

Ashe County

*150 Government Circle
Jefferson, NC 28640*



Meeting Minutes - Draft

Monday, May 19, 2025

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 May 19th, 2024 Regular Session Meeting 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**III. Consent Agenda**

*Commissioner Eldreth made the motion to adopt the Consent Agenda. Commissioner Greene seconded the motion. The motion passed with unanimous approval.
Adopted*

[MIN 25-14](#) May 5th, 2025 Meeting Minutes

[Attachments:](#) [5-19-2025 May 5th, 2025 Meeting Minutes](#)

[PRES 25-65](#) Monthly Tax Report for April 2025

[Attachments:](#) [5-19-2025 Monthly Tax Report April 2025](#)

IV. Adoption of Agenda**V. Public Comment**

Chairman McNeil opened the floor for public comment at 9:03 AM.

Ashe Medic, Ryan Kissell, Blowing Rock, NC took the podium and stated he would like to stress that they, paramedics in this county, who serve 24/7, through holidays, day, night, shine, sleet, snow and rain, were discouraged from coming here to speak to commissioners today. He said they were told not to wear their uniforms. He stated he was here with his beautiful wife and his six month old daughter and that he was also here with his fellow coworkers. He said "I have been a paramedic here in the High country since 2011 around 2017 I transferred from Watauga County to Ashe County, since then I have served this county as a paramedic, I have done everything in my ability to serve this community with professionalism and courtesy, despite any personal or professional challenges put before me. The paramedics in Ashe County are the best I have ever worked with he stated. He said I am proud to call them my friends, I'm proud to call them my family. I served my country working for the Department of defense, I was a civilian specialist that was deployed to the war in Iraq in 2008, I served with Polish, Mongolian, Ukrainian and US Army special forces. He stated that the jacket he was wearing today was his combat jacket. He said it had blood on it, sweat in it and dirt. He stated that it was a symbol for free speech, democracy and liberty. He said this jacket and the flag that adorns it is a shield against intimidation, against tyranny, it's American, it's democracy. He thanked the Board for the opportunity to speak and for providing forum for the public, for free speech, we have a voice, we should be able to speak without intimidation or fear of losing our job. it's our God-given right as Americans.

Cody Darnell, West Jefferson took the podium. Cody is also a Paramedic with Ashe Medics. He read the following prepared statement.

Good morning, commissioners, it is a pleasure to be able to speak before you today. I stand before you as Cody Darnell, Ashe County Native, concerned citizen, and proud Professional Paramedic of 10 years. Nearly my entire EMS career, whether professional or volunteer, has been served here in Ashe County under employment of Ashe Medics. I am beyond honored to care for my fellow man and I hold our position as tax funded public servants in the highest regards. Due to this regard, I am here to speak factually, my lived experience truth, about what is trying to transpire at your contracted EMS service, Ashe Medics.

On May 7th while off duty, I was reading our company's messaging app called breakroom, that a possible merger was to take place between Priority on Demand and the Medics Company, owned by Craig Sullivan. No exclusive details were given, and vague answers were common.

On Tuesday May 14th I arrived at work ready to perform daily operations when the staff was made aware via our breakroom app, and in person that the decision to move forward with Priority on Demand was made. We were given an approximate 30-minute briefing and were told a "Town Hall" meeting with Priority on Demand was to take place via Zoom in our conference room. Priority on Demand sent two in person representatives and the Zoom meeting was presided virtually by Priorities Regional HR Business Partner and their Regional Talent Acquisition Manager. All parties from Priority were either out of state or hours away from Ashe County. During this meeting it was revealed that Priority does not have employees, they have companies, and that many benefits would change including, down grade of medical insurance, removal of 401k match, loss of Aflac, and reduction of PTO. The expected merge date of Ashe Medics and Priority on Demand was to be June 1st. As to be expected this caused significant undue stress for the employees and their families they provide for.

