

**MACON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
CONTINUED SESSION
JUNE 12, 2017
MINUTES**

Chairman Tate reconvened the meeting at 6:02 p.m. in the commission boardroom as recessed from the June 8, 2017 continued session and welcomed those in attendance. All board members, the County Manager, Deputy Clerk, Finance Director, County Attorney, members of the news media and interested citizens were present. The primary purpose of the meeting was to hold a budget work session.

PUBLIC COMMENT: John deVille asked the board to restore \$200,000 in current expense funding for Macon County Schools. Mr. deVille told the commissioners that school systems in the state “are no longer treading water” and are “indeed going under.” He provided the board with a number of statistics regarding education funding in North Carolina. He said that Macon County Schools Superintendent Dr. Chris Baldwin “has proven he can be trusted.” He also asked the commissioners to trust the board of education, adding that the commissioners can “trust but verify” when it comes to budget matters.

REQUEST FROM MACON COUNTY SCHOOLS: Commissioner Shields, one of the board’s liaisons to the school system, made a motion to leave the county’s current expense appropriation for the school system at \$7,138,330 per the County Manager’s recommended budget, but with two stipulations – (1) that when the state legislature adopts its budget, representatives of the county and school system will meet immediately to determine the impact of that budget on the local system and report back to the commissioners accordingly and (2) that the County Manager and Finance Director will meet quarterly with Dr. Baldwin and Macon County Schools Finance Officer Angie Cook. “I’m not sure we’re communicating as well as we could,” Commissioner Shields said. Commissioner Beale seconded the motion, and a lengthy discussion ensued, one that at times centered on the school system’s need to fill six teaching positions and a teacher assistant position now or wait until August. After nearly an hour of discussion, the board voted unanimously to approve the motion as presented.

REQUEST FROM BURNINGTOWN/IOTLA VOLUNTEER FIRE & RESCUE:

Burningtown/Iotla Volunteer Fire and Rescue Chief Kenneth McCaskill reviewed the department's request for an increase in the tax rate, and told the board, "My community needs this." Commissioner Higdon questioned why the department spent \$550,000 on a new substation and likened it to a "flagrant abuse of taxpayer dollars." He again stated his personal desire to have a consistent method for the board to review all of the budgets for the county's fire departments. He told Chief McCaskill that his comments were "nothing personal against you" but that the "people of Burningtown are taxed out" and said he would not support the increase. Chairman Tate suggested that the board grant a partial increase in the rate, but it would be based on stipulations. He suggested that the department's total request be lowered to \$213,743, which would reduce the new rate to 10.09 cents per \$100 valuation instead of 10.46 cents as requested. He also suggested that if the department does not receive a Class 7 or better rating in the coming year, the department's budget would be reduced next year by the \$32,427 it receives from the tax increase this year. Finally, he asked that the department work with Cowee Fire Department to explore options to maintain or lower rates for homeowners in those districts, essentially the "north end" of the county. Mr. McCaskill said attaining the Class 7 rating was feasible. The discussion then turned toward the new substation and the department's call volume. Chairman Tate also pointed out what he felt was a potential conflict with Mr. McCaskill serving as both chief and interim treasurer of the department. Commissioner Beale made a motion to grant the reduced tax increase with the stipulations as outlined by Chairman Tate and Commissioner Gillespie seconded the motion. The board voted 4-1 to approve the motion as stated, with Commissioner Higdon opposing.

