

MINUTES
WILKES COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
BUDGET WORK SESSION
May 31, 2023

The Wilkes County Board of Commissioners met Wednesday, May 31, 2023 at 3:32 P.M. with the following members present: Chairman Keith Elmore, Commissioner Casey Joe Johnson, Commissioner Bill Sexton, and Commissioner Greg Minton. Vice Chairman Stoney Greene was not available to attend due to a conflict.

Also present for the meeting were John Yates, County Manager; Chris Huffman, Finance Director; Brooke Felts, Assistant County Attorney; and Sarah Call, Clerk to the Board.

Chairman Keith Elmore welcomed everyone and called the work session to order.

INVOCATION – Commissioner Casey Joe Johnson led the Invocation.

RESCUE SQUAD – Chairman Elmore stated they received an email from the Rescue Squad indicating they would like to speak with the Commissioners. He thought this would be a good opportunity. Chief Cole Wyatt and Medical Officer Patrick Jackson handed out Wilkes Rescue Squad Inc. Operational Statistics to the Board at this time. Mr. Jackson went over the calls for the past few years and said these have increased since 2019. He went over the last two pages at this time informing the Board that call response has increased 54% from January 1st to May 22nd; they are looking at staffing needs; they are asking for an increase to fund a full-time staff position. Mr. Jackson stated this would cover over 60% of their calls with guaranteed trained response and went over the calls in more detail at this time. Currently they are trying to do this with part-time employees, but that is difficult to do. With this full-time employee added to the part-time employees they already have, they estimate 93% of their calls would be covered. They would still have volunteers to rely on for coverage, but this is the goal of the increase and why they are requesting it.

Chief Wyatt said they are requesting an additional \$50,000 for staffing due to call volume. They intend to hire a fulltime employee for Monday-Friday 8AM-5PM. This will cost them \$55K with benefits and they will take the remaining \$5K from their budget. This will allow them to have up to 2 paid people per day with the part-time employees. The Board discussed this request in detail and asked questions at this time in regards to call volume, call type, River cleanup, funding, call response parameters, and staffing.

FEE INCREASES – Chairman Elmore asked the Board’s opinion on the fee increases requested. He added that some increases are needed such as the Landfill, but some he questions and he shared his thoughts on those fees at this time. He added he is not in favor of the majority of the proposed fee increases. Commissioner Minton shared his opinion and indicated that he supports the proposed fee increases. Commissioner Sexton shared his thoughts, and indicated he also supports

the proposed budget on fees. Commissioner Johnson said he feels good about some of the increases such as the Landfill and some others, but there are some he questions, such as Planning. The Board discussed the proposed fee increases for Planning at this time with W.C. Scroggs, Planning Director. Next they discussed the Landfill fee increases. Chairman Elmore asked what will the addition fees be spent on. Mr. Yates replied \$7.3 million for phase six, the fees will not cover this, but they will help. He added construction will begin in 2024-2025 and they plan to do this over two budget years, 24-25 and 25-26. The Board discussed proposed fee increases for Inspections with Jacob Patrick, County Inspector at this time. Next the Board discussed proposed fee increases for the Health Department with Rachel Willard, Health Director and Angie Rhodes, Environmental Health Supervisor. Chairman Elmore stated it sounds like there may be a consensus, but they will set another Work Session and decide on the fees at that time.

BUDGET DISCUSSION – Chairman Elmore asked if anyone has anything they would like to bring up at this time. Commissioner Sexton stated he would like to discuss the Sheriff’s pay plan. The Board discussed the request at this time. Commissioner Sexton discussed the request and stated he is in favor of the Sheriff’s pay plan. Commissioner Minton said he is in favor of the plan, but wants to see it. Commissioner Johnson said he would like to see them do something for the Sheriff’s Department based on the scenario the Sheriff showed him yesterday. Chairman Elmore stated he was under the impression that when they went from 5% to 7% for all county employees across the board, the Sheriff was good with that. He added he very much appreciates law enforcement; they have a tough job and do it very well, but they have already done something similar for them in the past and they have a responsibility to all the other County Employees. Commissioner Minton suggested they table this until they see the numbers, total cost, and entire plan. Chairman Elmore agreed.

Commissioner Johnson asked what is the Visitor Center grant expense. Mr. Yates replied the State gives them money to run the Visitor Center, the County contracts with the Chamber to do this, so this is a pass-through.

