

Ashe County

*150 Government Circle
Jefferson, NC 28640*



Meeting Minutes - Draft

Monday, February 3, 2020

1:00 PM

Special Meeting - Roundtable Meeting with Towns

Ashe County Chamber of Commerce - The Venue Meeting Room

County Commission

*Chairperson Todd McNeill
Vice Chair Larry Rhodes
Commissioner William Sands
Commissioner Paula Perry
Commissioner Larry Dix*

SPECIAL SESSION**I. 1:00 PM - Meeting Called to Order at the Ashe County Chamber of Commerce**

Chairman Todd McNeill called the Special Session to order at 1:00 p.m. at the Ashe County Chamber of Commerce Venue Meeting Room. The purpose of the meeting was to hold a roundtable discussion between County officials and municipal officials.

Board members present: Chairman McNeill, Vice Chairman Rhodes, Commissioner Dix, Commissioner Perry, and Commissioner Sands.

County staff present: Finance Officer Sandra Long, Tax Administrator Chris Lambert, Economic Development Director Cathy Barr, County Manager Adam Stumb, Parks and Recreation Director Kevin Anderson, Deputy Clerk Barbara McCoy, and Clerk to the Board Ann Clark.

Others present: Facilitator Phil Trew, Arts Director Jeff Fissel, Chamber Director Kitty Honeycutt, Reporter Dylan Lightfoot, HCCOG Director Julie Wiggins, WCC Vice President Chris Robinson, Reporter Bailey Little, Senator Ballard, and Representative Russell.

Town of West Jefferson Attendees: Mayor Tom Hartman, Manager Brantley Price, Town Clerk Rebecca Eldreth, Alderman Rusty Barr, Alderwoman Crystal Miller, Alderman Calvin Green, Alderman Stephen Shoemaker, and Alderman John Reeves.

Town of Lansing Attendees: Mayor Mack Powers, Alderman Jim Blevins, Alderwoman Cheyenne Blevins, and Alderman Matt Cordell.

Town of Jefferson Attendees: Alderman Mark Johnston.

Present: 5 - Commissioner Todd McNeill, Commissioner William Sands, Commissioner Larry Rhodes, Commissioner Paula Perry and Commissioner Larry Dix

II. Welcome - Todd McNeill, Chairman, Board of Commissioners

Chairman McNeill welcomed everyone to the meeting.

III. Update on Recent Activities/Initiatives

Facilitator Phil Trew opened the floor for highlights of recent projects and activities within Ashe County and the towns of West Jefferson, Jefferson, and Lansing.

Chairman McNeill explained that the commissioners voted this morning to move forward with the purchase of property for a new convenience center site that will be constructed on Highway 163. The project to build a new middle school is moving forward. An exploratory committee has been formed to begin planning for the combined DSS and Health Department building. Chairman McNeill asked Chris Robinson to provide an update on the Wilkes Community College expansion project. Chris Robinson stated that the slab for the building is being poured today. The project is ahead of schedule, on budget, and fundraising efforts have provided in excess of \$2 million for the project. Chairman McNeill told the group that both he and Larry Dix serve on the advisory committee for the proposed agricultural facility that will be built in Ashe County. Magellan Strategy Group will conduct a feasibility study for the project and a grant will pay for the study. In addition, work on the new industrial park project is moving forward.

John Reeves, alderman with the Town of West Jefferson, stated that they are reviewing the cost of providing public wi-fi in the downtown area and have applied for a grant through the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). The town aldermen are scheduled to hear DOT representatives and vote tonight on a project to restripe Jefferson Avenue, reduce the four-lane to a three-lane to install biking and jogging lanes, and consider the possibility of installing sidewalks from downtown to McDonald's. New signage has been started which will help businesses opening in locations other than on Main Street. Representative Ray Russell spoke to the need for vehicle charging stations in town which will be a growing issue in the next five years. John Reeves stated that due to increased tourism, more parking is needed in West Jefferson. Advertising and marketing for tourism continues. A grant is needed to install utilities and water at the industrial park site. Alderman Shoemaker stated that the County is helping the hospital financially and he emphasized how important it is to our county to have a critical access non-profit hospital.

Jefferson Alderman Mark Johnson stated that they are building a new police station next to the 1904 Courthouse.

Lansing Mayor Mack Powers explained issues with parking in town. Plans are to hold discussions with DOT for maintaining traffic when the Highway 194 bridge is replaced this summer. The Lansing Park has been very busy. Restrooms have been added at the park and a new stage has been installed which provides three venues for entertainment and gatherings. A grant was received for beautification of buildings in Lansing. There are five new businesses in town. Campsites are being added in the new addition of the park. Fiber optic has been installed throughout town. Work continues on the Old Lansing School project turning the building into the Lost Providence Cultural Arts Center. The Center will also include 20 rental units. Long range plans for Lansing include installation of sidewalks, expansion of water and sewer facilities, cleanup of the water tower, and possible installation of an additional water tower.

