

**MINUTES OF A
WORK SESSION
OF THE JACKSON COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
HELD ON
FEBRUARY 04, 2025**

The Jackson County Board of Commissioners met in a Work Session on February 04, 2025, 6:30 p.m., Justice and Administration Building, Room A201, 401 Grindstaff Cove Road, Sylva, North Carolina.

Present: Mark A. Letson, Chairman	Kevin King, County Manager
Todd Bryson, Vice Chair	Angela M. Winchester, Clerk to the Board
Jenny Lynn Hooper, Commissioner	Darlene Fox, Finance Director
Michael Jennings, Commissioner	
John W. Smith, Commissioner	

Chairman Letson called the meeting to order.

(1) GLENVILLE-CASHIERS RESCUE SQUAD: Nat Turner, Rescue Squad Board Chair; Jeremy Stewart, EMS System Director; and Jeff Stewart, Rescue Squad Chief, were present for this item.

Mr. Turner presented:

(a) 2025 Budget Requests:

- Normal percentage increase (3%?)
- Additional \$20,000 per month increase
 - GCRS was running an annual GAAP based P&L deficit
 - Expenses increased with the opening of Station 2
- New Ambulance to replace 552: cost estimates at \$350,000 - \$380,000
- Additional GCRS employee: base salary \$38,000

(b) Vision Cashiers Information

- New Tax Revenue 2025-2030 totaling \$22,853,648
- Compelling reasons for living in Glenville/Cashiers area:
 - Health care,
 - The people
 - The mountains
 - Mild climate
 - Water resources
 - Broadband

(c) Community CPR/AED Classes: 350 Philips HeartStart OnSite AEDs in homes and spreading them throughout the community. Cashiers was on track to become one of the largest AED covered communities in the country.

(d) Profit and Loss Analysis:

	2023 Audited	2024 Unaudited	2025 Budget Est.
Revenue			
GCRS EMS Support - Jackson County	\$1,546,652	\$1,560,312	\$1,560,312
Total County Support	\$1,546,652	\$1,560,312	\$1,560,312
Expenses	(\$1,752,142)	(\$1,902,781)	(\$2,034,000)
Income	(\$205,490)	(\$342,469)	(\$473,688)

(e) Donor Funds Usage:

- Capital overage for Station #2
- Purchase of Station #2 Crash Truck
- Purchase of Ambulance 553
- Coverage of Operating Losses
- Upcoming Capital Expenditures
 - Station #1 upgrades
 - Cardiac Auto-Pulse devices (3)

General discussions were held.

Informational item.

(2) SOIL AND WATER DEPARTMENT REPORT: Barry Stevens, Soil and Water District Director, presented: Soil and Water Conservation District:

(a) In the 1910s and 1920s, 5.2 million acres of thick native grassland was plowed and transformed into wheat fields. In the 1930s, droughts left the ground exposed. 850 million tons of topsoil blew away in 1935 alone. The Dust Bowl was the worst man-made ecological disaster in American history.

(b) Dr. Hugh Hammond Bennett, a North Carolina native, urged congress to intervene and Soil Conservation Service was created in 1935. Dr. Bennett had the idea to create local Soil and Water Conservation Districts. This brought federal assistance and funding to local communities. On August 3, 1937, North Carolina Secretary of State Thad Eure made history when he signed the certificate establishing the Brown Creek Soil Conservation District as the first in the state, nation and the world.

(c) District:

- Under NC General Statute 139, soil and water conservation districts were organized as governmental subdivisions of the state, as well as independent political units.
- Districts worked closely with county, state and federal governments and both public and private organizations in a non-regulatory capacity to carry out a comprehensive conservation program to protect and improve the county's natural resources while assisting private landowners in using conservation practices. This partnership had been the backbone of highly successful efforts over the past 75 years to address serious problems across the state including soil erosion, flood damage and water quality problems.

(d) Purpose and Function: District law provided authority to districts to meet the needs of landowners and citizens in several ways.

- Deliver state programs administered by the division, including: the Agriculture Cost Share Program (ACSP), the Agricultural Water Resources Assistance Program (AgWRAP) and Community Conservation Assistance Program (CCAP).
- Deliver federal Farm Bill conservation programs involving water quality practices, farmland protection, wetlands restoration and wildlife habitat enhancement.
- Assist communities in many areas of natural resource management such as erosion and sediment control, source water protection, stormwater management, floodplain management and flood control, water use efficiency, stream restoration, open spaces and small-plot forestry management.
- Respond to natural disasters by helping local landowners and state and local governments with cleanup efforts and restoration including cropland and drainage system cleanup, repair of conservation best management practices, livestock mortality issues and waste management systems.
- Respond to projects of local interest such as conservation easements, environmental education centers, parks and demonstration farms.

