Ashe County

150 Government Circle
Jefferson, NC 28640

Meeting Minutes - Draft

Tuesday, June 2, 2026

8:00 AM

FY 2026-27 Budget Session

2nd Floor Conference Room(Register of Deeds)

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 Business Session to order at 9:00 am. In attendance with Commissioners were County Manager Adam Stumb (Arrived 10:00 am), Finance Officer Sandy Long, Assistant County Manager & Community Development Director Nick Farmerie, Human Resource Coordinator Kelsey Wagoner, Asst. Finance Officer Teresa Bare, Deputy Finance Officer Ashley Lambert and Clerk to the Board Missy Seivers.

MISC 26-36 E911 Coordinator

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $10,300

MISC 26-37 E911 Operations Fund

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $109,140

MISC 26-38 Communications

The discussion shifted to the communications department, where a position has been vacant for six months. Despite this vacancy, the department requested a new assistant director position. The group expressed skepticism about adding a new role when an existing one remains unfilled. It was noted that the department relies heavily on part-time and overtime help, having spent over $28,000 on overtime and $51,000 on part-time wages recently. The participants ultimately decided to "pull" or permanently cut the vacant dispatcher position, totaling approximately $75,000 in savings, with the option for the department to formally request it again if needed.

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $924,887

MISC 26-39 Airport

Adam recommended a total cut of $8,500, which includes $6,000 from buildings and grounds maintenance and $2,500 from equipment. A proposal for $16,000 to spray herbicide using drones was discussed; the group suggested cutting this to $10,000 and shopping around for better quotes. The group noted that a light at the airport has been non-functional for years and the clock on the front porch displays the wrong time, requesting these be addressed.

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $447,333

MISC 26-40 Planning

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $200,396

MISC 26-41 Community Development

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $900,759

MISC 26-42 Cooperative Extension

The Cooperative Extension budget was trimmed by $3,000, specifically from office *supplies and miscellaneous expenses.*

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $609,732

MISC 26-43 Soil Conservation

The Soil Conservation budget was reduced by $4,000, though the group maintained enough funding for them to host two district meetings this year.

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $258,424

MISC 26-44 Health (Appalachian District Health)

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $745,720

MISC 26-45 Mental Health

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $192,216

PRES 26-121 Social Services

The Ashe County Department of Social Services (DSS), led by Director Tracie McMillan, outlined a complex budget shaped by detailed reimbursement formulas tied to staff activities. Employees track their work minute-by-minute using coded day sheets, which determine how costs are reimbursed across various funding sources. Income Maintenance staff typically receive higher reimbursement rates than services staff, and the department also uses specialized "black book codes" to capture expenses such as psychological evaluations and unfunded medications for wards. Regular meetings with business liaisons help ensure accurate coding and full use of available funds. The budget incorporates annual step increases affecting roughly half the workforce.

A major financial strain this year stems from H.R. 1, which sharply reduces Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) administrative reimbursement statewide due to North Carolina's high error rate, even though Ashe County maintains a 0% error rate. This change is expected to cost the county about $410,581, cutting federal reimbursement from roughly $817,000 to about $409,000. H.R. 1 also doubles staff workload by requiring case reviews every six months instead of annually. Additional pressures include a $228,000 reduction in indirect cost reimbursement and uncertainty surrounding both federal and state budgets.

Operational costs continue to rise as DSS invests in safety and technology, including Starlink connectivity for vehicles operating in remote "dark zones" and mandatory IT upgrades totaling about $80,000. The department maintains its practice of replacing one vehicle per year to maximize reimbursement. Tracie emphasized the urgent need for a new DSS building, noting that staff currently work in cramped spaces without room for interns or partner agencies, and that a modern facility could provide emergency shelter space and safe overnight accommodations for children.

DSS programs bring substantial economic benefit to Ashe County, including $68 million through Medicaid, $7.5 million in FNS benefits, and additional funding for daycare subsidies, transportation, and energy assistance. Disaster case management has generated nearly $1 million in grants and donations, though the department is transitioning this work to UMCOR as its involvement winds down. Tracie expressed *concern that many residents expecting home rebuilds through Renew NC may ultimately return seeking further assistance.*

The department is not requesting new positions this year but is actively filling Income Maintenance vacancies to manage increased workload. Tracie asked for a 3% Cost of Living Adjustment to remain competitive with neighboring counties, where starting salaries are significantly higher. She highlighted Ashe County's low caseloads, foster care averages 9–10 cases versus the state's recommended 15, as a key factor in strong staff retention and faster permanency outcomes for children.

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $10,436,560

MISC 26-46 Human Services

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $1,695,481

MISC 26-47 Veterans Service

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $96,485

MISC 26-48 Education

The Ashe County School Board thanked the Commissioners for their continued support and noted they would not request additional funding this year, as their budget is not yet finalized. They reviewed enrollment trends, explaining that Average Daily Membership has declined to about 2,750 students due to lower birth rates and past storm-related relocation. To strengthen workforce development and encourage young residents to remain in the county, the board has expanded intentional internships to 90 placements and highlighted rising success in Career and Technical Education programs, with the graduation rate increasing from 84% to 92%. The group also discussed ongoing traffic issues at Mountain View, where immediate safety measures—such as a "No left turn" sign and road delineators—are being implemented while a longer-term solution involving a new internal road awaits engineering plans and would likely occur after the next school year. Budget deliberations centered on salary increases and funding allocations for both the school system and Wilkes Community College. Concerns were raised about a proposed 5% raise that included higher-paid central office staff rather than focusing solely on the lowest-paid non-certified employees. In the end, Commissioners chose to maintain level funding for the schools at $6,744,870 and agreed to assume trash pickup services for Wilkes Community College, saving the college $8,400 annually while keeping its funding unchanged.

