

Ashe County

150 Government Circle
Jefferson, NC 28640



Meeting Minutes - Draft

Monday, June 15, 2026

9:00 AM

Commission Meeting Room

County Commission

Chairperson Todd McNeill

Vice Chair Jerry D. Powers

Commissioner Russell Killen

Commissioner Wes Greene

Commissioner Mike Eldreth

BUSINESS SESSION**I. 9:00 AM - Meeting Called to Order at the Ashe County Courthouse**

Chairman McNeill called the June 15th, 2026 meeting of the Ashe County Board of Commissioners to order at 9:00 am.

Present: 5 - Chairperson Todd McNeill, Vice Chairman Jerry D. Powers, Commissioner Mike Eldreth, Commissioner Russell Killen and Commissioner Wes Greene

II. Pledge of Allegiance/Opening Prayer

Commissioner Greene led the Pledge of Allegiance. Vice Chairman Powers offered the Opening Prayer.

III. Consent Agenda

With the addition of the High Country Council of Government Appointment of Tasha Roundtree to the Workforce Development Board to the Consent Agenda by Chairman McNeill, Commissioner Eldreth requested to be recused from voting on the Consent Agenda because the addition involved his daughter, Tasha Roundtree. The Board agreed. Commissioner Killen made the motion to approve the Consent Agenda. Commissioner Greene seconded the motion. The motion passed with the remaining four voting unanimously.

Approved

For: 4 - Chairperson McNeill, Vice Chairman Powers, Commissioner Killen and Commissioner Greene

Recused: 1 - Commissioner Eldreth

MISC 26-6 2026 Annual Hellbender Bike Ride DOT Letter

Attachments: [6-15-2026 Hellbender DOT Letter 2026](#)

MISC 26-7 Reinstatement of Leave - Christal Houck, Social Services

Attachments: [6-15-2026 Employment History for Christal Houck](#)

MISC 26-8 Budget Amendments

Attachments: [6-15-2026 Budget Amendments](#)

MISC 26-9 AGRICULTURE CENTER CONSTRUCTION AMENDED AND FINAL PROJECT ORDINANCE

Attachments: [6-15-2026 AG Center Const Amended & Final Project Ordinance](#)

MISC 26-10 ASHE COUNTY LANDFILL CELL CONSTRUCTION & ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES BUILDING PROJECT ORDINANCE

Attachments: [6-15-2026 Landfill Cell Const & Env Ser Bldg Project Ordinance](#)

MISC 26-11 Monthly Tax Report for May 2026

Attachments: 6-15-2026 Monthly Tax Report May 2026

APP 26-4 High Country Council of Government Appointment of Tasha Roundtree to the Workforce Development Board**IV. Adoption of Agenda**

*Commissioner Greene made the motion to adopt the June 15, 2026 agenda.
Commissioner Killen seconded the motion. The motion passed with unanimous approval.*
Adopted

For: 5 - Chairperson McNeill, Vice Chairman Powers, Commissioner Eldreth, Commissioner Killen and Commissioner Greene

V. Public Comment

Chairman McNeill opened the floor for the Public Comment portion of today's meeting. No comments were offered from those in attendance. He then closed the Public Comment portion of today's meeting.

VI. Presentations**PRES 26-88** 9:05 AM - PUBLIC HEARING: FY 2026/2027 Proposed Budget Ordinance

At 9:05 am Chairman McNeill opened the public hearing for the proposed fiscal year budget as required by North Carolina General Statute 159-12B, noting a three-minute limit for public comments.

Sheriff Howell read from a formal letter he had written expressing concern over proposed cuts to public safety, specifically citing reductions in maintenance, office supplies, uniforms, equipment, and the removal of vehicles from the lease program. He said that the budget proposal would cut three positions across his departments, which he argued moves the county backward in terms of safety. He expressed frustration that he felt his office was not provided a specific time slot to present their budget during previous work sessions, despite requests from Mrs. Vogler. The Sheriff compared Ashe County's compensation and benefits to Wilkes County, noting that Wilkes provides higher incentive pay for night shifts, certifications, and education, as well as additional patrol and dispatch positions. He also shared revenue figures.