(e) Board of Supervisors: Each district was governed by a five-member board of supervisors. Three supervisors were elected on the general ballot as non-partisan candidates during the regular election of county officers and two were appointed by the NC Soil and Water Conservation Commission upon recommendation of the local district board of supervisors.

(f) Role of the Board:

- The board of supervisors met monthly to establish local soil and water conservation priorities based on the needs of the district.
- The board chaired work groups to address these priorities through the installation and implementation of best management practices that protected and improved the natural resources within the district. The work was accomplished by partnering with local, state and federal agencies; businesses; and non-profit organizations for technical and financial assistance.
- The board was responsible for reviewing and approving district contracts for ACSP, AgWRAP and CCAP. The Division of Soil and Water Conservation administers ACSP, AgWRAP and CCAP and holds each local board of supervisors accountable to these state programs.

(g) Soil and Water District Conservation Programs:

- SWCD NC Agriculture Cost Share Program:
 - The NC Ag Cost Share Program was a reimbursement program that addressed agricultural water quality concerns to help farmers install Best Management Practices on their farm. Reimbursement rates were usually 75%.
 - Exclusion Fencing, Watering Tank, Conservation Cover, Stream Restoration, Feed/Waste Structure
- Community Conservation Assistance Program: CCAP was a voluntary, incentive-based program designed to improve water quality through the installation of various best management practices on urban, suburban and rural lands not directly involved with agriculture production.
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) USDA farm bill program:
 - EQIP was a voluntary program that provided financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers to plan and implement conservation practices to improve soil, water, plant, animal, air and related natural resources on agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland.
 - Eligible individuals were owners of land in agricultural or forest production or persons who were engaged in livestock, agricultural or forest production on eligible land and had a natural resource concern on the land may apply to participate in EQIP.
 - Program focus: Cropland, Pastureland, Confined Animal, Forestry, Western Stream Initiative, Seasonal High Tunnel, Organic Transition, Strikeforce Initiative, Golden Winged Warbler, Wildlife.
 - Conservation Stewardship Program: a voluntary program to encourage agricultural producers to improve conservation systems by improving, maintaining and managing existing conservation activities and undertaking additional conservation activities.
 - Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP): The program was designed to help people and conserve natural resources by relieving imminent hazards to life and property caused by floods, fires, windstorms and other natural occurrences. EWP was an emergency recovery program.
 - Agricultural Conservation Assistance Program: Financial assistance to eligible partners for purchasing Agricultural Land Easements (ALE). The goal of ALE was to protect the agricultural use and conservation values of eligible land.

- Farmland Preservation Program: The purpose of the Voluntary Preservation Program was to encourage the voluntary preservation and protection of farmland from non-farm development. This was in recognition of the importance of agriculture to the economic, health, social and scenic benefit of the county.
 - Summary of Conservation Programs:
 - 2023-2024 Funding: \$278,075
 - Number of Participants: 18
 - Acres enrolled in Farmland Preservation: 1,035
- (h) District Education Programs:**
- The district offers many free and voluntary outreach efforts throughout the year. Events attempt to increase awareness of natural resources, environment and ecosystems while encouraging life-long stewardship.
 - Student populations were reached in several ways: environmental science competitions and contests, programs developed to meet the NC Essential Standards, summer programs at local summer camps and libraries, a weeklong summer camp as well as district field days.
 - Every effort was made to help students develop the knowledge and skills required to step into future leadership positions in natural resource management.
- (i) 5th Grade Conservation Field Days:** Field Days were an outdoor educational event for fifth graders. The field days take place at East LaPorte Park over two days to accommodate the more than 280 students and volunteers who participated. Professionals from various fields give short programs, enabling the students to learn not only about the subject matter discussed, but also see nature and conservation related occupations in action. The students travelled around eight stations which included, forestry, wildlife, soils, air quality, weather, recycling and pollination.
- (j) Camp WILD:** The district received grant funding to create a weeklong summer camp, Camp WILD (wilderness, investigating, learning, discovery). The camp connected kids to nature while creating lifelong memories through outdoor experiences. Themes varied each day and included: soil science, alternative energy, forestry, wildlife, aquatics and STEM activities.
- (k) Contests:** The district annually holds education contests for poster, essay, speech and computer designed slideshows. Themes rotated yearly and covered important topics like the water cycle, wetlands, soil and watersheds. Students who participated competed for cash awards and recognition. The district encouraged students to display content in the contests relevant to the theme by helping them understand key principals of conservation.
- (l) Envirothon:** The Envirothon was a fun, hands-on, natural science academic competition for teams of middle and high school students. The Envirothon helped develop environmentally aware citizens who were able to assume future leadership roles. Subject areas studied were: Aquatic Ecology, Forestry, Soils and Land Use, Wildlife and Current Environmental Issues.
- (m) Resource Conservation Workshop (RCW):** The RCW was a week that involved study and hands on participation in a wide range of conservation topics. Students were housed at NC State University campus dormitories under the guidance of live-in counselors (generally district educators). The primary objective of the workshop was to learn about natural resources and their management in today's global environment. Awards and scholarships could be won and were presented to students under several awards programs.
- (n) Equipment Rental:** Made possible by grant funding from TVA AG and Forestry Fund and Duke Power
- Bulk Lime Spreader with three-ton capacity
 - Conservation Seeder with large and small seed boxes

