

**MINUTES
WILKES COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
March 20, 2018**

PUBLIC CONCERNS – RICK HARVIN – FUNDING FOR LIBRARY – Chairman Blevins welcomed and recognized Rick Harvin. Mr. Harvin thanked the Commissioners for the opportunity to speak. He said he is the Chairman of the Wilkes County Library Advisory Board. He said he wants to talk about funding for the library and particularly funding for much needed raises for the staff. Mr. Harvin said they are requesting from the county for the main library and Traphill Branch for FY 2018-2019 a total of \$664,639.00 which is an increase of less than 10% for the previous year. He stated from this total the request for salaries is \$457,500.00, which is an increase of 3.8% from last year for 22 employees. Mr. Harvin mentioned some of the many attributes of the staff. He said an entry level position at the library pays \$8.01 per hour, and added that is hard to live on and mentioned several living expenses everyone has to pay. Mr. Hardin stated Julia Turpin, County Librarian told him that 2 applicants turned down a job there and two existing employees left for higher paying library jobs elsewhere. He said they can't keep or hire good people with these salaries. Money is tight and he knows the Board has many decisions to make in the budget, but they want find any better bang for their buck than at the library. In closing he added they need to reward the people that make the library what it is and asked the Board to please consider this when working on the budget for next year.

WILKES SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT SPEECH CONTEST WINNERS – Chairman Blevins welcomed and recognized Rob Baldwin, Director Wilkes Soil & Water Conservation District. Mr. Baldwin thanked the Board and said one of their charges at the Soil and Water District is education. They have a contest every year as part of their education program, which they host at the McGee Center. He added on April 10th they will have more than 350 kids at the McGee Center participating in the Enviro Thon. He invited everyone to attend and added they learn about the environment, have test, and contest. There will be 13 districts across the area, and this event is held state wide.

Mr. Baldwin said tonight they have the winners of the speech contest as they wrap up the education facet in the district. He added Chairman Blevins attended the District speech contest and he mentioned having these winners come to a Board meeting and Chairman Blevins invited them. He added they have the two winners that will give their speech tonight. Next he introduced Alexis Gunn 8th grade winner and Robert Myers 7th grade winner, both are from East Wilkes Middle School.

ALEXIS GUNN – 8TH GRADE EAST WILKES MIDDLE SCHOOL – Ms. Gunn presented her winner speech at this time. She was given a round of applause at the conclusion.

ROBERT MYERS – 7TH GRADE EAST WILKES MIDDLE SCHOOL – Mr. Myers presented his winner speech at this time. He was given a round of applause at the conclusion.

Chairman Blevins and the Board stated it is a tie. He added there are so many things on the news about youth and problems, but over and over again they meet with students and interact with youth and it is very positive. They feel good about the kids that will take over in the future, there are many good youth in Wilkes County. Chairman Blevins stated they know the parents are very proud of them, both presented great speeches. He asked for the audience to give them another round of applause.

The Wilkes County Board of Commissioners met on Tuesday, March 20, 2018 at 7:08 P.M. with the following members present: Chairman Gary D. Blevins, Vice Chairman Eddie Settle, Commissioner Keith Elmore, Commissioner David Gambill, and Commissioner Greg Minton.

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

Chairman Gary D. Blevins welcomed everyone and called the meeting to order.

INVOCATION – Commissioner David Gambill led the Invocation.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE – Chairman Gary D. Blevins led the Pledge of Allegiance.

WILKES VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURE DISTRICT:

1. WILKES VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURE DISTRICT BOARD REAPPOINTMENTS – Chairman Gary D. Blevins recognized Rob Baldwin, Director Wilkes Soil & Water Conservation District. Mr. Baldwin stated the Wilkes Voluntary Ag District appreciates the Board for their time and all they do for them and the County. He said the Voluntary Ag District makes recommendation to this Board for approval of their Board members. They have three nominees for reappointment to the Board for 3-year terms, which are Mr. Claude Shew, Mr. Jimmy Church, and Mr. Benny Alexander. He added they have completed the Board No Change Form as required.

Vice Chairman Settle asked if they have a 5 member Board. Mr. Claude Shew replied yes. Chairman Blevins stated they are 3 reappointments for consideration, Mr. Claude Shew, Mr. Jimmy Church, and Mr. Benny Alexander.

Vice Chairman Eddie Settle made a motion to approve the Reappointments of Claude Shew, Jimmy Church, and Benny Alexander to the Wilkes Voluntary Agriculture District Board for 3-year terms, as presented. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Keith Elmore and unanimously approved.

