

**COLUMBUS COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**  
**BOARD PLANNING RETREAT**  
**Monday, March 23, 2020**  
**5:30 P.M.**

The Honorable Columbus County Commissioners met on the above stated date and at the above stated time in the Dempsey B. Herring Courthouse Annex Building, located at 112 West Smith Street, Whiteville, North Carolina, for the purpose of conducting the annual Board Planning Retreat.

**COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:**

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

**APPOINTEES PRESENT:**

Mike Stephens, **County Manager**  
 Amanda B. Prince, **County Attorney**  
 June B. Hall, **Clerk to Board**  
 Bobbie Faircloth, **Finance Officer**

**OTHERS PRESENT:**

Dylan Bowen, Deputy Finance Officer  
 Justin Smith, The News Reporter

**Agenda Items #1, #2 and #3:****RETREAT CALLED to ORDER, INVOCATION and PLEDGE of ALLEGIANCE:**

At 5:30 P.M., Chairman P. Edwin Russ called the March 23, 2020 Board Planning Retreat to order. The invocation was delivered by Commissioner Charles T. McDowell. Everyone in attendance stood and pledged Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America.

**EVENING MEAL SERVED:**

At this time, a delicious evening meal was served and enjoyed.

**DISCUSSION:**

At 5:49 P.M., Mike Stephens, County Manager stated he would like to thank his staff for all of the hard work they performed in getting this information together for presentation. Mr. Stephens discussed the following topics.

**Historical Courthouse:**

1. The Historical Courthouse Committee was formed last year after the Planning Retreat. Their first task was to solicit RFQ's from potential architect firms with experience working with historic buildings. A total of eight (8) RFQ's were received. The committee reviewed all eight (8) RFQ's and ranked them. Five (5) of the eight (8) architect firms were interviewed and the committee initially selected Hobbs Architects, PA, for consulting services for this project. However, after negotiations with the firm failed, the committee moved forward with Lee Dixon with Coastal Architects. A contract between Coastal and the County was approved by the Board and has been executed by both parties.
2. Lee Dixon was given the plans previously agreed upon for the courthouse to work with our staff to tweak. However, the court system has decided that they do not want to utilize this building for additional courtrooms.
3. I recommend that we need to move forward with demolition of the inside of the Historic Courthouse to determine if there are any issues that need to be resolved.
4. Once those issues are determined and fixed, we need to move forward with the possibility of using this building for office space for County departments and offices for the DA.

**City Schools Project:**

1. Whiteville City Schools are currently in the process of building the foundation of the new school building.
2. They were able to obtain a loan through USDA with an interest rate of 3.5% for a forty (40) year term.
3. If the contractor remains on schedule, the new Whiteville High School building should be completed by the fall of 2021.

**Columbus County School Construction Project Update:**

1. The architect has completed Phase I for both Cerro Gordo and Tabor City and both have been approved.
2. The architect has a few issues to address with USDA regarding the PAR (Preliminary Architectural Report) and ASA (Architect Service Agreement).
3. USDA needs to do their secondary Environmental Review.
4. A budget has been made for the construction of each school and we are waiting on the financial feasibility to be updated.
5. The school system is also waiting to hear back from the Historic Commission because one of the schools is a historic building.
6. A time line for this project has not been established at this time.

**Water Projects:**

1. Green Engineering provided estimates on the waterline extensions for Columbus County Water Districts I, II III and V that Board members requested, and those extensions were approved by the Board.
2. Staff is in the process of mailing letters to potential customers on these roads to encourage hookups within a ninety (90) day period. After that time, we will determine which roads we need to move forward with, and those extensions will be bid as a group but separated by water district. We hope to have these extensions completed by the end of the year.
3. Staff is also working with Green Engineering on the WD-IV USDA Rural Development application for waterline extensions, two (2) wells and a tank. Staff has meetings scheduled during March to determine interest in the project.
4. At this time, the project is estimated at \$9,718,714. If the project is funded, we hope to receive 45% grant, which will make this a \$5.3 million project financed for forty (40) years at around 2%.
5. The application will be submitted to USDA Rural Development during April 2020.
6. Staff is also in the process of obtaining quotes for all of the generators needed and expects to have that information within the next thirty (30) days.

**Paging System for Fire/EMS and VIPER Radio System:**

1. Both projects have been funded and EMS staff is working with Motorola/NCHP to complete these projects.
2. Kay expects it to take more than a year to complete these projects. She is currently working on a time line and will get that information to us.

**Corona Virus Update:**

1. The Governor has issued an Executive Order which has closed several businesses;
2. The schools have been closed until May 15, 2020;
3. On-line learning is being encouraged;
4. Dr. Meadows is stating she needs chrone books for the school students that are at home and the price for each book is \$175.00, but at this time, she does not know how many;
5. The key personnel is meeting regularly on the corona virus; **and**
6. At this time, no departments have closed, but have cut down on the services they offer.

Lengthy and in-depth discussion was conducted relative to the non-payment of water bills, and placing a stop on the tax foreclosures at this time.

**Financial Report:**

Bobbie Faircloth, Finance Director, presented the following **Overview of Finances**.

1. Columbus County, over time, has been able to increase its unrestricted fund balance from \$3,498,471 (6.22%) in 2007 to \$28,269,527 (50.10%) in 2019, of this, \$12,000,000 is in reserve for the school construction and \$1,897,00 is in reserve for the historical courthouse renovation.
2. The County has adopted a fund balance policy in order to maintain a fund balance of no less than 20% of General Fund Expenditures and outflows at the end of each fiscal year.

3. Columbus County Water Districts I, II, III, IV and V currently have several water line extensions planned for the upcoming fiscal year.
4. Current Water District I is debt free having paid its general obligation bonds off in 2014. The current fund balance for this Water District I is \$1,656,422, however we do not set aside funds for depreciation. If the Water Districts were to start a policy on setting aside funds for depreciation, the net cash provided would be: \$269,285.
5. Water District II has debt of \$5,466,416 and a spendable fund balance of \$1,642,712, however if depreciation was funded Water District II net cash provided would be: \$346,023.
6. Water District III has debt of \$3,725,000, and a spendable fund balance of \$869,708, however if depreciation was funded, Water District III net cash provided would be: \$287,845.
7. Water District IV has debt of \$4,900,000 and a spendable fund balance of \$301,406, and again if depreciation was funded, Water District IV would have a net cash provided of: \$479,199.
8. Water District V has debt of \$3,880,000, and a spendable fund balance of \$194,183, and if depreciation was funded, Water District V would have a net cash provided of: \$596,893.

### **DEBT CAPACITY**

Columbus County currently has outstanding debt of \$43,605,197, of which \$25,633,782 is General Fund debt and \$17,971,415 is water district debt. To further classify the General Fund Debt, \$1,670,687 (QSCB-2028) is owed by the school systems. Whiteville City Schools has a loan anticipation note of \$14,609,000 (2042) to First Bank. Once construction is completed on the Whiteville High School building, the loan will be converted into a USDA loan (40 year loan) with an interest rate of no higher than 3.5%. The County is still in the process of securing a loan to upgrade the radio system to VIPER radios, in the amount of \$4,519,690 (2025) with an interest rate of 1.89%. The County has secured a loan for the Sheriff's Department for additional vehicles in the amount of \$333,483 (2023) with an interest rate 1.97%. The Courthouse Annex Project has a current balance of \$4,500,000 with an interest rate of 1.98% (2027).

Columbus County Schools are working on finalizing a USDA loan to combine Tabor City Elementary School and Tabor City Middle School onto the campus where Tabor City Elementary is currently located in a total of \$29,348,414. Also, combine Cerro Gordo School, Evergreen School and Chadbourn School onto the current campus of Cerro Gordo Elementary and renaming it West Columbus Pre-K - 8 School in a total of \$26,041,664. The total estimated cost of these projects combined is \$55,390,078 of which \$34,440,078 will be borrowed.

