

**MACON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**  
**JUNE 7, 2022**  
**CONTINUED SESSION**  
**MINUTES**

Chairman Tate reconvened the meeting at 5:00 p.m. as recessed from the May 26, 2022 continued session and stated that the primary purpose was for on-going budget discussion. All Board Members, County Manager Derek Roland, Deputy Clerk Mike Decker, Finance Director Lori Carpenter, County Attorney Eric Ridenour and members of the news media, county employees and interested citizens were present.

**Discussion regarding the recommended Fiscal Year 2022-23 Budget:**

Chairman Tate asked board members if there were any questions or items they wanted to discuss regarding the recommended budget. Mr. Roland stated there had been a minor change to the recommended budget following his discussion with Ruthie Edwards with the North Carolina Forest Service (NCFS), whom he had not been able to connect with prior to his budget presentation. He said the recommended amount was \$94,528 and asked the board to consider increasing that amount by \$8,098 making the new total \$102,626. Mr. Roland indicated the difference would be taken from the Transfer to Fund 46 account. He explained that the county is only responsible for 40 percent of the funding for the NCFS with the remaining 60 percent being funded by the state. Mr. Roland said the increased amount would be representative of the county's 40 percent match and the state's portion would be \$153,940 for a total contracted amount of \$256,566. Mr. Roland reminded the board that \$20,400 of the county's \$102,626 allocation is for a one-time capital purchase of a fire attack vehicle. He also gave a report of funds budgeted for the NCFS since FY 2020 and how much was unspent. Mr. Roland reminded board members that the unspent funds revert to the fund balance at the end of the year.

Commissioner Beale requested the board take another look at the library funding. He stated the library had requested \$100,000, but the county manager only put \$50,000 in his recommended budget. Commissioner Beale said we are the only county that operates three libraries, it is not known if Nantahala will need additional employees with the new location, and the employees serve Macon County citizens and need to be paid accordingly even though they are not Macon County employees. He requested an inflationary increase of 7 percent, which would bring their allocation to \$70,000, which would help them increase their wages and keep the staff. Finance Director Lori Carpenter shared that the

current contingency balance was \$100,000 if the board wanted to reduce that amount by the \$20,000 request. Commissioner Higdon stated he had received more phone calls regarding the library this year than ever before with concern about the “Gay Pride” display in the teen section. He said he was having a hard time allocating an increase to a publicly funded institution that supports a display that is so divisive. After a brief discussion between Commissioner Beale and Commissioner Higdon, Commissioner Higdon stated he felt that the board’s position is to set the direction of the county and the agencies that represent the county.

Commissioner Young suggested Cowee School be turned over to a non-profit to maintain instead of spending \$70,000 for the county to maintain. He said he believed when new schools were built the intent was to no longer have to maintain the old facilities and inquired as to whether it would be better to have Mainstream, the Little Tennessee Land Trust, or another non-profit take over those responsibilities. Commissioner Beale stated that Cowee School is a heritage center for the entire county. Mr. Roland confirmed the budget recommendation was for \$67,500 with \$50,000 of that amount to cover roof refurbishment and the remainder covering utilities. Commissioner Higdon said this year the basketball courts had to be resurfaced, last year the well had to be replaced and in previous years, the HVAC system had to be replaced, as well as the kitchen, which is not being utilized. Commissioner Young added that in 20 years we are still going to be maintaining this property like any other county-owned building. Commissioner Beale added that the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians was also contributing to the facility and the Cowee Community heritage group helps take care of the facility and grounds. Chairman Tate said he did not disagree with Commissioner Young and understood from the beginning that the center was to become self-sufficient. Commissioner Higdon said he recalled the original plan was to contribute \$60,000 for three years and then the center would be self-sufficient. Commissioner Beale said this was not the only previous school building that the county had contributed to, but the other facilities are not the size of this facility nor open every day.

Commissioner Higdon requested time to talk about the proposed \$150,000 pickleball courts. He stated that the pickleball courts serve people primarily his age, but for months the skate park had been discussed and was not included in the budget. Commissioner Higdon asked Franklin Town Manager Amie Owens to give an update on the status of the skate park from the town’s perspective. Ms. Owens shared that the town council had discussed the park at its meeting last night regarding communication issues with J.E. Dunn Construction and resignation of the project manager in April. She said the town has reached out to Artisan Skateparks that actually builds skate parks and has received a quote between \$260,000 and \$280,000 to build the park. Ms. Owens said that with the \$35,000 that this board said it would give, the donations that have been raised thus far, and a \$50,000 grant secured by the town yields about \$103,000 toward that cost. She said there were also two other grants in play and that she

