle led the Pledge of Allegiance.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES - Motion was made by Commissioner Keith Elmore, seconded by Commissioner Brian S. Minton and unanimously adopted to approve the Minutes of the Board Meeting held on March 5, 2020.

REVISED FIRE DEPARTMENT SUBSTATION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM – Chairman Settle recognized County Attorney Tony Triplett. Mr. Triplett stated in December the Board passed a Substation Assistance Program for Rural Volunteer Fire Departments in the county. This program has not actually been implemented, it was approved and passed out to all the fire departments. He added no applications have been approved as of this time and the Board has had discussions about revising the policy and making a slight change. There is only one change before the Board, it will remove all references to construction costs. Mr. Triplett stated previously the program imposed a maximum. The idea was that the county would reimburse any fire department their interest on any loan they took out to build a substation that took in no man's land to bring properties back into fire tax and insurance districts. He added the maximum approved in December was set in part based on the construction cost incurred by the fire department building the substation. It was complex and a little complicated on how it was to be computed.

Mr. Triplett stated the change before the Board is to remove that aspect, it still has the same maximum of \$40,000 and frequently would have worked out the same under the old program of computing construction cost. With this change it would no longer require that, if approve

tonight. He added documentation would be required from the fire departments that qualify for the program. They would verify they took out a loan, their interest payments over the life of the loan, and it was to build a substation. The other requirements have not changed which is requiring a letter from Niki Hamby, Fire Marshal that parcels have been brought into the fire tax district, the certificate of occupancy, and the Department of Insurance Approval from N.C. DOI. These are all the same just with no link to construction costs. Mr. Triplett said the county will then make an appropriation of the amount of interest to be incurred up to the maximum of \$40K. It is open to and intended for all fire departments, all will be treated the same and go through the same process, he added.

Chairman Settle stated one first department has requested this under the old program and have provided some of the documents with more to come. Mr. Yates replied yes they have provided some of the construction cost with more to follow. Commissioner Elmore stated they are saying this simplifies the previously approved program, how does it do that. Mr. Triplett replied it no longer requires any verification of construction cost, before every applicant had to provide receipts of some type as to what it cost to build the substation. Commissioner Elmore asked if they will no longer require proof of the cost of the substation. Mr. Triplett replied if the revised program is approved that is correct. Chairman Settled added they are still requiring them to provide proof they are building a substation. Mr. Triplett replied yes, that did not change, all those requirements are still in effect. They have to provide proof that they borrowed money from a N.C. financial institution in the form of a Promissory Note and evidence of what the interest payments will be, this is unchanged. They also must provide a letter from the Bank saying the loan was for the purpose of building the substation as before. Mr. Triplett said the maximum is no longer based on construction cost, it will be set at a flat amount of \$40K or interest cost whichever is less.

Commissioner Blevins said the intent was for the money to be a way to give them an interest free loan basically for their building without the county giving them money. He added they will give them up to \$40K, they will build a substation that will bring in a fairly large number of people into a protected fire zone that do not have that currently. Commissioner Blevins stated it is a great benefit to the entire county and for the home owners and tax payors that do not have this currently. He said they had discussions previously if the loan needs to be on the building itself and they bring them a Note as proof. Mr. Triplett replied they have to provide proof it was for a substation, but if they want to pledge collateral other than the substation for repayment of the loan, that is up to them. He added as long as the loan was for the purpose of funding the construction of the substation, which the bank has to verify it would qualify. Commissioner Blevins asked if the substation was deemed at some point no longer needed or they did not pay the loan back, who owns it. Mr. Triplett replied it is the fire departments building and they can do as they see fit, if they failed to pay the loan it would be up to the bank to remedy as they deem necessary.

Commissioner Blevins stated they made this offer years ago for interest free loans to fire departments for new substations. Commissioner Elmore asked who. Commissioner Blevins replied the Board of Commissioners had a consensus that if they built a building they would give them an interest free loan. Commissioner Elmore said they had a consensus in December to give

20% of the cost. Commissioner Blevins said they have had a long standing consensus on the Board for the interest free loan and have made offers to fire departments for a long time. Chairman Settle agreed. Commissioner Elmore stated bottom line they passed in December a good agreement, a good program that all fire departments can participate in with 20% match of the cost of the building and he was very happy with that. He added interest rates fluctuate and it seems it would be much simpler to keep the program they have. Commissioner Elmore said he is fully supportive of this program, but would ask them to not change it.