Commissioner Johnson stated the Library has requested an additional \$22K and the other Counties have agreed to meet their requests. He added if there is room in the budget to meet the request, he would like to see the Board do this. They are doing some renovations upstairs and adding a restroom. Chairman Elmore added he is in favor of this. Commissioner Minton stated this is for salaries, correct, to meet the ARL’s pay plan. Mr. Yates replied that is not the way they look at this, the County gives them an amount of money and does not tell them how to spend it, they have full discretion on how to spend it. Mr. Huffman added they ask for additional things on top of this. Mr. Yates stated the County also takes care of a lot of the building maintenance.

CONSENSUS – After discussion, the Commissioners unanimously agreed to an increase of \$22,157 to fully fund the request from the Library for the proposed 2023-2024 Wilkes County Budget.

Chairman Elmore stated they are adding staff to EMS for a back-up ambulance. Mr. Pennington added this is for peak time 11AM – 11 PM, which is when they have a lot of calls. Chairman Elmore asked if this overlaps with the Rescue Squad and their request to add staff. Mr. Pennington replied his staff is medical, they are two separate operations. Chief Wyatt added they only respond

for EMS as a backup if they are completely out of units. They agree EMS needs this, as it keeps their staff available to run rescue calls.

Chairman Elmore asked if there are still 29 open positions. Mr. Yates replied they have good news as the County has 16 new hires starting this month. Tracy Triplett, Human Resources Specialist, added they have lost some more people, but the number is better than it was last month. Mr. Yates agreed. For example, the Landfill lost an equipment operator that went for a lot more money; this hurt. Chairman Elmore stated he requested an update on the benefits, they are good, and the County should be able to hire folks. Mr. Triplett added they are good, but unfortunately benefits are not keeping them. For example, EMS lost 5 last month and 2 this month, which is a significant loss for that department.

Chairman Elmore asked about Hospitality House located in Boone, the County gives them \$116,800, was that part of the Opioid Settlement. He asked if the Wilkes Homeless Shelter would be eligible for any of these funds. Rachel Willard replied Hospitality House is also located in Wilkes County, they have an office here. The \$116K will go to support 16 families who are in recovery to find stable housing, they did not fund the full amount requested. Chairman Elmore asked if these 16 families are in Wilkes County. Ms. Willard replied yes. Mr. Yates added he asked Ms. Felts to find out if Watauga funds Hospitality House since they are located in Watauga. Ms. Felts replied the Hospitality House receives \$10K from Watauga County and \$25K to \$30K from the Town of Boone. Chairman Elmore added Wilkes County contributes as well and they do provide some services to Wilkes residents that the Catherine Barber Shelter does not provide.

Chairman Elmore asked if they need to leave in the \$10K for gun permit revenue at the Sheriff's Office. He asked wasn't this done away with by the Legislature. Commissioner Minton replied this is still being discussed; not all Sheriffs agree, they like having a record check for gun permits.

Chairman Elmore asked if the Health Department is increasing Health fees. Ms. Willard replied this is in the event they have to pay for something like the Covid vaccine; they can add this to their fee schedule. She said they charge the Medicaid rate, so when they get reimbursed they can put this into their fee schedule.

Chairman Elmore asked about the Register of Deeds interest on investment, why did this increase from \$22K to \$400K. Mr. Yates replied interest rates have gone up. Mr. Huffman added last year they had accounts and would earn less than \$100, now they are getting \$10K to \$12K. Interest rate increases can be bad, but they are also good for governments that have a good fund balance. He added the staff does a great job; it takes time and work to earn this interest income.

Chairman Elmore said when they look at medical insurance it shows \$9,375 throughout the book, isn't this \$12,000. Mr. Huffman replied it is now, the way there software is set up once it is approved, this will be changed on June 30th when the new rate is adopted.

Chairman Elmore asked under finance, what is Professional Services. Mr. Huffman replied there are new requirements that they have to meet and they are having to use outside help to complete it. They are called GASB 96 and 97. Chairman Elmore asked about the fines and forfeitures

expense. Mr. Huffman replied this is part of GASB 96 and 97 they have to show the fines incurred, but they all go to the school system; they just have to show these on the books. He added that before it was just a wash and they did not show it, now they also have to budget them as well.