Representative Ray Russell reflected on a year spent serving in the legislature. He believes that 2019 will be remembered as the year that things did not get done. He stated that a farm bill did not get passed. The budget was not passed. There was no significant progress made on education reform and there were no raises for teachers. There was huge bipartisan support to rewrite sexual assault laws. The age was raised for non-violent violators under the age of 18. The DOT budget is in place but DOT has been hit with a cash crunch due to approximately 360 Map Act lawsuits that have been settled with property owners across the state. In addition, DOT has been hit with the high cost for repairs due to storms, and DOT was encouraged to spend their cash balance above the minimum required cash balance. There have been legislative changes to assist with broadband expansion to unserved areas. There were affordable healthcare and health insurance plans passed but the bill is being held up due to federal litigation. A Medicaid expansion bill is also being held up. In the *Leandro v. State* decision, which gives every child the constitutional right to a basic sound education, the State was making steady progress until 2013 when schools started losing ground on most measures. Representative Russell stated that there is a crisis in education. A resulting report says North Carolina needs \$8 billion in the next six years to help struggling low income schools.

Senator Deanna Ballard stated that work is progressing with education issues. Funding to address the issues has increased since 2013 although an increase in teacher pay did not pass the Senate. Work on the Northern Peaks Trail continues in Ashe and Watauga counties. There was \$91 million invested in school safety. Senator Ballard works on

several committees. One committee sets a priority on education and helps to develop teacher preparation programs. Another committee addresses opioid issues and resulting impacts on rural communities.

West Jefferson Alderman Stephen Shoemaker spoke of the impact of large asphalt trucks traveling through downtown West Jefferson. He requested assistance with a comprehensive plan or study to address this. Facilitator Phil Trew stated that the Comprehensive Transportation Plan 2021 is upcoming and will be developed by DOT and the High Country RPO.

IV. Phil Trew, Director of Planning HCCOG - Open Discussion - Current Areas of County/Town Cooperation

Facilitator Phil Trew opened conversation regarding current areas of county and town cooperation.

In answer to a question from Lansing Alderman Matt Cordell on how much a town can limit what is built within the city limits, County Manager Adam Stumb answered that building inspections and building codes are regulated by the State.

Representative Ray Russell addressed Airbnb rentals and whether towns and counties are being shortchanged on occupancy tax collections. West Jefferson Town Manager Brantley Price stated that towns and counties work together regarding occupancy tax collections. Discussion was held regarding the difficulty in collecting taxes from Airbnb.

Tax Administrator Chris Lambert explained that with the new software installed at the tax office, there is a capability for the County to collect taxes for municipalities. There are 78 counties in the state that are doing this.

Representative Ray Russell encouraged the tax office to find a way to not charge citizens a fee when they use a credit card to pay tax bills. He has received a lot of complaints from citizens on this.

Dispatch and 911 services are county-wide and also animal control services. Equipment is shared as needed, for example equipment needed for repairs at parks.

Jefferson aldermen voted on the water line extension to the airport last week.

V. Phil Trew, Director of Planning HCCOG - Open Discussion - Future Areas of County/Town Cooperation

Future areas of county and town cooperation centered on discussion regarding traffic issues at Vannoy's Construction and at the Food Lion shopping center. Facilitator Phil Trew added that the County and the towns need to work with HCCOG to address transportation issues.

IV. Julie Wiggins, Director - High Country Council of Governments

Director of High Country Council of Governments (HCCOG) Julie Wiggins addressed the group. The HCCOG is owned by local governments serving 7 counties and 19 municipalities. She explained programs and services offered. The HCCOG serves as a liaison on aging programs and workforce development programs.

Facilitator Phil Trew listed services offered through the Planning Department which includes grant planning, GIS work, mapping services, Rural Planning Organization (RPO) services, and planning and development services.

VII. Kitty Honeycutt, Director - Ashe County Chamber of Commerce

Chamber of Commerce Director Kitty Honeycutt highlighted new activities at the Chamber. Four new committees have recently been formed, a virtual tour of Ashe County was launched, Startup Ashe was spotlighted, entrepreneur collaborating has taken place with Wilkes Community College, the Appalachian Gateway Community project to place murals in state parks is underway, the Chamber is a major partner of Christmas in July, and the new Ashe County Guide will be available in March. As of today, the Chamber has 448 members.

VIII. Jeff Fissel, Director - Ashe County Arts Council

Arts Council Director Jeff Fissell explained that he operates two facilities, the Civic Center and the Arts Center. He highlighted events and programming offered to serve the citizens and to support students and youth in our county.

IX. Closing Remarks

Facilitator Phil Trew provided closing comments. Commissioner Dix wants this group to work toward an extensive county-wide economic development plan.

X. Adjournment

Commissioner Sands made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 3:05 p.m. Vice Chairman Rhodes seconded the motion. The motion passed with unanimous approval.

Approved

For: 5 - Commissioner McNeill, Commissioner Sands, Commissioner Rhodes,
Commissioner Perry and Commissioner Dix

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