(o) Other SWCD Duties:

- Review erosion plans as needed
- Give technical assistance to landowners as requested (eroding streambanks, roads, steep banks, lawn and gardening, etc.)
- Provide soil testing materials, help read results and give recommendations
- Provide resource materials
- Conservation easements
- Provide aerial photography as needed (1953, 1963, 1980, 1988)
- Certify water points for all the fire departments in the county

General discussions were held.

Informational item.

(3) **VETERANS SERVICES DEPARTMENT REPORT:** Sheila Crumpler, Veterans Service Officer, presented: Veterans Office:

(a) Veterans Affairs:

- The Veterans Benefits Administration was not the Veterans Health Administration, although they helped apply for the Healthcare Benefits as well.
- Employed and paid by the county.
- They were legal representatives and Certified Veteran Service Officers for the U.S. Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and the North Carolina Division of Veterans Affairs.
- Attended two week-long conferences a year, quarterly state regional trainings, monthly VSO's meetings and online courses regulated and issued by the U.S. Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to maintain certifications.
- They had legal trainings and school through National Veterans Legal Service Program for legal trainings.
- They were trained and knowledgeable with the Federal Veterans Laws, Rules and Regulations Book and the Veterans Benefits Manual 38CFR.
- The Veterans could utilize a Veteran Service Officer as a go between with the Veterans Health Administration in case of conflicts with appointments, doctor changes, advocacy, pharmacy, enrollment, etc.

(b) Veterans Office Mission:

- To counsel, educate, assist, advocate and provide representation with utmost respect to Veterans of the Armed Forces and their families with benefits.
- The purpose of the office was to assist Veterans get healthcare and additional compensation from service related disabilities or a pension to help with Aid and Attendance and additional resources.

(c) Services and Benefits: The Veterans Service Office administered the laws of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to included:

- Compensation for service connected disability
- Pension for non-service connected veterans
- Headstones/Markers, Burial Flags, Presidential Memorial Certificates, Medals and Military Service Records, help arrange military grave site rights, Burial Reimbursement, Burial in a National Veteran's Cemetery
- Vocational Rehabilitation, Education, Training
- VA Home Loans
- Housebound Status and Nursing Home Care Aid and Attendance.
- Healthcare and dental care
- Special housing and automobile adaptation