2. ANNUAL REPORT OF ACRES ENROLLED – Chairman Blevins welcomed and recognized Mr. Claude Shew, Jr., Chairman Wilkes Voluntary Ag. District. Mr. Shew gave the following agriculture update for totals and percentages of acres enrolled:

Totals (all plans): thru March 9, 2018
Owners – 59 Groups
Parcels – 138
Acres – 6115.96

Percentage of Total:
Ag Land – 2653.46
Forestry Land – 3168
Horticulture Land – 6.5

Mr. Shew said Ag is very important in Wilkes County. He added when he was growing up they use to drink from a creek or water hose and never thought they would pay for water, or bottles of water as they do today. He said water is very valuable and Wilkes is fortunate that it has a lot of good water. Vice Chairman Settle added they are very blessed to have plenty of water in Wilkes. Mr. Shew agreed. Chairman Blevins stated he was in Mexico awhile back. They traveled 400 miles and crossed only one small creek. Mr. Shew stated he is very aware of how Soil and Water takes care of the water in the pastures. He added he has traveled out West many times and the cattle famers tell him if a cow can't walk a mile for water, they do not want them on their farm. Wilkes is very fortunate and they appreciate the Board for all they do, he said.

Chairman Blevins stated the programs they have in restoring streams, and the banks, along with the good forestry management has improved the water table, supply, and purity of water in the streams. Mr. Shew agreed. Vice Chairman Settle added they are one of the most aggressive in the state for getting grants to help the poultry growers and cattle farmers. Mr. Baldwin agreed. He added they were just recently approved for a portion of \$865K for the Roaring River Watershed and will be implementing this. Chairman Blevins said this is a good project. Vice Chairman Settle stated just like one of the speech winners said, water is a precious commodity, can't have life without water. Chairman Blevins said as they know, the Board strongly supports the agricultural business in Wilkes County. Mr. Shew replied they appreciate the Board and all they have done and intend to do.

Commissioner Gambill asked how the acres enrolled compares to the past few years. Mr. Baldwin replied the voluntary Ag district has stayed fairly constant. He added they always welcome people to submit applications to join the voluntary Ag district. They appreciate Farm Bureau because they donate the signs that are at each farm that lets everyone know they are part a voluntary Ag district. Mr. Baldwin said as far as farming in Wilkes County it has increased slightly. He said they hope through education they can ramp up the voluntary Ag district in the county. Mr. Shew added it is hard to get people to enroll until they have a problem, once they have a problem they want to enroll.

Mr. Shew thanked the Board for their time. Mr. Baldwin added they have a Board meeting on Monday, March 26th and welcomed the Board to attend and said they will provide lunch at the meeting. The Board thanked Mr. Shew and Mr. Baldwin for the update.

FINANCE DEPARTMENT – CONTRACT TO AUDIT ACCOUNTS FISCAL YEAR 2017-2018 – Chairman Blevins welcomed and recognized Assistant Finance Officer Chris Huffman. Mr. Huffman stated he is here to present a contract to audit accounts from Martin Starnes & Associates, CPAs, P.A. for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2018. This is a standard contract used by all governmental entities in North Carolina for auditing services. He said the total contract amount is \$65,000 which is a 5% increase over last year. This increase is due to the expanded Office of State Auditor testing requirements for major programs. Mr. Huffman said if this contract is approved by the Board, it will be forwarded to the Local Government Commission for their approval.

Commissioner Gambill asked if the cost was the same last year or did it have an increase. Mr. Huffman replied it had a slight increase last year. Chairman Blevins stated this increase is driven by the change in regulations. Mr. Huffman agreed and added he has just handed out information from the Department of State Treasurer office. He attended at the last finance conference they went over audits and said for all counties to expect an increase in audits due to the Office of the State Auditor requesting more audits be done. They stated the auditors will pass this cost to the counties because they are going to have to test more programs. Mr. Huffman stated he and Mr. Shepherd were surprised with the slight increase they received many neighboring counties had a significant increase.