For those of you that do not know I have a preexisting liver condition I was born with called Wilson's Disease. This disease prevents my body from eliminating excess copper and the built-up copper, if not treated, will eventually lead to permanent liver damage, cirrhosis, kidney damage, Parkinson's type symptoms, and death, resulting from multiple organ system failure. Unfortunately, my sister shared this same disease and by the time medical experts knew, it was too late. She passed April 20th, 2005, at 17 years old, in a hospital bed at Carolinas Medical Center. I tell you this not to gain sympathy but to rather state that due to advances in medical care I have nearly doubled her age in years. I have married the love of my life, am privileged to father 2 beautiful children, and am expected to live a full life. All due to 4 pills, taken daily. Unfortunately, like many of my fellow 18 million Americans, who struggle to afford medications, this medication is impossible to afford without quality health insurance. At 19 years old I was no longer eligible for my late mother's insurance she was provided through disability caused by stroke. I had to enter the full-time work force to be able to afford my life altering medications, always checking employee provided health insurance to assure myself, I was covered.

Continuing May 14th after finishing ambulance calls and completing patient care records, I sat down in my room and began yet another search to see if I was covered. Referring to the benefits book Priority gave each employee I learned our insurance provider will now be Cigna and that our prescription drug plan will have 4 tiers of covered medications. After calling Cigna's customer service line they told me that the drug plan Priority provided was outsourced through express scripts. Cigna's representative advised me to call express scripts to see if my medication was covered. Speaking with express scripts, I found it strange that the customer service representative was not familiar with Priority on Demand and that they cannot tell me any information without having an enrollment number or plan ID. Not wanting to give up, I went back to Cigna's website and searched numerous PDF files to see if my medication was covered or what tier they classify it as. To my disappointment I discovered that my medication is a Tier 5, and as previously

stated our plan offered by Priority only covers up to tier 4. Reality set in my medication is not covered by Priority on Demands health insurance and their coverage starts June 1st. I had approximately 15 days to figure something out.

The following Day on May 15th my day off, our companies messaging app was a buzz with questions, concerns, doubts, pros, cons, and everything in between regarding the merger. Claims were made that PTO will be fixed, Aflac will be fixed, 401k will be fixed yet no mention of improved or similar health insurance. Also, to my knowledge no staff has received any of these claims in writing. To confirm my findings, as instructed by Priority, I called their Regional HR Business Partner. I explained the situation and reported my urgent need to make sure my medication is covered. She advised me to write her an email and that she will send it up the ladder to someone who can help. I have yet to receive a response.

By May 16th we were advised that the rest of the Priorities Town Hall meetings were cancelled and the merger between the companies was on hold. Later that day I was relieved to hear the current Health Insurance with Ashe Medics was extended through June buying me more.

Commissioners, my simple questions are these. If this merger was in the best interest of us as employees and prehospital providers, why were we left out and left behind with only two weeks' notice of this merger taking place? How can something this significant be decided without county oversight?

I stand here on my day off as Cody Darnell, Ashe County Native, concerned citizen, and proud Professional Paramedic of 10 years. Make no mistake, I WANT TO WORK AS A PARAMEDIC IN THE COMMUNITY I WAS BORN AND LIVE IN. Commissioners, with a heavy heart and a great burden please hear this. If this merger takes place and my medication is not covered, I will be forced to leave my paramedic position with Ashe Medics, my hands will be tied. You will gain an out of state for profit company, and you will lose a native son who loves his role in EMS. Thank You.

Seeing no other movement from the citizens in attendance, Chairman McNeill closed the floor for public comment at 9:13 am.

VI. Presentations

PRES 25-66 9:04 AM - Chris Lambert, Tax Administrator -

Attachments: [5-19-2025 Reappointment Consideration for Tax Admin](#)

Vice Chairman Powers made the motion to reappoint Chris Lambert as the Ashe County Tax Administrator. Commissioner Eldreth 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 25-67 9:08 AM - Sheriff Phil Howell - Budget Amendment