- Fiduciary/Guardianship protection programs
 - Homeless
 - Mental healthcare
 - License Plates, Property Tax Exclusions for those who qualify, Hunting and Fishing License, etc.
 - The Wish For Our Hero's Foundation awarded a Veteran with a terminal illness whose life expectancy was six months or less. The award was \$2,500.00 to use for their last wish.
- (d) Productivity of the office:
- They saw several Veterans a day by appointment, walk-in or by referral. This did not include the veterans they communicated with by phone, email, fax. They saw 7-9 new Veterans each week.
 - On average, one claim could consist of five or more disabilities for one veteran which was service connected. When they were awarded, the disability could range from 10% to 100%. The rates were different for a Non-Service Connected Pension based on Nursing fees and Housebound Status, which could be greater.
 - When the Veteran was awarded, they could draw from \$171.00 to \$4,500.00 each month. These monies were tax-free.
 - Burial reimbursements could range from \$300 to \$2,000. HISA Grants were \$6,800 per grant for home renovations. \$21,000 for an Adaptive Vehicle. These were paid out once in a lifetime to the Veteran.
- (e) Revenue from Compensation and Pension Claims:
- Approximately 800 disabilities awarded each month in the county.
 - Of those disabilities, \$931,049.37 a month was awarded in Compensation and Pension claims that went back into the county's economy, which was tax free money.
 - 2024 to present, her office produced \$13.5 million, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Census and the North Carolina Division of Veterans Affairs.
- (f) Resources: Healthcare, VA Home Loans, Education, Homeless, Entrepreneurship, Women Veterans.
- (g) Milestones:
- 2015
 - First Annual Veterans Day Parade
 - First Annual Smoky Mountain Veterans Stand Down
 - May 21st Proclamation Purple Heart County
 - August 19 Veterans Office became a Commemorative Partner of the Department of Defense Vietnam War Commemoration
 - 2016
 - Second Annual Veterans Day Parade
 - The Department of Aging turned all responsibility of the Annual Veterans Appreciation Dinner to Veterans Office
 - 2017
 - Third Annual Veterans Day Parade
 - Helped Organize the 210th Military police Deployment Dinner
 - Helped gather items for care boxes to send to the 210th MP in Cuba
 - 2018-2019
 - Fourth Annual Veterans Day Parade
 - First Tricare Seminar for Retirees of the Military
 - Quilt of Valor Ceremonies Began

- 2020-2022
 - First Blood Connection Blood Drive
 - First Drive-thru Veterans Dinner due to the Pandemic
 - 2023-2024
 - First Veterans Monthly Lunch
 - First Veterans monthly coffee social
 - Accepted Blue Ridge Honor Flight Applications for processing
- (h) What Dependents qualified for?**
- Widow's/Survivor's Benefit was the least applied for within the VA.
 - A Widow/Survivor would automatically qualify for a Death and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) when the Veteran died of a Service-Connected Death. The DIC was always a flat rate of pay.
 - A Widow's/Survivor Pension was income and asset based and at least 5% of their income must be medical expenses.
 - If the Veteran was 100% Service-Connected, the Spouse could apply for CHAMPA Supplemental Insurance under the Veteran.
 - Children of Veteran may apply for Educational Benefits and Scholarships through the VA. The qualifying criteria must have occurred during a period of war. At time of application, applicant must be a resident of North Carolina.
- (i) Veterans Events:**
- Annual Veterans Day Parade
 - Annual Veterans Appreciation Dinner
 - Annual Smoky Mountain Veterans Stand Down
 - Quilt of Valor Ceremonies
 - Veterans Once a Month Lunch
 - Veterans Coffee Socials
 - Veterans Jobs and Claims Expos in Cherokee
- (j) Partnerships:**
- Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
 - American Legion Post 104, Sylva
 - American Legion Post 143, Cherokee
 - East Carolina Dental Clinic offers Dental Care Events called VetSmiles for those Veterans who were not 100% Permanent and Total by the VA
 - Blue Ridge Dental Clinic sponsored free dental clinic services for Veterans each year
- (k) There were five VA Disability Presumptive Lists for Veterans who could apply for disabilities related to the chemical exposures:**
- Agent Orange Presumptive List for Vietnam Veterans 1991
 - Gulf War Undiagnosed Illness Presumptive List
 - Camp Lejeune Water Contamination List
 - Iraq/Afghanistan Presumptive List
 - The PACT ACT of 2022
 - The Sergeant First Class Health Robinson Honoring the Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022, which extended additional presumptive illnesses to Agent Orange, Gulf War and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans. The Iraq/Afghanistan list would fall under the presumptive of the Gulf War Veterans.
- (l) Veterans Healthcare through Community Care:**
- The Community Care Program replaced the Veterans Choice Program. The benefits for the program were for those Veterans who were enrolled in VA Healthcare.

- Community Care was utilized for a Veteran if they had been waiting for an appointment in VA Healthcare for more than 30 days, lives more than 40 miles from the nearest VA Hospital or Clinic or the Veteran needed a service VA Healthcare could not provide.
- If the Veteran was having an emergency and they could not drive all the way to the VA Hospital. The 72 Hour Assistance Program allowed the Veteran flexibility in seeking medical care for an emergency to utilize local emergency departments. This service was activated by the Veteran or family member notifying the 72 Hour Assistance Program of the emergency incident, which allowed the VA Healthcare System to pay the bill.

General discussions were held.

Informational item.

(4) PLANNING TOPICS: Michael Poston, Planning Director, stated at a previous meeting, the Board had a broad discussion about planning related ordinances. Mr. King invited him to speak about these issues and the relationship between the Planning Board and the Board of Commissioners.

