



**MACON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**  
**April 9, 2024**  
**REGULAR MEETING MINUTES**

Chairman Shields called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. All Board Members, County Manager Derek Roland, Deputy Clerk Tammy Keezer, Finance Director Lori Carpenter, and County Attorney Eric Ridenour were present, as were a number of county employees, media, and citizens.

Upon a motion from Commissioner Shearl, seconded by Commissioner Young, the board voted unanimously to adjourn to Courtroom A on the fourth floor of the Macon County Courthouse to accommodate the large crowd in attendance. At 6:14 p.m. Chairman Shields called the meeting back to order.

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:** None

**MOMENT OF SILENCE:** Chairman Shields requested all in attendance rise and a moment of silence was observed.

**PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:** Led by Commissioner Higdon, the pledge to the flag was recited.

**PUBLIC HEARING:**

**(A) Old Pine Grove School** – Chairman Shields opened the public hearing at 6:17 p.m. to receive public comment on whether it is in the County's best interest to sell the property known as the Old Pine Grove School, an approximate 1.26-acre tract of land located at the junction of Peeks Creek Road and the Highlands Road, bearing Macon County Mapping Office Parcel Identification Number 7522092290 and more particularly described in Book H-42, Page 1836 of the Macon County Registry. **Harold Alex Hawkins** spoke in favor of selling the property. He said he does not see the property being used except for a polling precinct. He did request that if the property is sold the memorials from those lost in the Peek's Creek disaster be preserved. **MaryAnn Ingram** stated she has voted at the location known as the Sugarfork Precinct since 1996 and believes there are around 400 registered voters in that precinct. She requested that if the property is sold the building be put on a historic registry so that it can never be torn down, destroyed, or changed, and that it is made available to the county for a voting precinct. **Robbie Holland** had signed up to speak but yielded the opportunity. **Marci Holland** indicated there were representatives from four generations of native families of the Gneiss, North Carolina community present which is where the Old Pine Grove School actually sits and was built in 1912. Ms. Holland gave an overview of some of the history of the building and ownership. She requested that the building not be sold and that she and others are willing to oversee the upkeep and maintenance of the property. **Pam Owens** had signed up to speak but yielded the opportunity. **Kyle Jennings** had signed up to speak but yielded the opportunity. **Devon Deal** was not present when her name was called. **Lori Smith** had signed up to speak but yielded

the opportunity. **Julie Tastinger** spoke about her family experiences at the school including going there to vote for her first time voting. She requested the building be preserved to continue to teach history about the building and community and said she was willing to be on the board to oversee its use. **Chris Brower** spoke in support of keeping the school as it is due to the historical significance it has to the community. **Betsy Carson** read a statement prepared by her husband Rick who could not attend the meeting. In his letter, Mr. Caron requested the County revisit this property as an asset to the County to be maintained instead of an extra property to be disposed of. Ms. Carson said they are willing to help maintain the property. **Karen Deal Raby** spoke about how the building was used even when in disrepair as a gathering place for church and community activities. She requested the community be allowed to maintain the building. **Narelle Kirkland** spoke about the Peek's Creek video that shows how the community rallied together and encouraged board members to watch the video.

At 6:42 p.m., upon a motion by Commissioner Young, seconded by Commissioner Shearl, the board voted unanimously to close the public hearing. Commissioner Shearl made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Antoine to discuss and take action on the Pine Grove School. After some discussion and points of clarification, Commissioner Shearl retracted his motion, seconded by Commissioner Antoine. Marci Holland was asked to investigate the possibility of establishing a 501C3 for the community organization to maintain the property, investigate the requirements of making the building a historic structure, and report back to the board at a later meeting.