had just sent an email to J.E. Dunn Construction requesting a \$25,000 donation and suggested making this a town project. Commissioner Beale inquired about including restrooms and other amenities. Ms. Owens stated those items were not included in the quote as the town wanted to phase the project and felt the important part at this time was having the area for the individuals to use as a skate park and then add things as the town council decides what to do with the remainder of the Whitmire property. She indicated that the contractor from Artisan Skateparks would not be able to start the project until March 2023. Commissioner Young stated he would be willing to discuss constructing the park at Parker Meadows, close to the dog park, or even the playground where there are restrooms and parking areas. Commissioner Beale asked how much property the county owns near the dog park. Mr. Roland indicated there is about an acre left for utilization. Ms. Owens stated the park is about 6,000 square feet, but the accessories including the apron for safety, restrooms and parking take up much more space. After some additional discussion, Ms. Owens said this would be a topic of discussion at the joint meeting between the town and county boards in August and that she would continue to provide updates. Mr. Roland steered the discussion back to the pickleball courts and stated a \$250,000 state capital infrastructure fund directed grant that can be used to make stream bank restorations and paving improvements along the greenway freed up funds within the recreation budget. He said a strong recommendation for the pickleball court from the recreation board was made in response to a very vocal pickleball community. Mr. Roland added the pickleball community has initiated fundraising efforts similar to the skate park group and those fundraising efforts have not been factored into this recommended budget, but could serve to reduce the amount the county has to put in. He added that we will be looking at putting it on county-owned property and on property that will be the least intrusive as far as grading. Mr. Roland reminded the board members that last year a \$127,500 contribution was made to the Town of Highlands for a lighting project at the ball field there, which was in the recreation function. He said they could not get the lights on that ball field because of some issues with rock under the surface, so they are going to transfer that funding to light their pickleball courts. Mr. Roland indicated that the recreation director approached him with this request since the lighting at the Highlands park was rolling off and the grant was covering other expenses that would have otherwise been budgeted. Chairman Tate stated the pickleball courts was a priority on the recreation commission because of how popular the sport is becoming. Commissioner Higdon addressed the proposed Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for county employees, saying this is a tough one here, but “in my opinion what I say is my opinion it's not representative of this board. I'm only one vote out of five.” He referenced the salary study conducted last year and funding the increases with a recurring cost of \$2.6-million. Commissioner Higdon stated that at that time it was indicated that those changes put us in the end zone, takes care of us, and was a comprehensive plan, but again this year in the

proposed budget there is a three percent cost of living raise suggested for all employees with a one-step increase. He said this equates to about 1.5 percent per employee, which is essentially a four and a half percent proposed salary increase for county employees, and while they do a tremendous job we're in tough economic times right now and in years past our average has been a two percent cost of living in more normal times. Commissioner Higdon stated he personally thinks that a three percent COLA plus a step increase is a little bit hefty and wanted to discuss it. Mr. Roland reiterated that employees are our most valuable asset and the budget in general is based on extremely conservative revenue projections. He said the expenditures related to the COLA and the step increase can be supported based on the times that we are in right now, and if economic growth were to stop tomorrow we can still support what had been put in this budget. Mr. Roland clarified that we were in the end zone when we passed that pay study, but since then inflation increased three and a half percent and as he cited in the presentation the average statewide planned COLA is 4.7 with merit increases on top of that ranging from another 1.8 to 3.7 percent. He said the reason he recommended this was that in order to continue to be competitive and continue to provide high quality public service we have to try to take all steps necessary to recruit and retain high quality employees. Commissioner Beale commented that we are still behind Jackson County as well as Swain County. Chairman Tate commented that although private and public sector employers are different, he would not have anybody working for him if he was only giving a 4.5 percent increase over the last six months or in the next six months, therefore, he feels that is a minimal increase to consider.

Chairman Tate stated there had been some really good discussion tonight and that he wanted to add Cowee School to an upcoming agenda for further discussion. Commissioner Shields said he thought Mr. Roland had done an excellent job with the budget and wanted to be sure the employees are taken care of. Commissioner Beale asked School Superintendent Dr. Chris Baldwin to share what the school board had budgeted for a COLA for the teachers. Dr. Baldwin said the state gave them overall about a 2.5 percent increase, and hourly employees will get an increase from \$13 per hour to \$15 per hour for those earning the lowest hourly wage.

After some additional discussion, Chairman Tate thanked Mr. Roland for the work he had done on the budget and indicated there seems to be a consensus on supporting the budget and the board will vote after the public hearing on June 14, 2022. Mr. Roland thanked Ms. Carpenter for her work on the budget as well as Lindsay Leopard in the Finance Department and the county's department heads.

