

**MINUTES OF A
WORK SESSION
OF THE JACKSON COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
HELD ON
MAY 24, 2021**

The Jackson County Board of Commissioners met in a Budget Work Session on May 24, 2021, 8:30 a.m., Justice and Administration Building, Room A201, 401 Grindstaff Cove Road, Sylva, North Carolina.

Present: Brian McMahan, Chairman	Don Adams, County Manager
Boyce Deitz, Vice Chair	Heather C. Baker, County Attorney
Mark Jones, Commissioner	Angela M. Winchester, Clerk to Board
Tom Stribling, Commissioner (via Zoom video conferencing)	
Gayle Woody, Commissioner	

Chairman McMahan called the meeting to order.

Mr. Adams stated that the recommended budget was presented to the Board on May 18th and the budget was in the hands of the Commissioners. It was the normal process to have some of the larger institutions present to the Board.

(1) SOUTHWESTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE: Dr. Don Tomas, President and William Brothers, CFO, were present for this item.

Dr. Tomas thanked the Board for the opportunity. He stated that he wanted to provide an update on the Health-Sciences Building. They were 98% completed with the second and third floors working on punch lists. The first floor would follow and finish around June 18th. They were hopeful to finish over the summer and start utilizing the building for classes in the fall. They would also hold a ribbon cutting and open house on a date to be determined.

Mr. Brothers presented:

(a) Assumptions affecting 2021-22 budget:

- COVID-19 had an impact on overall college enrollment at SCC and sister institutions during the 2020-21 term. Recent guidance from the Governor and CDC allowed for a return to near pre-Covid operations.
- The college was ever-mindful of funds for capital and had requested \$299,781.45 for those needs. This was down approximately 11.62% versus 2020-2021.
- Bills submitted by both the House and Senate called for a 7% salary increase.
- SCC annually requested 2% growth for operations expenses:
 - Additional 3% allocation pending GA approval of 5% salary increase was \$22,877.77.
 - Additional 5% allocation pending GA approval of 7% salary increase was \$38,129.62.
- Employer contribution for teachers and state employees' retirement increased from 19.70% to 21.68%.

(b) Operating Expenses – Operating Budget Requests:

- 2018-19 \$2,003,898
- 2019-20 \$2,050,989
- 2020-21 \$2,092,289
- 2021-22 \$2,411,172

- The college maintained 2% increase in operating requests on average. However, 2021-22 appeared to exceed the average due to the additional recurring personnel and operating costs associated with the new Health Sciences Center of \$267,445.00

(c) Operating Expense Detail:

Expense Category	Expense Detail 2020-21	Expense Detail 2021-22
Management Operations, Salary and Benefits	\$1,155,796.79	\$1,331,969.79
Utilities and Supplies	\$604,575.11	\$696,693.25
Insurance	\$224,066.00	\$258,219.39
Software, Maintenance and General Expenses	\$107,850.90	\$124,290.14
	\$2,092,288.80	\$2,411,172.58

(d) Capital Requests – Capital Budget Requests:

- 2016-17 \$1,405,670
- 2017-18 \$935,800
- 2018-19 \$704,125
- 2019-20 \$431,213
- 2020-21 \$349,126
- 2021-22 \$299,781

(e) Capital Request Detail:

Capital Items	Priority	
Carpet squares or tiles in Balsam 216	1	\$4,140.00
Carpet squares throughout the Student Support Services	2	\$8,280.00
Commercial pressure washing	3	\$21,500.00
Update exhaust system for welding booths	4	\$100,000.00
Fleet vehicles	5	\$60,500.00
Incidental Capital	6	\$48,223.45
Tractor	7	\$47,000.00
Stainless steel tiles CUL kitchen	8	\$6,631.90
Replace fluorescent light fixtures Automotive Lab	9	\$3,506.10
Total		\$299,781.45

(f) Summary of Total Requests:

- 2016-17 \$3,345,698
- 2017-18 \$2,914,629
- 2018-19 \$2,708,023
- 2019-20 \$2,482,202
- 2020-21 \$2,441,415
- 2021-22 \$2,710,953

General discussions were held.