Commissioner Elmore asked Sheriff Shew was it correct that Roaring River Fire Department build a substation and they increased their fire tax rate 2 cents to pay for it. Sheriff Shew replied that was correct. Commissioner Elmore said this is a big change, over the years fire departments have raised their rates to pay for substations, with this in mind he would like to keep the program as is. Commissioner Blevins asked how many substations are there. The response was: Roaring River, Millers Creek, Champion, Wilbar, Champion, Ronda, and Traphill. Vice Chairman Gambill added that was before the state came in and they had all the fire district issues and people now outside the fire tax and insurance district. He added those departments did that to take in property and revenue. The county is offering this to get folks back into fire tax and insurance districts and take in no man's land. Commissioner Blevins agreed and added in most cases it does not take in a large population but large tracts of land and opens those areas up for development. He added the fire insurance district triggered a lot of this. The fire departments were covering these areas anyway and they have fire protection, but the 6 mile limit using satellites made this an issue. Commissioner Blevins stated this program was to help fire departments build additional substations in those areas. The county will grow and this will aid development. He added with the feds lowering interest rates they might can get a near zero interest loan right now. Chairman Settle said it may be a good time for them to proceed. Commissioner Blevins added the two Fire Commissioners, Chairman Settle and Vice Chairman Gambill are both recommending this, he agrees with Commissioner Elmore. This was a good start, this change in not a big one and the Fire Commissioners think the change makes the program better and this is his recommendation.

Vice Chairman David Gambill made a motion to approve the Revised Substation Assistance Program for Rural Volunteer Fire Departments located in or serving portions of Wilkes County, as presented at tonight's meeting. The motion was seconded by Chairman Eddie Settle. Voting on the motion:

Ayes: Chairman Eddie Settle
Vice Chairman David Gambill
Commissioner Gary D. Blevins
Commissioner Brian S. Minton

Nays: Commissioner Keith Elmore

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING – OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMY – Mr. Yates stated this was given to the Board a few weeks ago, the Towns of Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro and the EDC have passed it. He added this is to work on the outdoor economy, inventory everything, and get some direction going forward. Mr. Yates said this is all the MOU does, Mr. Triplett has advised this is not legally bidding them to anything. He added it just shows they are all working together and looking at the outdoor economy. There is no cost or promise of funds associated with approving the MOU.

Vice Chairman David Gambill made a motion to approve the Memorandum of Understanding between The Health Foundation Inc. and Wilkes County as presented at tonight's meeting. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Keith Elmore and unanimously approved.

OLD BUSINESS – UPDATE – TIM PENNINGTON, EMS DIRECTOR – Chairman Settle asked Tim Pennington, EMS Director to provide an update at this time on meetings they have had with emergency response. Mr. Pennington said they have been working around the clock on this as everyone knows there is so much information that is constantly changing. He added they have a great team working on this and trying to keep up with every update and change that comes out in order to manage it. This is an evolving new virus; the CDC and scientist are all learning more as they go. Mr. Pennington stated make no mistake they are going to manage this event and it is not going to manage us. He added they are way ahead of this right now and all departments are working in a completely unified approach with all Department Heads. Mr. Pennington said their approach has been very aggressive and will remain this way. They are very proactive and taking preventative measures, thus far, there are no positive cases in Wilkes County. He added there are some test results pending at this time and most likely one will come up in Wilkes.

Mr. Pennington stated today they found out the testing process will speed up. He added they have made many proactive changes such as limiting access to many of the County Buildings and have spread out ambulances to reduce the density of employees. Mr. Pennington said throughout the county the priority is to prevent and protect employees from the virus, the county must keep critical services intact. He added they have made a lot of difficult decisions and more will come, but all are unified, with lots of support, and working together. They have amped up the cleaning process for all county buildings and are also cleaning the ambulances twice the normal standard. Mr. Pennington stated signs are posted at every entrance asking if they are sick please do not enter the building. At the courthouse if someone has to come in and are coughing or have any symptoms, they are asked to put on a mask. Most things at the courthouse have been delayed or cancelled, he added.