**Discussion regarding the recommended increases for fire district service fees:**

(A) Burningtown-Iotla Fire and Rescue – Commissioner Beale requested a correction to the department's letter to the board in the third paragraph, which

says the increase would be roughly \$18.90 but should really should be \$189. He inquired as to whether the community had been told in their meeting that the increase was going to be \$190 a year or were they told \$18.90. Chief Mike Shuler stated they were told the increase would be between \$170 to \$200 a year, and there was a misprint in the letter Commissioner Beale was referencing. Chairman Tate asked if Chief Shuler was sure because he was positive he was told in a previous meeting with the department that it was going to be less than a \$20 increase. Chief Shuler indicated he was sure. Commissioner Young said the request is a 30 percent increase in the budget that seems out of proportion for an increase whenever the last increase was three to four years ago. Commissioner Beale said he feels the department has done a good job of outlaying why the money is being spent and asked Commissioner Young if he could support 50 percent of the new proposed rate, which would take their additional revenue from \$119,609 down to around \$60,000 a year still giving them a little leeway in what they have to do. Commissioner Young said that, in his personal opinion, there were 12 departments county-wide and in looking at an average of what it costs to operate and what it costs per call that Burningtown is already on the high end of that and out of proportion with the other departments. Commissioner Higdon said families and households are suffering in managing their houses or small businesses as well and do not have anywhere to go and get extra money. He said he cannot support any sort of tax increase for anything and thinks it is time that publicly funded agencies learn to live with what they have because that is what families and businesses are doing. Commissioner Higdon stated he cannot support any tax increase for anything, not just Burningtown. Commissioner Shields said he could support 50 percent of the proposed rate as suggested by Commissioner Beale. Chairman Tate said he could support a tax increase for the department due to the increase in operating, but felt he had been misled based on the previous discussion. After lengthy discussion, Commissioner Beale made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Shields, to reduce their requested amount by 50 percent resulting in an increase to their tax rate of .1326 per \$100 valuation. (\$59,804). The motion failed 3-2 with Commissioners Beale and Shields voting in favor and Commissioners Higdon, Tate and Young opposing. Upon a motion by Chairman Tate, seconded by Commissioner Beale, the board voted 3-2 to increase the rate by a penny with the new rate being 0.1156, with Commissioners Beale, Shields and Tate in favor and Commissioners Higdon and Young opposing.

(B) Cullasaja Gorge Fire and Rescue – Board Chair Jack Baird and Chief Bobby Henry responded to questions from board members and clarified their budget request. Mr. Baird indicated that building costs had gone up this year and that the current estimate for the new sub-station was \$150,000 for a two-bay metal building with a kitchen. At the end of the discussion, Commissioner Shields made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Beale, to approve the requested increase of 1.63 cents making their new rate .072 per \$100 valuation. The vote

was 3-2 with Commissioners Beale, Shields and Young voting in favor and Commissioners Tate and Higdon opposing.

(C) Franklin Fire and Rescue – Chief Ben Ormond responded to questions from board members during a brief discussion regarding recruitment of volunteers and the budget request. Chairman Tate stated Chief Ormond works for an elected board and mayor and they know what is best for their residents. Commissioner Beale requested that Chief Ormond consider starting or rekindling the junior firefighter program. Chief Ormond said he was weeding through the paperwork of establishing a non-profit as it has to be a separate entity and indicated he has looked at partnering with Boy Scouts of America, which can also provide some additional resources. Commissioner Young recommended that Chief Ormond look at partnering with Emergency Management Director Warren Cabe and county finance staff on purchasing in bulk in order to possibly find better deals. Upon a motion by Commissioner Shields, seconded by Commissioner Beale, the board voted 4-1 to increase the rate from .0545 to .07 per \$100 valuation, with Commissioner Higdon opposing.

(D) Otto Fire and Rescue – Chief Barry Cabe and Board Chair Colby Anderson were present to answer questions from the board regarding their budget requests. After a short discussion regarding the logistics of a new main station, Commissioner Shields made a motion to approve an increase of 1.92 cents (\$95,752) as requested. The motion failed for a lack of a second. Upon a motion by Commissioner Beale, seconded by Commissioner Shields, to give a one-cent increase (\$49,812) and rethink the building plan, the motion failed on a 3-2 vote, with Commissioners Beale and Shields voting in favor and Commissioners Tate, Young and Higdon opposing.

**Consideration of resolution exempting engineering services for the Macon Middle School Locker Room project and the accompanying budget amendment (#317)** – Mr. Roland stated that funding was appropriated from fund balance at the last meeting to move forward with construction of the locker room facility at the Macon Middle School complex. He said the architect is finishing up work with that design, but some soil borings have to be completed at the site prior to beginning construction and we have a quote from Bunnell Lammons Engineering in the amount of \$4,640. Mr. Roland stated the resolution will exempt these services from the competitive bid requirement as permitted by the North Carolina General Statutes and the budget amendment will move \$5,000 from general fund contingency to the capital project fund for the Macon Middle School Locker Room. Upon a motion by Commissioner Shields, seconded by Commissioner Young, the board voted unanimously to approve the resolution and budget amendment as requested, and copies of both are attached [Attachments 1 and 2, respectively] and are hereby made a part of these minutes.

**RECESS:** At 7:27 p.m., upon a motion by Commissioner Higdon, seconded by Commissioner Young, the board voted unanimously to adjourn.

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Derek Roland  
Ex Officio Clerk to the Board

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Jim Tate  
Board Chair