SRO Brian Blanco was present today to discuss the requested budget amendment. This is a general amendment, moving ABC money to the ACSO budget for training on the drug education program (LEAD). Brian stated that they wish to send three SRO's to the LEAD training being held on June 10th & 11th, 2025. Brian stated the total cost of the training and hotel stay for the three officers was approximately \$2298.18. Adam Stumb, County manager stated to the Board that Finance Officer Sandy Long had recommended allocating \$3000.00 for the LEAD training. Commissioner Greene made the motion to approve the allocation. Commissioner Eldreth 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 25-68 9:12 AM - Joe Testerman, Director of Animal Control - Budget Amendment

Attachments: [5-19-2025 Animal Control Budget Amendment](#)

Joe Testerman, Director of Animal Control -presented a Budget Amendment to the Board. He is requesting to move donated funds to purchase a few equipment items. Commissioner Eldreth made the motion to increase the appropriation for the department of Animal Control from \$452,489 to \$456,689; this increased appropriation of \$4,200 to be made from previous year donation funds residing in the General Fund (Fund Balance). 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 25-69 9:16 AM - Missy Parker, Veterans Services Director - Acceptance of Veterans Grant

Attachments: [5-19-2025 NCDMVA Grant Program for County Veterans Offices Contract Packet](#)

Missy Parker, Veterans Service Officer stated that she applied for and received approval for a grant from the NC Department of Military and Veterans Administration. The grant amount is \$17,150 and requires no matching funds. She stated these funds will be used for more outreach to veterans and to purchase some furniture for the Family Central conference room to provide a more inviting space for veterans to meet. Vice Chairman Powers made the motion to approve the grant and approve the acceptance of the funds. 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 25-70 9:20 AM - Priscilla Norris, CPA - Contract Approval FY 2024-25

Attachments: [5-19-2025 Audit Letter](#)
[5-19-2025 Contract to Audit Accounts 24-25](#)

Priscilla Norris, CPA presented to the Board the Audit Contract for FY 2024-25 for their approval. Vice Chairman Powers made the motion to approve the Audit Contract for FY 2024-25. 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

PRO 25-2 9:35 AM - Karen Moll, Friends of The Library - Proclamation Celebrating

the 50th Anniversary of the Friends of the Library

Attachments: [5-19-2025 Proclamation Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Friends of the Library](#)

Karen Moll, Friends of The Library presented to the Board a Proclamation Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Friends of the Library. She spoke on the many ways Friends of the Library assists the library such as supplementing the library budget by providing direct financial assistance for the purchase of library items and materials requested by staff. To date they have raised over \$500,000. They encourage gifts and memorials for the library and provide additional financial support through our fund-raising efforts. They sponsor community awareness and use of the library. They lobby NC legislators for improved funding and library legislation an sponsor interesting programs designed to add to the cultural life of the community. They also aid in public relations by informing the community about the library's services and programs and recognize staff and the important work they do and provide financial support of staff development. They maintain the Friends Corner within the library. Commissioner Greene made the motion to adopt the Proclamation Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Friends of the Library. 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 25-71](#) 9:40 AM - Kristi Berry, President Wilkes Vocational Services Inc. - Update on Services

Attachments: [5-19-2025 Wilkes Vocational Services Inc Handbook for Persons Served](#)

Kristi Berry, President Wilkes Vocational Services Inc. was present today to present the Board with an update on their services. Wilkes Vocational Services is a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering and supporting individuals with disabilities and barriers in life, in achieving a meaningful and purposeful day. Wilkes Vocational Services offers people served with opportunities for employment, employment skills training, and self-sufficiency. Through a comprehensive range of vocational support services, readiness job skills, inclusive community involvement, and peer support. Wilkes Vocational Services offers a variety of services based on individualized need and not limited to the following: employment, supported employment, vocational assessments, job coaching, employment building, preparation and training in daily living skills, social skills, supports in self-help, leisure, communication skills, recreational skills, training in safety awareness, budgeting, money management, and community living skills. Wilkes Vocational Services has in-house employment opportunities as well as opportunities for employment in the community. One primary focus of Wilkes Vocational Services is a person-centered approach ensuring each person supported has the necessary resources necessary to thrive. We strive to build relationships, confidence and promote independence, ultimately creating a higher quality of life. Wilkes Vocational Services anticipates the opportunity to share in further detail about our program at the upcoming May 19th meeting. We are greatly appreciative of the out pour of support to our program. Your support has contributed to our growth and development, that is celebrated here. Thank you for the opportunity to continue to watch us grow.