Jeremy Williams, Captain ACSO, warned commissioners that proposed cuts to public safety—especially eliminating a dispatch position—would directly endanger residents because every 911 caller depends on a dispatcher to send help. He emphasized that law enforcement is the county's first line of defense and that cutting positions, vehicles, maintenance funds, and equipment undermines both public safety and officer safety. Jeremy also noted that high-mileage vehicles are already unreliable for long inmate and hospital transports, and that reductions to office supplies and uniforms affect both daily operations and community programs like Back to School Blast and Rooftop Cops. He closed by saying he never expected Ashe County to support anything resembling "Defund the Police".

Charles Stafford, Fleetwood, spoke saying law enforcement urgently needs the

commissioners' backing. He is troubled that the sheriff's office did not receive an adequate meeting to discuss its budget and urge commissioners to postpone any final vote until that happens. He also said that law enforcement, dispatch, equipment, and proper funding are basic county needs and note that deputies leave for neighboring counties because of significantly better pay. He concluded that commissioners have the opportunity—and responsibility—to fix these issues and should pause the process to support law enforcement.

Joann Kuszaj reminded commissioners that AppHealthCare's state & federal budget cuts—especially eliminated positions—reflect financial strain, not excess staffing, and that those losses leave too few providers and nurses to meet community needs. She acknowledged countywide budget constraints but urged commissioners to recognize the real impact of these reductions and to continue supporting the district health department. She also encouraged the county to review comparable district health departments, such as Vance and Granville Counties, and to study their budgets and publicly accessible materials, noting that their websites offer strong examples of clear budget communication. She stated that she was the mother of a law enforcement officer who has served for over 20 years, and she would fully support Commissioners looking at and give them the opportunity to help figure out what to do with their budget because public safety is very important. She stated that since being up here full-time for seven years, she appreciated what the sheriff's department does.

High School student Lilly Franconnet, who was attending with two other students and a teacher to observe government processes stepped to the podium and spoke saying "if you're going to cut our budget on something that keeps our county safe, how can we trust you to make the proper decisions to keep this county safe if you're going to cut something that does, in fact, keep our county safe?" She then took her seat.

Brian Greer, the county's Director of Communications, urged commissioners to understand the seriousness of cutting a dispatch position, calling it a "slap in the face" to a department that is the starting point for every emergency response. He described the extreme stress and under-staffing his team already faces, noting a vacant night shift position they've been unable to fill, a hiring freeze that blocked a recent candidate, and staff working extra hours while one employee is on sick leave. Greer warned that further cuts will cause burnout and resignations, jeopardize the county's ability to meet state 911 call answering requirements, and risk losing annual 911 funds—costs the county would then have to absorb. He closed by reminding commissioners that he previously saved the county by shifting a large expense to 911 funds, saying that should count as his department's budget cut and urging them not to eliminate the position.

Whitney Ward, a communications center telecommunicator, urged commissioners to understand that cutting the dispatch budget and eliminating a hireable position is dangerous and irresponsible. She described how only two dispatchers are typically on duty, making it impossible to manage multiple simultaneous emergencies without putting callers on hold and forcing staff to choose whose crisis matters more. Whitney emphasized the extreme stress, understaffing, lack of breaks, low pay, and emotional toll dispatchers face.

Curtis Barker, an Ashe County emergency dispatcher, urged commissioners to reconsider the hiring freeze and planned budget cuts, explaining that the dispatch center is already operating with dangerously low staffing due to vacancies and health-related absences. He described dispatchers routinely working 16-hour days to cover three shifts with only four available staff, all while managing multiple simultaneous emergencies. Curtis warned that further cuts will worsen burnout, reduce performance, and directly

endanger both citizens and first responders by slowing emergency response.