Informational item.

(2) PUBLIC SCHOOLS: Dr. Dana Ayers, Superintendent; Jacob Buchanan, Deputy Superintendent; and Kristie Walker, Finance Officer were present for this item.

Mr. Buchanan introduced the new Superintendent, Dr. Dana Ayers. Dr. Ayers was originally from Lincolnton and attended WCU, so she was very familiar with the area. She was a school teacher, assistant principal, middle school principal and moved to Jackson County three years ago. They were excited to have her in this new role.

Whatever role he had in the Jackson County Public School System, it was the greatest job in the world for many reasons. They had the most amazing children and a tremendous staff that had dedicated their lives to making a better life for the children. Also, the school system was so well supported and loved by the community and the Commissioners. The relationship between public schools and the Board of Commissioners had been tremendous because it was a part of the culture in the county to work together.

This had been the most challenging year to be in education possibly imagined. He would never be as proud to be a part of anything as he was to be a part of JCPS and Jackson County in the last year. The way they came together as a community and a school system to support the kids had been second to none. He thought they led the state and had been recognized for doing it right. They were cautious, but valued having the kids in school, so they worked very hard to keep the kids in school, keeping them and staff safe. He could not say enough about the hard work of the teachers, principals, the local health department.

He thanked the Commissioners and the School Board for their forethought and foresight over the years to make them a one-to-one district. When they had to go to remote only learning, the kids had devices because of that. Also, many years ago when they came together to figure out how they wanted to make the schools safer physically and emotionally for the kids. Those additional school counselors had been needed more than ever before and would be needed moving into the future.

The plan moving forward and expectation would be five days per week, seven hours per day, full face to face instruction. There would be things in place to allow a child who had a medical condition and could not safely attend school. They would support those children the way they always had with homebound services. They would not be a virtual public school the next year. They learned they could do a good job with virtual education, but they did a much better job when the children were in the classrooms.

Mr. Buchanan presented: Budget Request 2021-22 Request:

- Annual 2% increase, if provided to other departments: Total \$8,431,468.00
- \$23,000 for Teacher Supplement: Would bring to \$1,700 to be paid out in two lump sums.

General discussions were held.

Dr. Ayers stated she already saw a good collaborative relationship between the Commissioners, community and school system. She was grateful to have had school all year long. It was a testimony to what the community and school system, with Mr. Buchanan and Dr. Tipton, had done through the pandemic.

Mr. Adams requested that Mr. Buchanan update the Board on two issues that would be coming back before the Board relatively soon.

Mr. Buchanan stated that the project at Blue Ridge School to update the water and sewer would finish on time. Stillwell Enterprises had done an outstanding job that they were pleased with. Regarding the safety updates on the four campuses at Blue Ridge, Smoky Mountain High School, Fairview and Smokey Mountain Elementary, they sent the bids out as individual projects.

They had one bid for each project. They did not open those bids and re-advertised. Since that time, they felt they would solicit more bids in the summer. They did not want to rush in and pay an inflated price, get an inferior product and not be good stewards of the local dollars. This was still the School Boards' top priority.

Informational item.

(3) LIBRARY: Tracy Fitzmaurice, Librarian, thanked the Commissioners and the County Manager for approving the 2% increase they received in January, it was very well received and did go to bonuses for staff.

The libraries were open to the public and curbside services were offered to those patrons that preferred to stay in their cars. Digital resources access was expanded to meet the needs of patrons and library cards were issued remotely to people that could not make it to the library due to health concerns.

The libraries were operating regularly and Summer Learning Programs and Adult Summer Reading Programs and Adult Summer Reading Programs were gearing up for a lot of activities. They were also continuing the many community partnerships, including SCC; NCWorks; Department on Aging and Senior Services; Red Cross Blood Drives; Jackson County Schools; and the Boys and Girls Club of the Plateau, to name a few.