Mr. Huffman said Martin & Starnes has been doing the audits in Wilkes for 10 years. Chairman Blevins added in the past in tough years for the county they held their cost and did not request an increase. It seems justified he added. Commissioner Elmore stated it seems they are satisfied with these folks but he would ask if they have ever placed this out for bid, or when was the last time. Mr. Shepherd stated they did that 10 years ago and this is when they started using this firm. He added in working this long together they both get accustomed to each other and it makes the finance department's job easier as they know what to expect and what they want. Commissioner Minton added the most important part is the relationship they have with the state. Chairman Blevins asked how many county audits this firm does. Mr. Shepherd replied more than 60, this includes both Towns and Counties. Commissioner Elmore said a bid would keep them honest. Chairman Blevins said that is something they need to keep in mind and talk about for next year. Commissioner Gambill stated they did go several years without an increase. Mr. Huffman said this has been a hot topic the past few weeks in finance departments and there is one county close by that received a 40% increase in their audit contract.

Commissioner Keith Elmore made a motion to approve the Contract to Audit Accounts from Martin Starnes and Associates, CPAs, P.A. for fiscal year ending June 30, 2018, as presented. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Greg Minton and unanimously approved.

OLD BUSINESS – Vice Chairman Settle stated he would like to talk about the water. They had two kids earlier and one quoted Ben Franklin, “you know the worth of water when the well is dry”, this is a fact. He added he has concerns locally, each Board member is asked about the water issue from time to time and some more than others as they are in town much more. Vice Chairman Settle stated there are two towns, North Wilkesboro and Wilkesboro, and they are divided by the Yadkin River. This river is a life source for Wilkesboro and the county. Reddies

River is the life source for North Wilkesboro. He added both towns are super passionate about their towns, their elected officials serve with passion, and each wants the best for their towns.

Vice Chairman Settle stated he has a question, how can this Commissioner body facilitate the water issue that has been going on for a long while. For the past few years the Chairman of this Board (Settle 2 years, Minton last year, Blevins this year) have worked with both towns trying to get this worked out. He said there is a 30 year \$33 million loan interest free. Senator Randleman worked to get the 30 year term that had never been approved prior through DENR, he added. Vice Chairman Settle stated the next issue is the Town of North Wilkesboro is in desperate need of water, during the last drought the Reddies River got pretty low. He added the state recognized this need and this is why an interest free loan was offered. Wilkesboro also need it to keep a steady flow for their citizens and for Tyson, everyone knows Tyson is the heartbeat of the county. He added they are the largest employer not including the numerous poultry farms and all those workers.

Vice Chairman Settle said Wilkesboro is working on the Acti Flow system that is used in Europe, the Mayor told him yesterday they feel somewhat comfortable with it. The cost of the intake is the issue. He added there is a contract in place that was signed in 2012 and the county has offered to do their part. The county will build it if they will buy the water, he said. Vice Chairman Settle stated cost is an issue, it is not just the intake cost, and there are water rates too. He said in looking at the water cost for an average home for 5,000 gallons in North Wilkesboro city limits the rate is \$28.98, this is still a good deal. Outside the city limits the cost is \$42.56 which folks that have moved into this area say is still a good deal for water rates. Vice Chairman Settle stated Wilkesboro is \$10.69 for 5,000 gallons inside the city limits, it is the cheapest in the state, outside the city limits it is \$21.38 which is a good deal.

Vice Chairman Settle stated the goal is to get a conversation started, he is concerned they will lose the funding. He added they have a signed contract to build the intake, the county will do their part and build it to sale the water to the two towns. They do not blame either town, North Wilkesboro does not want to raise their rates, he understands this, and they don't want to raise taxes. It is a hard place in the road, but they are going to need this water. Chairman Settle said he does have good news, Wilkesboro Mayor has assured him they can provide finished water to the Town of North Wilkesboro cheaper than they can finish it. He added the final plea is to not let this loan go back. He asked the Chairman to work with the two Mayors and Managers and start meeting again and keep this on the forefront. Vice Chairman Settle stated they are not saying they have to build the intake, if the can agree and work together on water, buying from Wilkesboro or whatever is best. Maybe North Wilkesboro can use some of this money, build a line to Wilkesboro and buy it cheaper than they can finish it themselves. He added this sounds like a good deal, and maybe it will just take a few conversations and working together. The other Board members may have some better ideas, but he would like to see this put to rest.