Commissioner Blevins asked if they have plenty of protective equipment at this time, is this an issue. Mr. Pennington replied at this time they have an ample supply of equipment, Suzanne Hamby is working with some supplies and will also be working with the State Emergency resources to request items as needed as well. Mr. Yates added they are going through them fast. Mr. Pennington said they have done a great job with containment, but if they have an outbreak their response will be escalated rapidly. Mr. Yates said it is likely Wilkes will get a case.

Commissioner Blevins asked if Day Cares are closed now that all schools and universities are closed. Mr. Pennington replied no they are not, luckily this does not seem to really affect kids. The recommendations are in order to protect the workforce and people providing critical services the Day Cares need to stay open. Chairman Settle stated the CDC has all the latest information and updates the numbers at 4 PM each day and he is encouraged. He hopes the graph is coming down and maybe it has reached the peak. Chairman Settle added all the new implementations on social distancing and closings have helped. Commissioner Blevins agreed and said the rules and recommendations are helping, people need to take it seriously and follow the rules. People are not used to this, but it can help to bring the curve down and not overburden the health care systems and the county. Commissioner Blevins added the school system is feeding the kids and stepping up to help with food insecurity and doing a great job. Chairman Settle said they are also out in the county delivering and setting up at some community centers so it is closer for the families to pick up which is great. Commissioner Blevins said some of the restaurant workers are now out of work and it will be hard on them to take care of their family. He added they need to all work together and help people that are less fortunate and especially the elderly. Chairman Settle stated ministries are stepping in to help with meal delivery to make sure the kids get the food they need. He added they may find this virus has brought the community, three towns and everyone closer together. Mr. Yates stated the public has been very cooperative about the limited access, no one is upset, they are coming in, doing business and leaving, it has been great. Chairman Settle stated Wilkes was one of the first counties to delay a State of Emergency and then the Governor declared and this has really helped. These efforts and precautions are why there are no cases in Wilkes and most all the surrounding counties.

Vice Chairman Gambill said they need to be cautions and people need to do their part, the more they listen and follow the rules the quicker everyone can get back to day to day life. Commissioner Minton stated Jennifer Cooper at BROCC did close the congregate meals when the Senior Center closed, however they did keep Meals on Wheels open to provide the emergency boxes. Commissioner Elmore stated from his understanding the one case in Watauga went to the hospital and was immediately sent home to self-quarantine and then tested positive. He was told to take Tylenol and nothing else they could do, this is basically the treatment. Mr. Pennington replied yes it is a virus, the treatment is to take supportive treatment such as Tylenol and ibuprofen and plenty of fluids. Chairman Settle stated all the cases in NC are at home. Mr. Pennington replied yes no one has been hospitalized. Commissioner Elmore said so far everyone has or is recovering at home in NC. Mr. Pennington replied that is correct there are no deaths in NC. He added they will stay on top of it.

NEW BUSINESS – BUDGET AMENDMENTS – Mr. Yates stated with the Declaration the County did, this budget amendment will help to keep track of the spending for COVID-19 so they can ask for reimbursement. Chairman Settle asked is this because they declared the State of Emergency and can get reimbursement from FEMA. Mr. Yates replied yes that helps with the federal funds once that is opened up and helps to try to get reimbursement. Commissioner Blevins asked the Sheriff if they are working overtime. Sheriff Shew replied they are not at this time. He added he has sent all nonessential and some essential employees' home to keep them healthy so they can function. Commissioner Blevins asked what about the Jail. Sheriff Shew replied they have cleaned the jail out as much as they possibly can, they are not taking in inmates

unless they absolutely have to. They changed the way they do business there and have basically locked it down and have a vetting process. There is only one point of access and they are checking their temperature and symptoms upon entry. Sheriff Shew said they have a plan at a jail.