Abby Richardson, a night shift sergeant in the Ashe County Communications Center, explained that call volume continues to rise sharply with dispatchers handling everything from cardiac arrests and structure fires to mental health crises, wrecks, welfare checks, and after hours calls for multiple county and state agencies. She emphasized that dispatchers support more than a dozen emergency departments and serve as the county's only after hours contact point for DSS, magistrates, schools, and others, requiring extensive training and constant readiness. Abby warned that eliminating the open dispatcher position on her shift would leave her partner working alone, which is unsafe and unworkable given simultaneous emergencies and the county's population of 27,000. She stressed that dispatchers are already exhausted, working heavy overtime and rotating between day and night shifts. She urged commissioners to reconsider.

Lieutenant DJ Bowlin of Ashe County Detention Center explained that the detention center already struggles to stay fully staffed and has only been fully staffed a few times in the past eight years. He noted that the work is extremely difficult, dangerous, and often performed for far less pay than it deserves, making recruitment and retention challenging even when candidates are available. Cutting a position, he warned, would push the department even further behind and jeopardize the care and safety of people in custody—including the loved ones of those in the room. Bowlin urged commissioners to reconsider the cuts, emphasizing the dedication of detention staff.

Chairman McNeill asked if anyone else in attendance would like to speak on the proposed budget ordinance. Seeing no movement he closed the Public Hearing at 9:43 am.

[PRES 26-89](#) 9:10 AM - PUBLIC HEARING: FY 2026/2027 Proposed Budget Ordinance for Economic Development Expenditures

At 9:43 a.m., Chairman McNeill opened the public hearing on the FY 2026–2027 Community and Economic Development expenditures included in the proposed budget. This hearing was solely for comments on those expenditures. He asked if anyone wished to speak. Seeing no response, he closed the public hearing at 9:44 a.m.

No Action Taken

[PRES 26-90](#) 9:12 AM - Approval of the FY 2026/2027 Budget Ordinance & the FY 2026/2027 Economic Development Budget Expenditures

Chairman McNeill asked for a motion to approve the fiscal year 2026/2027 budget ordinance for \$162,619,528. This includes ongoing construction expenditures of the new middle school, the new landfill Environmental Services building construction, and a new cell at the landfill.

To set the ad valorem tax rate for fiscal year 2026/2027 at \$0.44 per \$100 of assessed value. That remains the same as fiscal year 2023/2024, 2024/2025, and 2025/2026 at \$0.44 per \$100, no change.

To set the fire tax rates per \$100 of assessed value as follows (all remain the same):

Creston: \$0.06
 Fleetwood: \$0.04
 Glendale Springs: \$0.07
 Lansing: \$0.06
 Warrensville: \$0.12

Jefferson: \$0.039
New River: \$0.07
West Jefferson: \$0.06
Laurel Springs: \$0.07
Pond Mountain: \$0.08
Todd: \$0.07
Deep Gap: \$0.04

To set the Rescue/EMS tax district rate for fiscal year 2026/2027 at \$0.024 per \$100 of assessed value, also the same rate as the previous year, with \$0.004 going to the Ashe County Rescue Squad and \$0.02 going into the county capital reserve fund for the purpose of establishing and equipping a county-run ambulance service when the current contract with Ashe Medics ends.

To set the solid waste disposal tipping fees at the landfill effective July 1 at:
Commercial: \$75 (no change)
Industrial: \$65 (no change)
LCID: \$55 (no change)

And the adoption of the revised fee schedules for fire inspections, planning, and building inspections beginning July 1.

That is the motion for consideration.

Vice Chairman Powers stated that budget sessions usually go three to four days and on occasion five days. We were able to do it in two days this year. He stated he was not going to assign blame for why the Sheriff's Office didn't have their opportunity to speak. However, he moved that they postpone adopting the budget and reconvene for one specific purpose: allowing a face-to-face conversation between the county commissioners and the Sheriff's Office. He stated he was not suggesting an all-day meeting—just a chance to address everyone's concerns openly and resolve them before we take a final vote on the budget. That is my motion he stated. After some discussion the session was scheduled for Friday, June 19th, 2026 at 3:00 pm at the Ashe County Courthouse. Commissioner Killen seconded the motion. All were in favor.

Chairman McNeill then stated "I recognize that discussions like this can become emotional, but I want to clarify a few facts for the record. No employee lost their job in this proposed budget. The positions that were removed were vacant—some for more than a year, others for over six months—and one was a grant-funded position whose funding sunset was known in advance. That position was also vacant. These points matter and should be acknowledged.

Two years ago, the county completed a comprehensive pay study to bring staff salaries up to market levels. Across nearly 250 full-time positions, the average wage increased by 8% in a single year. Departments in the public safety umbrella—law enforcement, corrections, and communications—received the largest adjustments, with some increases reaching 13%. Last year, all employees received an additional 3% cost-of-living adjustment, and this proposed budget includes another 3%, along with increases for part-time staff. These actions demonstrate consistent support for county employees.

Regarding the budget itself, the numbers are clear. Last year's combined budget for law enforcement, corrections, and communications was \$8,689,959. Their proposed budget for this year is \$9,021,065, an increase of \$331,110. That is a verifiable increase—more

than half a cent on the county tax rate—not a reduction. These figures can be confirmed directly with county finance staff.

This year's budget process moved quickly because difficult decisions had to be made, and there was no room for discretionary spending. The board worked together, unanimously, in open meetings held on the same dates they occur every year. Anyone could have attended at any time.

Finally, I want to be absolutely clear: I fully support law enforcement. My own brother spent his entire career in that field. Any suggestion that I would support anything resembling "defunding the police" is unfounded. The numbers speak for themselves: last year's combined budget for law enforcement, corrections, and communications was \$8,689,959; this year's proposal is \$9,021,065—an increase of \$331,110, which is more than twice the annual budget of the Town of Lansing. Combined with the significant salary increases provided over the past two years, this is not a reduction in support."

Commissioner Killen noted that although this is only his second budget cycle as a commissioner, he was surprised that only two departments came in to discuss or defend their budgets during the work sessions. He emphasized that the meeting dates are public, the door was open, and anyone without an appointment was still welcome to walk in. He added that this is simply the other side of the issue—participation was available, but few chose to use it.

Commissioner Greene explained that after 20 years of preparing budgets, he views a budget as a planning document that inevitably changes when unexpected events—such as COVID or Hurricane Helene—shift priorities. He emphasized that responsible budgeting includes evaluating year-end spending to determine what was truly needed and to ensure taxpayer dollars are used wisely. Drawing on 37 years in emergency services, he stressed his commitment to ensuring firefighters, deputies, paramedics, and all county employees have the equipment and protection they need. He stated he does not believe the board "defunded the police," but is willing to meet again on Friday to review concerns. He noted that the board had a productive, open budget session and that some items may warrant reconsideration, and he expressed support for voting to reconvene.

Commissioner Eldreth reminded the audience that the board held a public hearing before beginning budget work sessions, and only seven people spoke at that time. He noted that many of the individuals now raising concerns did not attend that initial hearing, emphasizing that the first public hearing is the appropriate venue for budget input. He also highlighted the broader issue of deputy pay compared to a teacher with a four-year degree. He concluded that anyone wishing to influence the budget should participate in the first public hearing.

No Action Taken

[PRES 26-91](#) 9:15 AM - PUBLIC HEARING: Land Sale

At 10:09 am Chairman McNeill opened the Public Hearing for the proposed sale of land. Nick Farmerie, Assistant County Manager & Community Development Director took the podium and stated that pursuant to NC General Statute 158-7.1 subsection D, we are required to hold a public hearing prior to the conveyance of property for the purpose of Economic Development. We have been offered a sale of \$500,000 from H&F Holdings LLC, to purchase lot five at the Industrial Park. That's the one, right as you go up and to the left, our largest lot. Within this requirement, the proposed purchaser has stated that they are committing to creating 35 jobs above the area median income in Ashe County,

creating \$7 million of ad valorem valued investment. And the building that would be constructed would be a minimum of fifty thousand square feet with ceiling height at least thirty feet at the eve line. Chairman McNeill stated our industrial park expansion is doing what it was designed to do. This is a new company, building a new building, thirty-five new jobs, average above the area median income.