#### **PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD:**

1. **Narelle Kirkland** spoke about the board to consider purchasing or leasing a piece of property for families to use that offers a viewpoint of the mountain ranges. **Debbi Shope** spoke in support of art and music in Macon County Schools. She said the teaching positions need to be filled regardless of where the funding comes from. She said as a retired probation officer and now a substitute teacher arts and music is important for kids to see their potential and requested kids not be robbed of these experiences. **Gracie Parker** spoke about opioid funding and early intervention programs. **Elke Kennedy** spoke about youth mental health and early intervention. **Sarah Johnson** spoke about funding art and music positions in Macon County Schools. **Betsy Baste** spoke about the recent Macon County Library Board meeting and how she felt board members and attendees had been inappropriate. **Jackie Kussow-Sroka** spoke about Macon County Transit and riders not being brought to her business. She requested the routes be made fair. **Mariah Rascati** spoke in favor of art and music in schools. She talked about the benefits of music for language development and art for science and math. **Kevin Kusso** spoke about Macon County Transit being structured to benefit businesses downtown and suggested alternating routes so the businesses on the south end of town were included. **Jessica Doyle** spoke in favor of art and music in schools and shared her experiences as the mother of an autistic child. **Matt Jackson** spoke in support of art and music in schools. **Lora Hickman** spoke in support of art and music in schools. **Emily Fields** spoke about the importance of the arts.

**ADDITIONS, ADJUSTMENTS TO AND APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA:** Upon a motion by Commissioner Young, seconded by Commissioner Antoine, the board voted unanimously to approve the agenda, as adjusted, as follows:

- To add Item 13B under Appointments, Macon County Library Board Appointment, per Commissioner Antoine
- To remove Item 9B under Reports and Presentations, Opioid Update, per Mr. Roland
- To remove Item 11C under New Business, Approval of Renewal Lease for Offices Utilized by North Carolina Department of Adult Corrections Probation and Parole, per Mr. Roland

**REPORTS/PRESENTATIONS:**

**(A) CAROUSEL OF THE ARTS** – Staff of the art and music programs at Iotla Valley Elementary and Macon Middle Schools introduced students who presented their artwork, spoke about the importance of art and music, and performed a musical theater piece titled, “This Is Me”. Board members were presented with a gift basket of art pieces made by students and invited to attend the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Macon County Public Schools Student Art Exhibition to be held on April 21, 2024.

At 8:08 p.m. Chairman Shields called a five-minute recess and reconvened the meeting at 8:14 p.m.

**(B) OPIOID UPDATE** – removed.

**(C) MEDICAID CHILD AND FAMILY SPECIALITY PLAN PROPOSAL** – Vaya Health Community Relations Regional Director Shelly Foreman explained how Vaya Health has been working with local DSS (Department of Social Service) offices in support of their child welfare programs in 47 counties and requested approval of a letter of support for Vaya’s application for a Medicaid waiver which will allow them better manage the overall care of children and caregivers in the foster care system by becoming the administrator of the Child and Family Specialty Plan statewide. After discussion, Commissioner Young made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Antoine, to approve the letter of support for Vaya to administer the Child and Family Services Plan statewide. Vote was unanimous.

**OLD BUSINESS:**

**(A) CONSIDERATION AND APPROVAL OF PROPOSAL FOR ASSESSING THE MACON COUNTY CLOCK TOWER PHASE 1** – Project Manager Jack Morgan explained that he had an architect look at the clock tower following the discussion at the March 2024 regular meeting of the Macon County Board of Commissioners. He presented a proposal from Peter Looper with Architectural Design & Planning in the amount of \$2,615. Commissioner Shearl said the repairs are cosmetic and didn’t feel an engineer was needed. He suggested the using volunteer builders to do the repairs. Mr. Morgan and Mr. Roland explained there had been safety issues brought up at the last meeting that anyone doing repairs needed to have insurance, and that until the exploration is done the depth of repairs is not known. Chairman Shields asked Steve Grissim from the Franklin Rotary Club to come forward to speak. Mr. Grissim said he had a local builder accompany him to look at the repairs needed on the clock tower. He shared that the builder provided a quote of \$11,265 which included donation of some materials and labor. Commissioner Shearl commented against hiring and paying additional funds to an architect. Mr. Roland said what Mr. Morgan is presenting is from a design professional who