(a) Key Statistics July 1, 2020 – April 30, 2021:

- Physical items circulated: 73,734
- eBooks: 61,642
- eAudiobooks: 35,969
- NCKids eResources (Pre-K-4): 13,994
- Individual Wi-Fi uses: \$40,903
- Study room usage: 2,873
- Reference questions: 25,553
- Technology 1-on-1 appointments: 6,999

(b) FRL Grants 2020-2021: Fontana Regional Library received a total of \$387,466 in grants for this past year. These grants enabled them to add vital services during a critical time when Internet access was at a premium.

- Wi-Fi expansion into the library parking lots to help people work on the Wi-Fi after library hours.
- Hotspots for school age children.
- Mobile print access, which allowed patrons to print from their mobile devices or print from home.
- Technology Infrastructure Support for new servers to assist with increased use of eResources.
- North Carolina Department of Commerce Grant allowed them to replace aging computers for staff.

They also received grant funding of \$2,400 from the Jackson County Community Foundation to provide 18 book classroom sets to each of the Jackson County Day Care Center's classrooms to be kept by the centers as a permanent collection of age appropriate materials dealing with health and hygiene, mental health, feelings and emotions during the pandemic.

(c) Friends of the Library Support: The FOL groups for both libraries never wavered from their support during the pandemic. JCPL's Friends group pivoted quickly to sell online to keep funds coming in. They were able to donate almost \$10,000 extra to the library to make up for shortfalls in fines and fees revenue. In Cashiers, the Friends received \$17,500 in grant money, which helped cover shortfalls and allowed purchasing of extra eResources.

(d) JCPL Complex Ten Year Anniversary: Ten years ago, on a beautiful sunny Saturday morning in mid-June, the ambitious project to renovate the historic courthouse and incorporate a 20,000 square foot addition to create the Jackson County Public Library Complex was officially open to the public. Public libraries were the place where the past, present and future coexist. Nothing illustrated that more clearly than the day to day activities and services offered at the Jackson County Public Library Complex and the Albert Carlton – Cashiers Community Library. Physical Library space was a crossroads for working, learning, teaching and new types of programs. Their goal was to maximize the social and interactive nature of the physical library space, such as the group study areas, art exhibits, meeting rooms, job fairs and craft classes. It kept their libraries relevant for years to come.

(e) Looking ahead to FY 2021-2022:

- Removing Barriers: Going forward, FRL Libraries were looking for ways to move towards a fine free model of service in order to remove barriers to library usage for the community's most economically vulnerable residents. This was happening in many libraries across the nation and FRL planned to move towards this model incrementally. The first step would be removing fees for DVD checkout, then removing fines for juveniles and finally removing fines for adults.
- Outreach: Another change in the budget was the transfer of funds specifically earmarked for the Reading Rover into the General Outreach Fund. The Rover vehicle had been on the road many years and it was no longer fiscally responsible to keep repairing the aging vehicle. The Reading Rover served 11 child care centers in the county, reaching 225 children in 27 separate classrooms each month.
- New Grants: FRL applied for a Planning Sustainability Grant for FY2021-22. If awarded, the grant would be used to work with a consultant to develop the next Five Year Long Range Plan for the FRL System.

General discussions were held.

Informational item.

The Board took at ten-minute break.

Chairman McMahan called the meeting back to order.

(4) **SHERIFF'S OFFICE**: Sheriff Chip Hall; Chief Deputy Matt Wike; Major Shannon Queen; Captain Patrick McCoy; and Shena Phillips, Executive Assistant to the Sheriff, were present for this item.

Sheriff Hall thanked the Board for the opportunity to discuss their budget for fiscal year 2021-22. He had the opportunity to speak to each Commissioner. Their primary focus that year was their salaries. They wanted to be competitive with surrounding agencies and they were getting to a critical point.

Also, they would discuss the Axon Project. They had worked with Mr. Adams and Ms. Fox on an alternative to abandon the pay scale of the Sheriff's Office and put all Sheriff's Office personnel back in with all other county employees. There was nothing in the draft budget, which was a concern for him, but he did see \$1,000,000 set aside in the draft budget. He hoped they could make a move to do something for the near future.