Commissioner Elmore stated the best thing is to combine the towns, they would not have to worry with the back and forth. Vice Chairman Settled added if they could do this he will second the motion. Chairman Blevins said he did not think they can do this. Mr. Triplett agreed. Chairman Blevins added they cannot merger the two town governments, but they could have one

entity that includes the towns and county as a water authority and all have a say in the water. Commissioner Minton stated the associations might not agree. Chairman Blevins said they would be represented and included. Vice Chairman Settle asked what it will take to get North Wilkesboro to agree to purchase water from Wilkesboro, and asked how the county can facilitate this. Chairman Blevins said they are frustrated as a county Board, they represent not only the citizens in the county, but also the citizens in each town which also pay county taxes. He added this Board is the only body that represents everybody that resides in Wilkes County and pays taxes at the county level. It gives them a responsibility to try to get everyone moving in the right direction and doing what is best for the entire county population. He added this translates into the county wants to build a water intake in the reservoir because it will benefit everybody in the county for decades into the future. Chairman Blevins said they do not know who will end up getting this water, if their well goes dry or have other problems or a severe drought, there is a potential to serve many people. He added it can help support new industry maybe Ag related, and they would like to see the intake built as a county entity. Chairman Blevins said they can't build it without the towns buying the water. The money is there, they do not know the final cost, but it is frustrating and they can't do it without the support of the two municipalities. Chairman Blevins said it can be a single plant located closer to the intake for efficiency and they move the water to the others. They have to have a commitment from both towns to purchase all of their water and abandon the Acti Flow and other systems, he added.

Commissioner Elmore said it is very frustrating that in 2012 they had a signed contract with the three entities, the county and both towns to do exactly what they are talking about. They are refusing to do what they signed and he does not understand this. Vice Chairman Settle said the cost has increased so much they can't do it now. If North Wilkesboro could run a line to Wilkesboro and purchase finished water, they guarantee they can do this cheaper. Commissioner Elmore stated if they would have acted on this four years ago it would have cost less. Chairman Blevins said the only possible reason to not do this would be cost. Commissioner Gambill stated on cost alone they will save \$15 million with a zero interest rate loan. Commissioner Elmore stated he understands the average bill in North Wilkesboro would go up \$7.00 or 29% to do this. He added that could be introduced over 3-years which is what it will take to build it. This is what Wilkesboro done, raised their rates to cover their cost in anticipation of doing this, he said. Vice Chairman Settle stated the loan will go away and asked how long they have. Chairman Blevins stated they have deadlines they have to keep meeting. Mr. Yates said there will be a day of reckoning. Commissioner Minton stated it will end at some time, they will want to use the money that has been tied up on this project since 2012. Mr. Triplett added it has been in place since the 2012 contract. Vice Chairman Settle stated the 30 years has only been in place about 3 years, Senator Randleman got this approved.

Commissioner Elmore stated his understanding is the county is ready and willing to build an intake and sale water to both towns. Commissioner Minton added absolutely. Commissioner Elmore said this is what is in the contract. Chairman Blevins stated they have to build it the Corps will not allow anyone else to build and own it that is why the county is involved. Originally it was just the two towns but the Corps can't allow that, it has to be the county until it reaches the edge of the Corps property, he added. This means the county has to be involved, but are not the decision makers, can't do anything and are virtually powerless. Commissioner

Gambill said they would like to be in control, if they could. Commissioner Elmore stated he would like to suggest a solution to North Wilkesboro not wanting to raise rates for their citizens. They can take \$15 million from the hospital rent and reduce the property taxes to offset the increase in water rates, he said. Chairman Blevins added they do not want a controversy with the two towns and there has been a great deal of editorializing and reporting on this and why it is not moving forward. The county is a willing party, but are not the decision makers. The county has to own the intake and would like to build it. The financing is in place if the towns will purchase the raw water, he said. Commissioner Minton added it must also include the maintenance, upkeep, and operation, it will be a county asset. Common sense should dictate something does not get cheaper the longer they wait, he said.

Chairman Blevins said they were in Washington, D.C. recently and was told they are pushing for \$25 billion for infrastructure money for rural communities to build water, roads, and bridges. Maybe as the project moves forward this will be available. Vice Chairman Settle agreed. Commissioner Elmore said they have discussed this before.

OLD BUSINESS – Commissioner Elmore said he would like to see the county enforce the covered loads at the landfill, he sees a lot of full trash bags falling off trucks. He added since the regulation is on the books he would like to see it enforced. Chairman Blevins stated they need to get the public hearing back on the agenda and discuss this in the near future.

ADJOURN - Motion was made by Commissioner David Gambill, seconded by Commissioner Keith Elmore and by unanimous vote adopted to adjourn the meeting of the Wilkes County Board of Commissioners at 7:47 P.M.

Sarah D. Call, Clerk

Gary D. Blevins, Chairman

WILKES COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

Approved: