

**COLUMBUS COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
MEETING with NCACC ADVOCACY TEAM**

Thursday, November 20, 2013

10:00 A.M.

The Honorable Columbus County Commissioners met on the above stated date and at the above stated time in the Economic Development Conference Room, Administrative Building, 111 Washington Street, Whiteville, North Carolina, for the purpose of conducting a meeting with the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners' Advocacy Team.

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Charles T. McDowell, **Chairman**
Ricky Bullard, **Vice Chairman**
James E. Prevatte
P. Edwin Russ
Trent Burroughs

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT:

Amon E. McKenzie
Giles E. Byrd

APPOINTEES PRESENT:

William S. Clark, **County Manager**
June B. Hall, **Clerk to Board**

OTHERS in ATTENDANCE:

State Representative Ken Waddell
Todd McGee, NCACC
Neil Emory, NCACC
Alissa Willett, NCACC
Elizabeth Floyd, NCACC
JoAnna Reed, NCACC
Lisa Nolen, NCACC
Gary Lanier, Economic Development/
Planning Director

WELCOME and INTRODUCTIONS:

William S. Clark, Columbus County Manager, welcomed everyone in attendance and thanked Representative Ken Waddell for being present. The following introductions were made:

Bill Clark, Columbus County Manager
Ricky Bullard, County Commissioner
Gary Lanier, Columbus County Economic Development and Planning
Charles McDowell, County Commissioner
Ken Waddell, District 46, State Legislature
Lisa Nolen, Outreach Coordinator for the Association
Elizabeth Floyd, Chief Finance Officer for the Association
Edwin Russ, County Commissioner
June Hall, Clerk to the Board
Trent Burroughs, County Commissioner
JoAnna Reed, Director of Government Relations for the Association
Neil Emory, Outreach Associate for the Association, former County Manager, and brother of former
City Manager of Whiteville, Jeff Emory
Alissa Willet, Grassroots Coordinator for the Association
Todd McGee, Public Relations Coordinator
James Prevatte, County Commissioner

PURPOSE of MEETING:

Alissa Willett, Grassroots Coordinator, stated the following:

1. On behalf of the Association, we really appreciate you allowing us to come and have a visit here in Whiteville and Columbus County;
2. We are trying to make various stops throughout the Sate and visit our members, and we feel that is very important; **and**
3. We would like to hear what you have to say, what your concerns are, and how we might be able to help.

BRIEF UPDATE on IMPACT of STATE LEGISLATIVE ACTIONS on COUNTY:**Representative Ken Waddell:**

1. I am a Columbus County native and I represent three (3) counties essentially, Bladen, Columbus and Robeson, and Columbus County is the base County;
2. One (1) concern that everyone around the table has is the concern that the rural areas of North Carolina are really getting left out when it comes to legislative action and legislative things that affect them;
3. I sit on the Revenue Laws Study Committee, which is highly unusual for someone to be put on there when they are a freshman, especially since I am a democrat too, in the kind of climate we are in;
4. We talk about things, and the committee makes recommendations to the General Legislature about tweaks that need to be done to the revenue laws;
5. We just went through the Revenue Package this past year, #998 the Tax Simplification Act, and it did lower the personal income tax rates in the State;
6. How that will affect the counties remains to be seen because of the sales tax;
7. Sales tax is a big concern for the rural counties because they don't have the base for sales tax disbursements back to the counties;
8. The Hold Harmless is a big concern not just for the counties, but for municipalities too, especially rural municipalities because it is a larger portion of their total budget;
9. There is talk among a lot of rural legislators about the fact that we are kind of getting left behind from a jobs creation standpoint;
10. We have basically the same needs in Columbus County that they have in Wake County with the exception of transportation and housing needs;
11. We got to figure out some way to get some rejuvenation back into rural counties;
12. They don't want to be like Charlotte or Wake County, but they want to be able to be self sustaining;
13. If you don't have a good manufacturing base in these counties, and I think you can help with that, by educating our legislators;
14. In 1971, there were 50,000 people in Columbus County, and today, there is only 55,000 people in Columbus County;
15. These numbers will reveal there has been a lag in growth;
16. We have many concerns and the major concern is getting commerce and jobs into Columbus County without compromising the rural aspect of North Carolina;
17. Rural areas built North Carolina and they should be recognized as being the fact they are the heart blood of North Carolina; **and**
18. You can not depend on service jobs essentially to change the economic dynamics of your county.

COLUMBUS COUNTY ISSUES:**1. School Construction:****William S. Clark (County Manager):**

1. Columbus County is the third largest county in the State with 954 square miles;
2. We are the only county in the United States that is named after Christopher Columbus;
3. Lake Waccamaw is a 35 square miles lake, is a State Park, and it is one of our treasures being a beautiful natural lake and is uncommercialized;
4. Education is a big issue, and school construction concerns us;
5. We have schools in our County that was built back in the 1920's and 1930's that we are still using, and we need capital improvement in our schools for our children and I don't know where the money is going to come from;
6. The lottery was set up for the schools, but has been diversified; **and**
7. Is it possible to have a state-wide bond referendum for public school construction?

Commissioner James Prevatte:

1. I have a background in education, and school construction is a concern at the top, but also, our teachers deserve more money than they get;
2. Our teachers are spending money out of their own pockets for supplies needed in their classroom;

3. There needs to be a push for more money directed to the classroom and not just to administration, and it needs to be for instruction and instructional supplies;
5. If we can't provide the needed education for our youth, they can't compete with the youth from other counties that can; **and**
6. Our largest employers are a paper mill, prison, school system, the County Government and the local hospital.

Vice Chairman Bullard:

1. Most of our schools were built in the 1920's and 1930's, and we have only about four (4) schools that have been built in the past fifteen (15) years that are modernized;
2. The majority of our schools are fire hazards, they are not meeting today's building codes as far as lighting and ventilation and security purposes;
3. We need to come up with some way to get some industry to build up our tax base;
4. In urban counties, our children get more dollars per student in the classrooms than the rural counties get, and our children in the rural counties are as important as they are in the urban counties; **and**
5. There is no way to compete with the urban counties unless our legislators make some changes to the guidelines to make it an even ballfield.

Commissioner Prevatte:

1. When I started in the city school system in 1978, the teacher turnover was approximately 2; **and**
2. At the present time, the teachers are leaving after one (1) year and going to South Carolina where they can make a lot more money.

Representative Waddell:

1. It looks like the Tier Status is going away;
2. It was developed to give tax credits and aid to supplement helping to get industry into the county;
3. It is back to reinventing the wheel instead of trying to make corrections on course;
4. You get into a catch 22 in the rural areas where you have more children that have more needs, per capita, than you do in the urban areas, and you are getting less money;
5. How do you treat those people that have more needs - economic needs, social needs, intellectual needs, and the whole works;
6. How do you treat these people to get them to be more productive citizens?; **and**
7. If you spend the money up front, then you will spend less later.

Vice Chairman Bullard:

It would help to spend more money for rural hospitals like our local hospital to expand their technology to pull in more people to stay in the county instead of them re-locating to a county with better technology.

Chairman Charles McDowell:

1. We have a community college, Southeastern Community College, that probably would have stood out thirty (30) years ago above almost every community college in the State, as training vocationalism;
2. It seems that over the last several years, community colleges have become more like junior colleges trying to prepare students to move on to a four (4) year institution, and a lot of that trade skill is now met by people from other countries who had that experience when they come in and they take those jobs;
3. The mind set is that every American should have a college degree and wear a coat and a tie to work, and that doesn't work well;
4. We need to get back to training people so they can work, not look for work, but work;
5. We are not training our children to do work that they can find in Columbus County; **and**
6. We need to train people to have a job, and not a degree.

JoAnna Reed, Director of Government Relations (Chief Lobbyist at the Legislature):

1. We worked extremely hard on school construction, and that was one of our biggest disappointments;
2. It was in the House Budget, but did not make in the final version that came out of the House and Senate negotiations; **and**
3. We have not given up on that, it is one of our second top goals, and it is a two (2) year cycle.

Todd McGee, NCACC Public Relations Director:

1. What we are seeing around the State, when the State reduces the lottery funds, the county either stops construction because the money is not there, or they have to raise taxes to get it to make up for the shortfall;
2. These are consequences that counties are facing across the State;
3. There are negative impacts in a lot of areas; **and**
4. Now is an ideal time for construction.

2. Hydrilla:**William S. Clark:**

1. Hydrilla is an invasive aquatic weed, and it has the potential to completely destroy our lake, all the vegetation, the fish, and everything in the lake;
2. The lake is a State Park, the State actually owns the park and the lake itself;
3. We really appreciate everything you did Representative Waddell to help us with this situation;
4. The County put up \$50,000.00, the Town of Lake Waccamaw put up \$50,000.000 to get matching funds from the State to start the eradication;
5. The eradication is projected to be approximately \$450,000.00 per year for seven (7) years or longer; **and**
6. This is an important issue for our county.

3. Impact of Railroad Closure:**William S. Clark:**

1. There is a railroad, Carolina Southern Railroad, that goes through the southern part of our County, comes in from South Carolina to Fair Bluff, then Chadbourn and into Whiteville and then goes down into South Carolina, Horry County, Conway, ultimately to Myrtle Beach;
2. That railroad is closed down and has been for two (2) years and that is a huge issue;
3. Georgia Pacific, which is a plant here in our County, shut down due to the shutdown of the railroad, and has not opened back up;
4. It is very important for us to get this railroad up and operating again, and we have been working on it; **and**
5. Georgia Pacific has the potential of adding 450 jobs, and they will not open up again without the railroad.

Chairman McDowell:

1. Getting the railroad up and running not only affects the re-opening of Georgia Pacific, it affects the potential of new business to come into our County that needs rail service; **and**
2. We have a large facility in Tabor City, Atlantic Publishing, that has seen a tremendous increase in transportation cost since the railroad closing.

Gary Lanier:

1. The one thing that I am hearing in my arena from the advocacy at the State level is the fact that is also applicable here, and we would not have the problem that we have now, if there was a fund that would allow us to put back what was erroneously taken away in the 1970's;
2. Whiteville used to be connected to Wilmington with a railroad;
3. If we could put a link to Wilmington and a link between Chadbourn and Bladenboro, we could still provide rail service to Columbus County; **and**
4. Rail Service needs to be re-established in this County.

4. Job Creation/Economic Development:**Gary Lanier:**

1. There are two (2) things we need to focus on in Columbus County, and they are forest resources and farming, that is our base;
2. We have the largest producer of yellow pine soft timber in the world down at the Armour Plant in Reigelwood area;
3. We have one of the largest paper product plants in the world, International Paper, down at Rieglewood;
4. As a result, we create within a fifty (50) mile radius of Whiteville, 986,000 green tons of slash left behind from logging operations every year;
5. One of the things we wanted to do with the alternative energy push is to have a Co-Gen facility to burn wood chips;
6. Right now there is an issue at the State Utilities Commission in determining the avoided cost rate;
7. At the same time, the power companies want to raise everyone's rates, and they are trying to convince the State Utilities Commission that the avoided cost rate should be lowered;
8. Right now, we have a 15 megawatt facility sitting out there to determine if they can build here in the county that would employ people;
9. The Article 3J Tax Credit sunset is a killer for us;
10. We are going to other countries;
11. Seed money would help small businesses; **and**
12. The ability to offer better incentive grants would help tremendously.

5. Other Issues/Comments:**Commissioner Prevatte:**

1. I serve on the East Pointe Mental Health and Substance Abuse Board;
2. At one time, we had mental health and substance abuse offices in each county;
3. Then it was cut back, the State decided to change it and it went to 25-30 facilities in the state;
4. Then the state decided it would be reduced to 11-12;
5. Now, the secretary is saying there will be three (3);
6. My fear is our local visibility and services will no longer exist
7. I would encourage the NCACC to try to encourage the state about leaving a little bit of say so in small groups;
8. The average person that needs these type services do not have a place to seek help;
9. This has a snowball effect which increases the population in our jails and prisons; **and**
10. I ask that you look at this situation.

Gary Lanier:

1. One of the focus areas we have is food processing;
2. Hopefully, we will get, in about ten days, the final report for a certification for the Southeast Regional Park by Garner Economics and Primus Builders;
3. We will be certified as the first food certified park in the State of North Carolina; **and**
4. This will be an addition to our tax base and employ a lot of people.

ADJOURNMENT:

At 11:01 A.M., William S. Clark stated the meeting was adjourned. We will now leave for the tour of MaXPro. We will have lunch at the Columbus Career and College Academy as 12:30 P.M., followed by a tour of the Columbus Career and College Academy at 1:00 P.M.

APPROVED:

JUNE B. HALL, Clerk to Board

CHARLES T. McDOWELL, Chairman