Chairman McNeill asked if anybody was present to speak to the public hearing for this land sale at the industrial park? Seeing no movement Chairman McNeill closed that public hearing at 10:11 am.

Nick then stated that action was needed to approve staff to execute the sale contract for the property in question. Vice Chairman Powers made the motion to approve staff to execute the sale contract for the industrial Park property. Commissioner Greene seconded the motion. The motion passed with unanimous approval.

Approved

For: 5 - Chairperson McNeill, Vice Chairman Powers, Commissioner Eldreth, Commissioner Killen and Commissioner Greene

PRES 26-92 9:20 AM - Tracie McMillan, DSS Director - DSS Statistics for April 2026

Attachments: [6-15-2026 DSS Statistics April 2026](#)

Trace presented the DSS Statistics for April 2026. She offered to answer any questions the Board might have. They had none. Tracie then continued on to her next presentation.

PRO 26-2 9:22 AM - Tracie McMillan, DSS Director - Proclamation Foster Care Month June 2026

Attachments: [6-15-2026 Proclamation Foster Care Month June 2026](#)

Tracie introduced a proclamation for Foster Care Awareness Month and, for efficiency, highlighted only the essential sections. The proclamation notes that North Carolina has an estimated 11,000 children in foster care, including young adults ages 18–20 in extended care, and that Ashe County currently has 18 children in foster care, including three young adults. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing the resilience of youth in foster care, the dedication of caregivers and professionals, and the need for more families to open their homes. The proclamation formally declares June 2026 as Foster Care Awareness Month in Ashe County and encourages citizens to honor and support foster families, kinship caregivers, child welfare professionals, and community partners. Commissioner Greene made the motion to adopt the proclamation. Commissioner Killen seconded the motion. The motion passed with unanimous approval.

Adopted

For: 5 - Chairperson McNeill, Vice Chairman Powers, Commissioner Eldreth, Commissioner Killen and Commissioner Greene

PRES 26-93 9:24 AM - Tracie McMillan, DSS Director - Resumption of CAP for Western North Carolina

Attachments: [6-15-2026 Documentation -Resumption of CAP for Western NC](#)

Tracie stated that this update concerns the Resumption of CAP in Western North Carolina, based on a letter dated May 7, 2026. Ashe County was previously one of 25 counties exempt from major improvement plan requirements, but that exemption has now ended. Beginning July 1, 2026, if the county fails to meet required performance measurements, we could be placed under an improvement plan.

[PRES 26-99](#) 9:27 AM - Tracie McMillan, DSS Director - Path NC for Permanency

Attachments: [6-15-2026 Update on Path NC Ongoing Roll Out](#)

Tracie stated that the update on the PATH NC rollout is straightforward: the implementation is not progressing as planned. The state is still working through Group 1 of the permanency rollout, which means Group 2 is postponed, and Group 3—our group—is also postponed. That is the current status.

[PRES 26-94](#) 9:30 AM - Tracie McMillan, DSS Director - MOU and Data Sharing Agreement

Attachments: [6-15-2026 SFY 2026-27 & 2027-28 MOU Cover Letter](#)

[6-15-2026 MOU-ASHE-DHHS FY 26-27](#)

[6-15-2026 Addendum A Data Sharing MOA](#)

[6-15-2026 Combined Performance Measures](#)

[6-15-2026 Approved Action Plan Protocol](#)

Tracie explained that the county did not sign last year's MOU with the state because several counties, including Ashe, believed the state was not meeting its responsibilities. A statewide work group was then formed with the Department of Health and Human Services, and the speaker served on it. As a result, the MOU was improved, training and resources were strengthened, and major progress was made—especially in IT access, monthly Q&A sessions, updated manuals, and clearer policy guidance. While the Medicaid policy area is still behind, it is not part of this MOU.