Chairman Elmore asked about the letter from Elections that they discussed last time, it was a little misleading. The information on the back page is not what they currently pay, correct. Mr. Huffman replied that is not what they currently pay. Chairman Elmore said they were comparing Wilkes County base starting salaries with actual salaries from other counties. He asked if they are good leaving elections as is. The Board indicated they support leaving the salaries as recommended. It is not an equal comparison to use Pender, Lee, and Granville Counties vs Wilkes.

Commissioner Johnson asked what is included under Court Facilities. Mr. Yates replied it includes the four staff working at the Court House and maintenance. This year they are going to reseal the building. It has been 5-years since the last time and they do this every 5-years. Commissioner Johnson asked what is included in Public Buildings. Mr. Yates replied this is all the buildings the County owns; Developmental Day School, Library, Heritage Museum, County Office Building, and more. Commissioner Minton asked about the improvements at the Courthouse and how much will it cost to upgrade the security they want. Mr. Yates replied they are handling most of this in the current budget. The back parking lot arms for the Judges and Jail area will help the Sheriff's Dept. and they are working on doing this now.

Chairman Elmore asked about the garbage pickup at the schools, the County pays for all of this. Mr. Yates replied yes, this comes from the Landfill budget. Chairman Elmore asked if they have any recycling at the schools. Ms. Anderia Byrd, Landfill Director, replied only cardboard. Chairman Elmore asked does it make sense that the school garbage pick-up comes out of the county budget for all locations. Mr. Yates replied this has been done for many years; it is expensive at \$166K per year with a 3% escalation each year.

Chairman Elmore asked about Ag, they got a grant to pay for most of the Mobile Class Room, are they going to budget that money toward salaries. Commissioners Minton added they originally asked for 2 new positions. Mr. Yates replied Rob Baldwin wants to take about \$63K away from the Streamflow Rehab Grant Match and move that to salaries, this is his request. He added they will take the \$113K away from the Mobile Soil Classroom which is the grant they received which leaves \$8,053. Chairman Elmore asked the Board if they are good with this, it is reoccurring, but Ag is very important to Wilkes County.

CONSENSUS – After discussion, the Commissioners unanimously agreed to decrease the Mobile Soles Classroom from \$121,053 to \$8,053 and increase Salaries by about \$63,000 (Grade 67) to add one new position for the Natural Resource Conservationist/Stream Flow Rehab Specialist to the proposed 2023-2024 Wilkes County Budget.

Chairman Elmore asked about the High County Council of Governments. It looks like they cut them about \$1,500 and he is in favor of giving the same as last year. Mr. Yates replied this is what they requested, this is the dues they say Wilkes owes, they did not cut them. Commissioner Minton asked if they still help them on GIS. Mr. Yates replied yes, Jessica helps a lot with GIS, but that

is a case by case and the County pays them each time they help on this and most things they do for the County. This is based on population; Wilkes County dues are very expensive and they need to look into this.

Chairman Elmore stated he would like to discuss Lincoln Heights Recreation Corp. He would like to move them to align with Cultural Arts and Museums. They are more suited for that category rather than Community Centers/Ruritan/Ballfields. The building is a historic facility that they have to maintain and it contains a Museum and also serves as a Community Center. He added they fund them the same as those at about \$1700 and would like to fund their requested amount of \$2,500. Chairman Elmore said they are in the process of working with the Heritage Museum and High Country and trying to get grants to restore the Building. This would be an increase of about \$800.

CONSENSUS – After discussion, the Commissioners unanimously agreed to increase the Lincoln Heights Recreation Corp from \$1,750 to \$2,500 which is an increase of \$750 to the proposed 2023-2024 Wilkes County Budget.

ADDITIONS/CHANGES TO THE PROPOSED 2023-2024 RECOMMENDED BUDGET – Additional 2% pay increase (total of 7%) for all full-time County Employees.

SET BUDGET WORK SESSION – Chairman Elmore stated they need to set another budget work session.

Commissioner Greg Minton made a motion to set a Budget Work Session for Tuesday, June 6, 2023 at 3:30 P.M. in the Commissioners' Meeting Room located at the Wilkes County Office Building, 110 North Street Wilkesboro, N.C. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Casey Joe Johnson and unanimously approved.

The work session is open to the public.

ADJOURN – The Budget Work Session of the Wilkes County Board of Commissioners adjourned at 4:56 P.M.

Sarah D. Call, Clerk

Gideon Keith Elmore, Chairman

WILKES COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

Approved: June 20, 2023