### **COLUMBUS COUNTY FACILITY ASSESSMENT 2019**

#### **Update on the Repairs/Improvements Made:**

Mike Stephens, County Manager, stated relative to the Building Feasibility Study, some of the needed items have been done and some have not, in the areas listed:

Administration  
 Airport  
 Animal Control  
 Old Animal Control  
 Tax Office and Register of Deeds  
 Dempsey B. Herring Building/Courthouse Annex  
 Farm Services Building/Cooperative Extension  
 Health Department (Miller Building)  
 Emergency Services/911 Building  
 50 Legion Facility (Former HUD/Elections Building)  
 Superior Court Judge and DA's Building  
 Library (Whiteville)  
 Maintenance Building  
 Parks and Recreation Office  
 Public Utilities Building

Aging Department Building and Ed Worley Building  
Sheriff's Office Building\Families First  
Law Enforcement Building  
Evidence Storage Building  
Social Services Building  
Transportation  
County Landfill Headhouse  
Old Dock Community Center  
Veterans Services

## **COURTHOUSE FACILITIES SAFETY REPORT:**

Commissioner James E. Prevatte presented the following information on the safety issues that have been addressed for the new Courthouse:

1. Three (3) County Commissioners have been appointed to the Courthouse Facilities Safety Committee as follows: Commissioner James E. Prevatte, Commissioner Giles E. Byrd and Commissioner Ricky Bullard;
2. So far, we have not been able to see the judge, and we have not received the report from the Sheriff's Association;
3. I tried to contact the judge to set up a meeting with him to discuss the safety issues, and when I did make the connection with the judge, he stated that he did not want to discuss anything with us, and for us to address the safety issues as needed;
4. The safety issues will be addressed in sixty (60) days, and at that time it would be determined if they were appropriate and satisfactory;
5. The windows have been removed and replaced with bricks, the door locks have been ordered, and Variable Temperature Dehumidifiers are being investigated of which we need four (4), at the cost of \$185,000.00; **and**
6. The Jury Box is being addressed to determine the most feasible and user-friendly manner to use.

## **CAPITAL PROJECT DISCUSSION and PRIORITIES:**

Mike Stephens, County Manager, stated the following relative to Capital Projects.

### **Historic Courthouse:**

1. Projects completed to date-  
-New Roof;  
-Building painted; **and**  
-Others.
2. How do we proceed with renovation?  
-Move forward with demolition to determine issues/safety issues.
3. Who should occupy the building?  
-DA's office;  
-Administration; **and**  
-Others.
4. Plans/goals for the courthouse upcoming budget year.  
-Proceed with demolition;  
-Move forward with architect plans; **and**  
-Other goals.
5. Funds currently set aside for this project.  
-\$2 million -waiting on State Budget; **and**  
-\$1.9 million - County funds.
6. Time line to accomplish goals.  
-One (1) year; **and**  
-Two (2) years.

### **New Courthouse:**

1. Unresolved issues/humidity issues; **and**
2. Safety issues.

### **Dempsey B. Herring Courthouse Annex:**

1. Safety issues; **and**
2. Future Plans for Building:
  - Continue use as a courthouse; **and**
  - Additional recommendations for use.

**Sheriff's Offices:**

1. Issues being discussed; **and**
2. Plans for old Detention Center offices.

**Elections/HUD Offices:**

1. Should we continue to lease property?
2. Options to move Elections/HUD offices; **and**
3. Old Elections/HUD Building.

**Emergency Service Building Needs:**

1. Discussion of new facility;
  - Current facility is not large enough to have all agencies during a disaster; **and**
  - No sleeping corridors for staff.
2. Warehouse needed for emergencies:
  - We previously used the Tortimex building for storage during disasters and it has been sold; **and**
  - Suggestions for a new building.

**Review of Department Manager Current Projects and Goals/Request for FY 2020/2021:**

DEPARTMENT	TOP FIVE (5) PRIORITIES
Airport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Perimeter Fencing</li> <li>-Generators</li> <li>-Apron Expansion</li> </ul>
Animal Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Outside kennels for dogs</li> <li>-Need a van for veterinary visits</li> <li>-New employees</li> <li>-Outside play area for dogs</li> </ul>
Building Inspections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Send Inspectors to standard examinations</li> <li>-Need 1 mote truck - 4 inspectors, 4 trucks needed</li> </ul>
Economic Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Establish Columbus County Entrepreneurial and Business Development Center in the downtown area of Whiteville.</li> <li>-Investigate the establishment of sewer service along Hwy 74-76 in the Delco area with a focus on utilizing the underutilized wastewater treatment plant on Fertilizer Road in Delco.</li> <li>-Work with Public Utilities and obtain EDA grant funding as well as Utilities Grant funding from the Rural Division of the NC Department of Commerce to install 2 new wells in the Delco area and to expand water lines in the area to allow for future growth in residential development and in the development of new industrial parks. Investigate the feasibility of co-locating conduit for fiber-optic cable and, where applicable, forced sewer mains.</li> <li>-Work to establish business incubators in Bolton (grant application nearing completion), Chadbourn and Fair Bluff.</li> <li>-Work to establish an industrial shell building within Columbus County either at Fair bluff (demo old Umbro Plant and rebuild on site) or at the Southeast Regional Park.</li> </ul>