will say whether or not there are safety and structural issues and put a seal on their recommendations. Commissioner Higdon said he wants to see a plan for improvements to the whole square downtown. Commissioner Shearl made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Shields, to task Mr. Morgan to prepare a list of what is needed on the clock tower and to put it out for bid. Commissioner Higdon requested Mr. Morgan put together a list of the properties owned by the County and develop a plan of what is needed to fix them. Mr. Roland reminded the board that the sidewalks are the responsibility of the Town of Franklin and the North Carolina Department of Transportation and that the gazebo property is under a forty-year lease with the Town of Franklin and they will make requests for improvements to this board and that a request to design or redesign the entire downtown properties is a lot to put on Mr. Morgan. He said this is a very broad request and suggested a task such as that be placed with professionals who handle that type of project. Vote was unanimous.

**(B) DISCUSSION REGARDING NEXT STEPS FOR MACON COUNTY LIBRARY AND MACON EARLY COLLEGE**

– Mr. Morgan gave an overview and shared photos of the damage to the portico structure. He explained the plan to repair the structure. Mr. Morgan said the architectural firm had given a quote not to exceed 20,000 dollars to finish out the project. He said this includes the construction documents, construction drawings, and administration of the project. Mr. Morgan said we would then have to put the project out to bid and he would have no idea how much the repair cost would be until that time. He also shared photos and spoke about some areas of concern at Macon Early College. Mr. Morgan requested approval to have an architect look at these areas and provide a quote separate from the library project. Commissioner Higdon made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Shearl to approve the contract with Looper Architectural Designs for the Macon County Library as presented, a budget amendment in the amount of \$20,000 from general fund contingency, to approve a resolution to exempt architectural services for the Macon County Public Library from the provisions of Article 3D of Chapter 143 of the North Carolina General Statute. Vote was unanimous. Mr. Morgan said he would present recommendations for Macon Early College at the May 14, 2024, regular meeting.

**(C) CONSIDERATION AND APPROVAL OF PROPOSED ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH FEES**

– Health Director Kathy McGaha presented and requested approval of the proposed fee structure as approved by the Macon County Board of Health. Commissioner Higdon said that he had not voted on any of the proposed changes at the Board of Health meeting because he did not agree with any of them. He requested to have individual conversations with board members to understand the impact these changes have on the economy. Ms. McGaha said her staff had tried to develop a more tiered structure and compared the fees to other counties. She said Macon County is in line with other counties in the west. Commissioner Shearl said he wanted more time to process the proposed fees and does not feel we have to match other counties. He asked why the changes were being proposed and if these changes were going to improve the delay in permits. After a long discussion about other issues related to delays in obtaining permits, staffing issues, and the budget, Commissioner Young made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Higdon to appropriate \$20,000 from the general fund contingency for contracted services for On-site Wastewater staffing. Vote was unanimous.

**NEW BUSINESS:**

**(A) APPROVAL OF BOARD OF ELECTIONS SECOND PRIMARY BUDGET AMENDMENT REQUEST**

– Board of Elections Vice-Chair Gary Dills presented a request for \$50,000 so the Board of Elections had funding for caring out the

duties necessary to hold a second primary. Board of Elections Director Melanie Thibault explained that if the Board of Elections office was ADA (Americans with Disabilities Accommodations) compliant some of these expenses would not be necessary, but due to their office being located on the first floor of the courthouse with access only by stairs or an elevator they were not ADA compliant. She also said that a voting location cannot require voters to go through a security check therefore, they must hold primaries and elections outside their office at an alternate location which requires them to follow additional rules and increases the cost of holding the primary and/or election. Commissioner Higdon made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Shearl to appropriate \$50,000 from the general fund contingency as requested. Vote was unanimous.