Chief Deputy Wike stated that they had shared the Sheriff's proposed budget with each Commissioner. They met with Mr. Adams, who shared with them information that he wanted to provide to the Board. They had a lot of conversations internally on a plan that he presented to the Board. They had problems with retention and hiring. They put in an across the board 10% increase with an estimated cost of \$425,642. Ms. Fox had made a suggestion to transition away from the SH Pay Scale that had been created and bring all of the Sheriff's Office employees under the current County Pay Plan, which would address what they were trying to target. They felt this would fix the problem they were experiencing with hiring and retention.

The new proposed plan would be an estimated cost of \$344,817 to implement, which would be a difference of \$80,825. In the new plan, deputies and sergeants would see up to 12% increase in salary. This would help them be more competitive with surrounding counties and department agencies within the county. They felt this was the most viable option. This would be the stop the bleed proposal they had discussed. It was not going to fix it and he expected that if they did go with a salary study, they may still see a gap after this plan. He did think it would address immediate needs to turn the tide on the salaries. They felt this was vital and they did not want to get to a point where they had to reduce services.

Mr. Adams stated that if they moved forward with an adjustment to the Sheriff's Office, this would be the recommendation from the County Manager and Finance Director because they believed it met what had been requested from the Sheriff's Office regarding salaries. He discussed the proposed grade schedule in detail.

In the Budget Summary, he stated: "They had multiple requests for salary reclassifications and salary adjustments. Currently, they were having hardships in employee hiring and retention, especially in Public Safety and Health Care Professionals. He recommended a salary study be conducted and \$1,000,000 had been set aside in the proposal for phased implementation. Several neighboring counties were conducting salary surveys. Failure to reserve budgetary capacity for those needs would result in the inability to competitively recruit and retain essential personnel."

He recommended to the Board to reserve \$1,000,000 for salary adjustments going into the next year, which was above the 2%. His conversation with the Sheriff and Chief Deputy was whether or not a portion of the \$1,000,000 should be released before the results of a salary study. If the Board did set aside \$1,000,000, were they then willing to set aside \$344,000 immediately for the Sheriff's needs.

Chairman McMahan stated that he personally did not think this was an option, he thought they had to do it. They saw the problems and by June 1st they would have ten vacancies. The other worry he had was that if they did take the \$1,000,000 set aside and pull from that, would they fall behind the next year?

Mr. Adams stated they knew Macon and Haywood Counties were going through studies and it would depend if they budgeted the monies to implement it. Then they would be implementing salary increases based on the same data they were looking at. If they implemented the results of their salary study, he did believe they would be dealing with this issue potentially in the future again.

Commissioner Stribling stated that he agreed with Chairman McMahan. It was not something they wanted to do, it was something they had to do.

Commissioner Jones stated that when they were down by 10% of their employees, then the county was 10% less safe. In the southern end of the county, 70% of homes were vacant in the winter, which was when there were the most break-ins. This was the time they should have more of a presence throughout the county, particularly where there was a higher percentage of vacation homes. He wanted to see them work on the budget to try to get a few more officers for that component.

Commissioner Woody stated she looked at these salaries the same way she looked at a supplement for the teachers - that they were investing in the community. These were people that lived there had homes, children and purchased things in the local economy. It was about investing in the communities and investing in the citizens. She felt that was a very important use of the tax revenue.

Sheriff Hall stated that he appreciated the support from each of the Commissioners. It was great they lived where they did. They still had a lot of support for the men and women that served the community. The national trend had its impact on people getting into the profession of law enforcement as the number of enrollment was down. If they could implement this plan into the final budget, he thought it would show how much the community supported them.

Commissioner Woody stated that she was in support of the cameras and the idea of leasing those in the proposal. As Chief Deputy Wike had stated, the cameras had a dual purpose. They protected citizens and the law enforcement. She thought that was a very important aspect with all that was going on in the media. She thought that was an important step for them. They knew their officers worked with integrity and this would prove that.

Chief Deputy Wike stated that they were ahead of the curve with the cameras because there was a lot of legislation being proposed that would force local and state law enforcement to bring their video cameras current. When the legislation became law, they would be ready to implement it, so they would be doing themselves a service to prepare before that came about.