REQUEST FROM FRANKLIN FIRE DEPARTMENT: Chairman Tate explained that he took the same approach with the tax increase request from Franklin Fire Department. However, in this case, he suggested granting the full one-cent increase as requested, but asked to (1) know the balance in the North Carolina Fire Fighters Relief Fund for the Town of Franklin, (2) have a revised capital plan by January 1, 2018 as to how the department will use the funds they are planning to set aside, (3) develop a plan in conjunction with Macon County Emergency Services by January 1, 2018 to provide coverage to the department's Class 9/10 areas or provide evidence that coverage is not financially viable and (4) provide proof of the requested two-person, 24-hour coverage by October 1, 2017. Commissioner Beale questioned what the penalty would be for noncompliance, and Emergency Services Director Warren Cabe suggested that the new revenue from the tax increase would be negated in the following year's budget. During discussion, Commissioner Higdon expressed that he could not support the increase "for any purpose." Commissioner Beale made a motion to approve Franklin's request to increase

Minutes

06.12.17

Page 2 of 4

the fire tax rate from 4.45 cents to 5.45 cents per \$100 valuation, with Franklin Fire Department officials to report back in January of 2018 and that if the stipulations are not met, the difference between the current rate and the new rate would be negated. Commissioner Shields seconded the motion, which was approved 4-1, with Commissioner Higdon opposing.

REQUEST FROM MACON COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY: Karen Wallace, the librarian for the Macon County Public Library, said the library has had inflationary costs just as the county has, and that the county has taken steps to invest in its “most valuable asset, its employees,” and that allows the county to be regionally competitive. She asked the board to again consider an increase in operating expense money for the library. The discussion turned to hours of operation for all three of the county’s libraries, utility expenses and overall personnel costs. In the end, Commissioner Beale made a motion to leave the operational funding for the county’s libraries at the Fiscal Year 2016-17 level of \$999,390, Commissioner Gillespie seconded the motion, and all favored.

REQUEST FOR ADDITIONAL MAINTENANCE STAFF AT MACON COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH: The board members, County Manager and Public Health Director Jim Bruckner held a lengthy discussion regarding the need for additional maintenance staff to perform cleaning duties in the clinical areas at the health department. Chairman Tate, the board’s liaison to the Board of Health, told the other commissioners that he was inclined to fund the position and allow the County Manager and Mr. Bruckner to work out a solution. The board essentially agreed by consensus to take this course of action, although a formal vote was not taken.

BROADBAND: Commissioner Gillespie told the board that the “deployment of broadband is the single biggest economic tool” the county has, and suggested that the board consider earmarking \$100,000 for consultation services and set aside \$500,000 for pilot projects – as opposed to the \$50,000 allocated in the recommended budget. This led to a lengthy discussion that primarily centered on the hiring of a consultant and where the county’s existing broadband committee was in its process. It later shifted to questions surrounding whether the county had the legal right to use tax dollars to expand broadband service into the county. In conclusion, the County Attorney agreed to do some research as to what the county can and cannot do in this area.

SCC BURN BUILDING: Following discussion and an acknowledgement from the board members that they were ready to move forward, the County Manager noted that the next steps toward construction of a new “burn building” on the Southwestern Community College (SCC) Macon campus consisted of obtaining a survey and an appraisal of the new proposed site for the facility, and to revise

the existing Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the county and the college to reflect that location. No formal action was taken.

TELEPHONE SYSTEM: Commissioner Gillespie questioned the amount of savings -- \$131,000 – to be derived from the installation of the new Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) telephone system and why departmental line items in the budget still contained funds for telephone expense. The County Manager explained that he left money in those line items in the event that there were “hiccups” in the installation of the new system and that he wanted to “give it a year and see it run.” He said there was no intent to spend the money from the departmental line items unless it was necessary. Commissioner Gillespie voiced his opinion that the \$131,000 should be taken out of the budget, which led to additional discussion. The County Manager stated he could not recommend that but would do as the board wished. No action was taken.

Commissioner Beale pointed out two items that he wanted to discuss at the board’s regular meeting on June 13th, a resolution regarding mental health and start-up funding for a project called the Nikwasi Initiative.

ADJOURN: At 9:54 p.m., upon a motion by Commissioner Shields, seconded by Commissioner Gillespie, the board voted unanimously to adjourn.

Derek Roland
Ex Officio Clerk to the Board

Jim Tate
Board Chairman