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $8,060,429

MISC 26-62 Economic Development

Is now "Community Development"

MISC 26-49 Library

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $647,741

MISC 26-50 Cultural Arts

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $383,003

PRES 26-122 Parks & Recreation

Kevin Anderson, Director Parks & Recreation presented the Parks and Recreation budget, highlighting several specific funding requests:

Fourth of July Fireworks: Requested a $2,000 increase to cover a contract with JECO Pyrotech, totaling approximately $22,000.
Youth Trout Derbies: Requested a $1,000 increase to source fish from private farms, as the state will not be stocking events for another year following hurricane damage.
Safety and Printing: Requested increases for telephone/internet to support security cameras and $1,000 for printing flyers for sports leagues.
Capital Equipment: Kevin agreed to cut a requested trap rake to prioritize a new Kubota L3902 tractor with a loader ($30,000 - $35,000), as the current early 90s model has a failing transmission.
The board expressed strong opposition to any tax increases this year, citing the high cost of living for residents and the impending property revaluation.

Tennis Court Project Complications:
A major portion of the discussion focused on the Ash Park tennis court renovation. Kevin reported that the contractor, Jeff Trexler (Geo Services), who signed a contract for $90,000 a year ago, recently increased the quote by $137,000, bringing the total to $227,000. The board expressed frustration at this "bad business" practice. Nick and Adam recommended rebidding the project and suggested looking into local companies like Chad Paving or Tri County, who have previously done quality work for the school system. The board agreed to carry over the existing $90,000 in funds to the next fiscal year to allow for this rebidding process.

Splash Pad and Playground Project:
Nick detailed the funding structure for the new splash pad and playground at Family Central. The project will be split over two years to manage costs:

Year One: Approximately $254,869 (with 50% reimbursement) will be spent to purchase and install the playground and buy the splash pad equipment to avoid price increases.
Year Two: The splash pad and a 40x40 shelter will be installed, with a projected request of $345,000. The board noted that the splash pad is one of the most requested amenities from the community.

Kevin raised concerns about the competitiveness of part-time wages, currently set at $12.75 per hour. He explained he is losing staff to higher-paying jobs and is constantly backtracking to cover shifts. Adam noted that while a 2.5% cost-of-living adjustment and a 50-cent hourly bump (to $13.25) are in the current plan, significant wage restructuring may need to wait.

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $1,275,254

MISC 26-51 Law Enforcement

The group rehashed several proposed budget cuts, including $5,000 from uniforms, $10,000 from office supplies, and $10,000 from vehicle maintenance. They also discussed a reduction of $18,281 from equipment, bringing that line item down to $30,000. A major point of discussion was the decision to cut a vacant grant position in law enforcement, which is estimated to save approximately $100,000 when factoring in fringe benefits and equipment costs, emphasizing that this allows for significant savings *without the need for layoffs. The group reviewed current year expenditures, noting that the law enforcement and corrections departments still have roughly 15-16% of their budgets remaining with only one month left in the fiscal year. Ideally, they should only have about 8% remaining. There was a debate regarding whether the department would try to "spend down" the remaining funds on items like key fobs. Finance staff suggested that if they want the key fobs, they should purchase them now using this year's remaining funds, as the funding will be pulled from next year's budget. The subject of law enforcement vehicles opened again. The group decided to cut the procurement of three new vehicles. It was noted that the recently cut vacant position already had a relatively new vehicle with only 10,000 miles on it, which could be reassigned to other staff members. Commissioners suggested that the existing fleet is in better shape than in previous years and can last another year as long as they are properly serviced.*

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $4,670,664

MISC 26-52 Corrections

In the corrections department, the group decided to permanently cut one open position to save approximately $75,000. There was a substantive discussion regarding the inmate population, which has decreased while staff numbers have remained steady. Commissioners and Finance staff questioned the financial viability of holding state prisoners (SMCP), suggesting that the $40 per day provided by the state may not cover actual expenses.

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $3,425,514

MISC 26-53 Debt Services

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $727,750

MISC 26-54 Fund Transfers

2026/2027 Recommended Budget = $7,646,501

II. Adjournment

A significant portion of the closing discussion focused on the future of EMS services. The board eventually decided to proceed with the design phase but defer construction decisions until more data is available, while also considering the potential need to hire an EMS director later in the year.

Chairman McNeill went around the table asking each Commissioner if they were in agreement with all the decisions that they made as a group with the FY2026/2027 Budget. All stated that they were.

Vice Chairman Powers made the motion to adjourn at 4:32 pm. Commissioner Eldreth seconded the motion. All were in agreement.

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.

Todd McNeill, Chairman

Missy Seivers
Clerk to the Board