Vice Chairman Gambill asked about Courthouse access. Court is cancelled and function is limited but normally there are still a lot of folks that go into the courthouse every day. Sheriff Shew said this was discussed today and right now the traffic through the courthouse is minimal, District Court and several things have been suspended. He added most everything there is open for business and the person at the door is being more observant of the folks coming through. Anyone questionable will have a vetting process and questions before access is granted. Mr. Yates said they are not checking temperatures, but according to the Clerk of Court and Register of Deeds they are having a lot less foot traffic than normal when he met with them earlier today. Vice Chairman Gambill asked about the traffic at the county office building and concern for employees and citizens. Mr. Yates replied it is much reduced as well they are encouraging folks to do everything they can online and over the phone when possible. Commissioner Blevins asked about DSS and the high foot traffic they have. Mr. Yates replied they limited access as much as possible. They are doing PPE training this week for Social Workers that have to go out and visit homes. He added they are cleaning the waiting room as often as possible and trying to not let anyone go in the back. They have the PPE equipment for in home visits and DHHS has now issued guidance on this.

Motion was made by Vice Chairman David Gambill to approve Budget Amendment No. 27 (General – Emergency Management – Requesting to allocate from fund balance \$25,000 to be used for response of the Coronavirus Pandemic). The motion was seconded by Commissioner Brian S. Minton and unanimously approved.

Commissioner Elmore stated he would like to suggest no new hires, freeze budgets as they are, and no travel. Mr. Yates replied travel has been cancelled already. Commissioner Elmore said this is going to be a very tight budget year. Commissioner Blevins stated sales tax will decline for a while, but may go right back up and asked what is the delay on sales tax. Mr. Huffman replied 2 months. Mr. Yates replied another reason to suspend hiring is to keep access limited as well for the new hire paperwork, this is being discussed at this time. Mr. Huffman said they could make a case that the way stores are selling everything on the shelf that the March sales tax may not look bad, but going forward it will be hard to know. He added not having MerleFest will also have an impact. Commissioner Elmore stated they will affect many. Chairman Settle added it had \$13-\$14 million impact according to Dr. Cox.

Sheriff Shew said Mr. Pennington, Mr. Yates and several of them have been to meeting after meeting and they know the most about something that they don't know anything about that anyone could possibly know. He added to date there is no known cases of contact with hard surfaces, it is person to person contact. Sheriff Shew stated if the residence will go by the guidelines and recommendations from the CDC everybody will be OK, if they don't it will get ahead of them. If that happens it will tax the medical system, Law Enforcement and everyone. He added it is imperative that everybody follow the guidelines. Sheriff Shew stated the

Governor's executive order has banned meetings of more than 100 people. He added 100 is way to many, 50 is entirely too many. He added they do not see anything that should cause 50 people to meet under one roof at this time, and that is too many. Chairman Settle asked if they believe the Governor will lower the number. Sheriff Shew replied yes he does. Commissioner Blevins added the federal recommendation is down to 10, they are having a safe meeting tonight and no positive test, but if they don't follow the guidelines and have an outbreak it will spread. Mr. Yates stated the guidelines and recommendations are rapidly changing as is the testing process. Mr. Pennington added there is a checklist or criteria they have to meet in order to be tested and at this time they have to go home and quarantine until the test comes back. The Health Department will either release them or continue the treatment and they have to complete a visitor list as well.

Commissioner Blevins asked about the larger employers like Tyson, they need to produce food, what are they doing. Mr. Pennington replied they fall under industrial workplace and are exempt and they are taking extra precautions.

Vice Chairman Gambill said everyone is working hard, from the County to the State and Federal Government they are all unified and working together. It is great to see and he is impressed, this is something they have never dealt with. Chairman Settle agreed politics have gotten out of the way and all are working together.

ADJOURN - Motion was made by Commissioner Keith Elmore, seconded by Vice Chairman David Gambill and by unanimous vote adopted to adjourn the meeting of the Wilkes County Board of Commissioners at 7:02 P.M.

Sarah D. Call, Clerk

Eddie Settle, Chairman

WILKES COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

Approved: April 7, 2020