The Board of Commissioners appointed members to the Planning Board. Communications usually happen through staff interactions with the Board of Commissioners. Mr. King was also a conduit to ask the Planning Board to look at certain issues. The Planning Board would then work on those items and come back to the Board of Commissioners with discussion points and how the Planning Board recommended to proceed. In the past, the Planning Board Chair appeared before the Board of Commissioners periodically to provide updates on what the Planning Board was working on. If agreeable, they could look to reinstate this on a regular basis.

Commissioner Smith stated as a citizen, he called a Planning Board Member to see if anything could be done about abandoned buildings or equipment. It was requested that the Board of Commissioners send a letter asking the Planning Board to look into the issue.

Mr. Poston stated the state statute broke it down between residential and nonresidential buildings. The most common pathway would be through the Building Code Office. For other items, the county had a Solid Waste Ordinance to deal with household trash. Since the county was partially zoned, the Development Ordinance filled in some of the gaps. There were regulations for Salvage Yards and Commercial Junkyards operating and doing business as such. Historically, they had not regulated “junk yards” or what were perceived as “junk yards”. They could look into this issue to see if there were ways to address this.

Commissioner Smith stated it was more of a business type issue.

Mr. Poston stated they would consider that to be more outdoor storage. The Board could provide direction to the Planning Board to look at commercial outdoor storage regulations and how that may be addressed. Staff would look at the ordinances in place and options to amend or add to remain in compliance with state rules and regulations.

Chairman Letson stated they also discussed abandoned structures and finding ways to make it safer for the area around the abandoned structures.

Mr. Poston stated there were a couple of tools they could look at through state statute starting with the Building Code. There were provisions in NC General Statute 160D, which gave counties the authority to institute land development controls and limits. Within this section were the building codes that contained tools to evaluate and address abandoned structures.

Commissioner Bryson asked about abandoned burned structures or houses. Was anything in place for this type of situation? He did not want to tell people what they could or could not do on their own property, but this could be a safety issue.

Mr. Poston stated he would confer first with Tony Elders, Code Enforcement Director, about his authority and the different processes. If this was an interest of the Board, staff and the Planning Board would start looking into available programs and report back to the Board.

General discussions were held.

Commissioner Bryson inquired about dumping trash and enforcement.

Mr. Poston stated the county had a Solid Waste Ordinance.

Commissioner Bryson asked if there were fees to the property owner if they did not clean it up?

Mr. King stated yes, the county acted as a watchdog. If the property owner did not comply, it would go through the Department of Environmental and Natural Resources (DENR). Once it was established there was an illegal dump site on a property, it would be turned over to the state office.

Commissioner Smith stated a concern would be if the trash was getting into a stream. This was also a concern with construction equipment being abandoned with fluids leaking out over time as it deteriorated.

Mr. Poston stated he would continue to research and reach out to Mr. Kubis about legal options the county would have. Some of the answers may not be legislative or regulatory, it may be how they interacted with some of their partners, such as DENR and NCDOT.

General discussions were held.

Mr. Poston stated he would update the Planning Board on the Board of Commissioners' concerns and they would start evaluating available options.

Informational item.

(5) ARTHUR WADE BRIDGE RESOLUTION: Mr. King presented a request from Swain County to consider a Resolution to name a bridge in Whittier the "Arthur Wade Bridge". Mr. Wade was a citizen who passed away a few years ago and was employed by both the Jackson County and Swain County Soil and Water Conservation District for 32 years. Mr. Wade was a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI), he was a Missionary and a Veteran awarded three Purple Hearts.

He thought this item had been discussed by the Board previously. The EBCI's Attorney General requested Jackson County consider this resolution. NCDOT had refused to move forward with the bridge naming since it did not meet certain criteria to include the person holding a Medal of Honor.

He presented a draft resolution for consideration.

General discussions were held.

Consensus: *Add this item to the next regular agenda for consideration.*

(6) OTHER BUSINESS: None.

(7) CLOSED SESSION:

Motion: *Commissioner Bryson moved that the Board go into closed session pursuant to G.S.143-318.11(a)(3) Legal and G.S.143-318.11(a)(5) Real Property. Commissioner Smith seconded the Motion. Motion carried.*

Chairman Letson called the regular meeting back to order and stated no action was taken in closed session except the approval of the closed session minutes.

There being no further business, Commissioner Smith moved to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Jennings seconded the Motion. Motion carried and the meeting adjourned at 9:40 p.m.

Attest:

Approved:

Angela M. Winchester, Clerk to Board

Mark A. Letson, Chairman