The speaker recommended that commissioners approve both the Memorandum of Understanding (which includes performance measures) and the Memorandum of Agreement for required data sharing, noting that the MOA is essential for exchanging information. Commissioner Killen made one motion to approve both the MOU and the MOA. Commissioner Greene seconded the motion. The motion passed with unanimous approval.

Tracie also took the opportunity to discuss budget reductions with the Board.

Approved

For: 5 - Chairperson McNeill, Vice Chairman Powers, Commissioner Eldreth, Commissioner Killen and Commissioner Greene

[PRES 26-95](#) 9:36 AM - Adam Stumb, County Manager - EMS Update

Adam presented an update on the EMS facility planning, noting that needs surveys from 22 staff members highlighted safety and space limitations at the current building. Two potential sites are under consideration: the lower section of the courthouse campus and the old Jefferson school site. Preliminary designs and site pros and cons are expected to be reported back to the Board by August.

[PRES 26-96](#) 9:40 AM - Adam Stumb, County Manager - STIP Project Solicitation

Attachments: [6-15-2026 High Country RPO STIP Projects Memorandum](#)

The Board approved three STIP projects for prioritization: the Ingles/McDonald's intersection, Business 221 modernization, and the Ashe County Airport terminal hangar replacement. Commissioner Greene made the motion, seconded by Commissioner Killen

and passed by unanimous vote.

Approved

- For: 5 - Chairperson McNeill, Vice Chairman Powers, Commissioner Eldreth, Commissioner Killen and Commissioner Greene

[PRES 26-97](#) 9:45 AM - Patricia S. Calloway, Executive Director Generations Ashe - Monthly Update

Attachments: [6-15-2026 Documentation-Generations Ashe](#)

Patricia requested and received approval for the fifth and final installment of the approved contingency loan for Generations Ashe. Updates were provided on the appraisal of the assisted living community and the ongoing fire suppression system updates. Patricia noted that an unexpected heat pump replacement in the main building is estimated to cost between \$14,000 and \$20,000.

[PRES 26-98](#) 9:55 AM - Nick Farmerie, Assistant County Manager & Community Development Director - Appeal of Incident ID: 13250

Attachments: [6-15-2026 90.04 NUISANCE, Photos, Appeal Notification, Incident Report](#)

Chairman McNeill called a recess at 11:08am. We will reconvene in the second floor conference room at 11:15 am.

Chairman McNeill reconvened the meeting at 11:15 a.m. Nick, the Assistant County Manager, outlined the timeline of a nuisance complaint under ordinance 90.04A2 involving chickens repeatedly entering a neighbor's property.

March 6, 2026: Edward Carrow filed a formal complaint about Craig Hart's chickens entering his property and garage.

March 24: Animal Control notified Mr. Hart.

April 16: Mr. Carrow submitted photos showing the issue continued.

April 28: A \$100 citation was issued.

May 4: Mr. Hart appealed.

Animal Control Director Joe Testerman explained that the chickens were entering Mr. Carrow's garage—where he stores collectible cars—and defecating on the property, forcing him to keep his garage closed.

Joe confirmed that although the ordinance requires a 72-hour grace period, Mr. Hart was given over a month before enforcement. Mr. Hart stated he has kept chickens since the 1970s, recently reduced his flock, and invested in fencing, though it remains incomplete. He also noted ongoing neighbor disputes and that his home is for sale. Commissioners reiterated that property owners must keep their animals on their own land, regardless of species. The board upheld the violation and the \$100 civil penalty, finding that staff followed all required procedures. Joe noted that future violations escalate to \$200, then \$500, plus possible criminal charges.

GENERAL SESSION

VII. Commissioner Comments**VIII. Announcements****IX. Executive Session****X. Adjournment**

At 11:32 am Commissioner Eldreth made the motion to adjourn the June 15th, 2026 meeting. Commissioner Killen seconded the motion. The motion passed with unanimous approval.

Approved

For: 5 - Chairperson McNeill, Vice Chairman Powers, Commissioner Eldreth, Commissioner Killen and Commissioner Greene

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