**(B) CONSIDERATION AND APPROVAL OF PURCHASE OF PROPERTY IN**

**NANTAHALA** – Attorney Eric Ridenour explained that the property would be used for a septic system at Nantahala School if approved for purchase. Mr. Ridenour said the closing of the proposed purchase would need to occur on June 30, 2024, or earlier. Commissioner Higdon made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Shearl to approve the purchase contract as presented in the amount of \$90,000 with a budget amendment in the amount of \$94,000 from fund balance allowing for a contingency for attorney fees, title search, and any other associated fees. Mr. Ridenour stated that the school will be responsible for coordinating the septic system project once the property is purchased. Vote was unanimous.

**(C) APPROVAL OF RENEWAL LEASE FOR OFFICES UTILIZED BY NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF ADULT CORRECTIONS PROBATION AND PAROLE** – removed.

**(D) DISCUSSION REGARDING WELL FOR WATER FEATURE AT WESLEY'S PLAYGROUND**

– Mr. Morgan explained that the County pays the water bill for two separate supplies at Wesley's Playground – one for the water feature and one for the pavilion. He stated the water bill for 2018-19 was \$28,000, the water feature was not turned on in 2020 due to COVID, a flat rate in the amount of \$147 for May 2023 just to have the connection, the bill for June 2023 was \$4,485, and the bill for July 2023 was over \$12,000. Mr. Morgan indicated that the Town of Franklin had been asked to reduce the bills and they had declined to do so. He recommended that the County could drill a well to supply both the water feature and the pavilion and save money. He said he had a quote to drill a well for \$10,000 and has secured the permit already. Commissioner Young made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Shearl to authorize Mr. Morgan to enter into a contract for \$10,000 to drill the well with a budget amendment in the same amount from general fund contingency. Vote unanimous.

**CONSENT AGENDA:** Upon a motion by Commissioner Shearl, seconded by Commissioner Antoine, the board voted unanimously to approve the consent agenda as presented which includes: (A) Minutes of the March 12, 2024 regular meeting and the March 25, 2024 special meeting, (B) Budget Amendments #211-219, (C) Public Records Disposal for Macon County Solid Waste, (D) Annual Community Advisory Committee (CAC) Report, (E) Tax releases for the month of March 2024 in the amount of \$3,381.65, (F) Monthly ad valorem tax collection report for which no action is necessary.

**APPOINTMENTS:**

**(A) PLANNING BOARD (2 seats)**

Commissioner Young stated the Planning Board had recommended the appointment of two candidates and made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Antoine, to approve the appointment of Mr. Luke Jakushev

who is a licensed contractor and will replacing a licensed contractor. Vote was unanimous. Commissioner Young made a motion to approve the appointment of Mr. Marty Kimsey, seconded by Commissioner Higdon. The vote was unanimous.

**(B) MACON COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY BOARD (1 SEAT)**

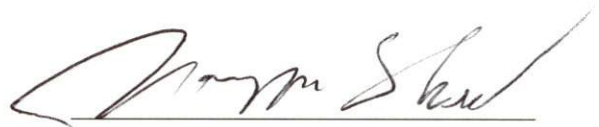
Commissioner Antoine stated that Ed Trask had left the board and made a motion to approve the appointment of Elizabeth Albers to fill that seat. Commissioner Higdon said he had not be given sufficient time to review the applications. Library Director Abby Hardison said Mr. Trask had reached out to the Nantahala community seeing nominations, but that the library by-laws do not state a representative has to be appointed from Nantahala. Commissioner Antoine made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Young, to table the approval of the appointment until the May 14, 2024, regular meeting. Vote was unanimous.

**CLOSED SESSION:** None

**ADJOURN:** With no other business, at 10:45 p.m., upon a motion from Commissioner Higdon, seconded by Commissioner Shields, the board voted unanimously to adjourn.



Derek Roland  
Ex Officio Clerk to the Board



Gary Shields  
Board Chair