[PRES 25-72](#) 9:55 AM - Adam Stumb, County Manager - Cleaning Contract & Mowing Contract FY 2025/26

Attachments: [5-19-2025 Cleaning Ashe County Facilities Contract 2025-26](#)

[5-19-2025 Mowing Ashe County Facilities Contract 2025-26](#)

Adam Stumb, County Manager presented to the Board the County FY 2025/26 Cleaning Contract & Mowing Contracts. Adam stated that there were no changes and no changes in cost on the contract for the coming year. Commissioner Greene made the motion to approve the FY 2025/26 Cleaning Contract & Mowing Contracts. 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

PRES 25-73 10:00 AM - Adam Stumb, County Manager - Environmental Services Building Contract Discussion

Adam Stumb, County Manager presented to the Board the proposed contract with Vannoy Construction for the new Environmental Services Building. The proposed design cost for the new Environmental Services Building is \$295,625. After some discussion Vice Chairman Powers made the motion to approve the contract with Vannoy Construction. 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

PRES 25-74 10:10 AM - Adam Stumb, County Manager - Generations Ashe Agreement

Adam Stumb, County Manager presented to the Board the proposed agreement between the County and Generations Ashe. He stated that County Attorney John Kilby and Attorney Jak Reeves (for Generations) have reviewed the agreement. After some discussion Vice Chairman Powers made the motion to approve the agreement. 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 25-75 10:25 AM - Adam Stumb, County Manager - Presentation of the FY 2025/26 Budget

Adam Stumb, County Manager presented the Board with the proposed budget for fiscal year 2025/2026. A copy is available online and in the Administration office on the second floor of the Ashe County Courthouse for anyone wishing to view it.

No Action Taken

GENERAL SESSION

VII. Commissioner Comments

VIII. Announcements

Adam Stumb, County Manager announced that County Offices would be closed Monday,

May 26th, 2025 in observance of Memorial Day.

IX. Executive Session

Commissioner Greene made the motion to enter into Executive Session at 10:15 am. Vice Chairman Powers seconded the motion. The motion passed with unanimous approval. The Board returned from Executive Session at 10:40 am. Patty Gambill, Emergency Management Coordinator joined the meeting. Craig Sullivan, the regional EMS director who oversees operations in four counties, including Watauga was also present and asked to address the issues brought to the Board during the public comment portion of today's meeting. Chairman McNeill expressed displeasure of the events leading up to today, noting that commissioners only learned about it after community members began calling with questions and reading about it in the Watauga Democrat. Chairman McNeill also stated that this conversation should have started a year ago. Commissioner Killen read a portion of the county's current EMS contract that requires board approval for any transfer or subcontracting of services, telling Craig Sullivan that there should have told him that he would have to come to the Board first. Board members were also displeased with reports that employees were instructed not to attend the Commissioners meeting today. Mr. Sullivan confirmed the merger is no longer moving forward and promised there would be no retaliation against employees who spoke out. He also said current health benefits would remain in place for now. Mr. Sullivan stated that EMS staff received some misinformation, and that it was his fault and he apologized. Commissioners acknowledged his apology, but also expressed concern about damaged trust and called for better communication in the future. With five years remaining on Ashe County's EMS contract, commissioners said they would like to see it through.

Chairman McNeill stated that the County spends almost 2 million dollars in taxpayer dollars every year and that he thought that should buy the County some goodwill for you to come to talk to us about it."

ES 25-5

Economic Development G.S. 143-318.11(4)

ES 25-6

Attorney Consultation G.S. 143-318.11(a)(3)

X. Adjournment

At 10:58 am Vice Chairman Powers made the motion to adjourn the May 19th, 2025 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

Citizens with disabilities requiring special needs to access the services or public meetings of Ashe County Government should contact the County Manager's Office three days prior to the meeting by calling (336) 846-5501.