Commissioner Jones stated that he was impressed with the technology side of the Axon Program, which would free up the detectives to do more to help the citizens of the county.

Sheriff Hall stated that this was not something they took lightly. He had a lot of discussions with sheriffs and chiefs of police across the state and the feedback he received was that none had any regrets with implementing the program. He tasked Major Queen to find the best product that would be reliable.

Commissioner Jones asked if the press was knowledgeable about the program?

Major Queen stated that they had not had a press meeting. Other agencies had access to Axon for years, such as Asheville, so the press there would be aware. He did not know how the press could get involved other than the fact that when they did have a critical incident occur, it was nice to go back and review the situation to make sure they knew what happened.

They had been dealing with the body camera, jail cameras and Justice Center cameras with how the public wanted access to that and how defendants wanted access as well in the court system. He and Ms. Baker had several conversations about how that was to be released.

Commissioner Jones stated that he was so impressed with the program and he thought it would be nice to communicate some of those positives that would help with the county.

Major Queen stated that if they purchased the program, he would be glad to meet with the media to share what the program was capable of. It would show support to the community to show integrity. The community was very supportive of the law enforcement.

General discussions were held.

Informational item.

(5) SUMMARY: Mr. Adams summarized:

(a) Southwestern Community College: Under the Current Year, on page 115, line item 115921:

- Current Year Budget \$2,092,010
- Request: \$2,411,173
- Recommendation: \$2,401,296

A few things changed and SCC's requested budget was technically reduced by \$13,000. The 2% across the board did get them where they were at. There was just a slight difference between the request and the recommendation. He requested to provide SCC with 2% plus the additional monies they needed to operate the Health Sciences Building.

(b) Public Schools: The \$23,000 that was put into Mr. Buchanan's presentation for Teacher Supplement was in the recommended budget. The Board put in \$359,000 mid-year last year with the idea they would come back with a true Teacher Supplement Plan.

On the capital side, he recommended taking all of the ½ cent sales tax and the ¼ cent sales tax to be prepared to utilize those funds for the safety project.

(c) Library: There were funds in the budget that were not part of the Library's request to help with the HVAC system at the main library.

(d) Sheriff's Office: From a personnel standpoint, there was the one-step increase for all employees and there was the recommendation to set aside \$1 million of personnel capacity. The Sheriff had several other requests regarding holiday pay and supplemental pay, but none of that was in the recommended budget. He did recommend adding an additional detective position, which had been previously discussed.

For capital, the Axon Program was not in the budget, but he and Ms. Fox were trying to determine if the cameras could be purchased through some of the federal dollars that would be coming to them. However, he was trying to figure out an alternative way to fund it. He was impressed with the Axon Program. He had followed up with some city managers that had implemented the system and this was the system most agencies wish they had or did not regret they purchased. If they moved with cameras, he would recommend looking at this program. They were trying to figure out a way to pay for it outside of general fund dollars.

Also, the Sheriff requested to replace nine vehicles and he recommended the replacement of eight. They would continue to deal with that year to year. The replacement schedule had been seven per year for multiple years.

Chairman McMahan stated that for staff's purposes, as they went through the ongoing budget process of amending to make sure they came up with a final product to adopt, he wanted to reconfirm that he was hearing a consensus from the Board. They wanted to use the existing capacity to find a way to support the Sheriff's salary increases as recommended by staff and in addition, find other alternative means to potentially fund the Axon Camera System.

Commissioner Deitz stated that was correct. But, he thought this would not solve the problem with a shortage of people with surrounding counties doing the salary studies and giving raises based on the study. Also, looking at EBCI, they had resources no one else had and those resources were not going to go away. At some point they would have to discuss this again, probably next year.

Mr. Adams stated that was the reason he was trying to get at least \$1 million dollars set aside. He did not know if that would take care of it, but they were trying to get some capacity because they knew they would have to deal with this to some extent.

General discussions were held.

There being no further business, Commissioner Deitz moved to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Jones seconded the Motion. Motion carried and the meeting adjourned at 10:59 a.m.

Attest:

Approved:

Angela M. Winchester, Clerk to Board

Brian Thomas McMahan, Chairman