<b>Emergency Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Installation of a new county radio paging system, conversion to the State VIPER Radio Network and distribution of emergency responder radios.</li> <li>-Required to implement the State Next Generation ESInet project for the 911 Center.</li> <li>-Update the County Hazard Mitigation plan.</li> <li>-Develop County Communications Plan and Mass Feeding Plan.</li> <li>-Continue to work with Hurricane Matthew and Florence victims regarding NCEM Hazard Mitigation and NCEM upcoming grants as well as local volunteer agencies in the county.</li> </ul>
<b>Cooperative Extension Service</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-To continue to focus on better marketing for the NC Cooperative Extension.</li> <li>-To continue to deliver programs to under served communities, this segment of the population is often left out and we have a golden opportunity to provide life changing researched based information.</li> <li>-To continue to focus on better customer service.</li> <li>-To continue to focus of using the budget the county has allotted to Extension in the most economical and efficient way to provide the services that we are tasked to provide.</li> <li>-To pursue a county car, our current county car has excessive miles above 125,000 and is continually in the shop.</li> </ul>
<b>Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Bring employee salaries up to surrounding county salaries.</li> <li>-Give the inside of the Health Department a “facelift” - paint flooring.</li> </ul>
<b>Human Resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Update Policy.</li> <li>-Staff training.</li> </ul>
<b>Housing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-We plan to update the Section 8 utility rates.</li> <li>-Our Columbus County PHA 5 Year Plan is due the first of April 01, 2020.</li> <li>-We plan to do a Property Owner Fair to get more people interested in renting their units to our participants.</li> <li>-We plan to attend several Webinar Trainings on HUD’s new regulations and to get certifications for the staff as needed.</li> <li>-Our Section Eight Management Assessment Program Report is due to HUD by July 01, 2020.</li> </ul>
<b>Library</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Replace Computers at Libraries.</li> <li>-Replace Shelving.</li> </ul>
<b>Planning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Update Columbus County development regulations (zoning, subdivision).</li> <li>-Revise-Amend the Columbus County Campground Ordinance.</li> <li>-Submit more cases of abandoned structures, junked vehicles and other nuisance cases to the Board of Commissioner for abatement.</li> <li>-Continue to work on bringing structures in the Special Flood Hazard Area designation by NC Department of Public Safety into compliance with the county’s flood ordinance.</li> <li>-Continue to work on bringing substantially damaged properties from Hurricane Matthew and Florence into compliance with the Columbus County Flood Damage Prevention.</li> <li>-Propose regulations for recreational vehicles/campers on lots that are not designated as a campground.</li> </ul>
<b>Public Utilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-AMI/AMR Reading System.</li> <li>-Building for equipment/ materials for Public Utilities Department.</li> </ul>
<b>Recreation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Complete phase three of updating countywide playground facilities.</li> <li>-Install security cameras at the Columbus County Fitness Park;</li> <li>-Construct a 12' x 32' covered shelter to secure and protect tractors, mowers and equipment attachments</li> </ul>

<b>Register of Deeds</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Conservation Project for Marriage Licenses from 1898-1970.</li> <li>- Credit Card terminals installed on our computer system so we can provide credit/debit services to our citizens.</li> <li>-Purchase a cabinet to store the maps that are recorded in our office.</li> </ul>
<b>Sheriff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Increase payroll budget to fix suppression and include raises for entire office.</li> <li>-Add positions to divisions and fix suppression within grade levels.</li> <li>-Need to replace unsafe and high maintenance vehicles.</li> <li>-Need to build fence around the jail and office along with new camera system in jail.</li> <li>-Need more space for staff and the public along with building repair.</li> </ul>
<b>Social Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Purchase/Upgrade software on computers to secure federal information.</li> <li>-We hope to be in compliance with state requirement, by having information scanned into NCFASST for the upcoming Medicaid Audits.</li> <li>-To get damaged file removed from Whiteville Mini Storage ASAP.</li> </ul>
<b>Soil and Water Conservation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-For non-point source pollution reduction-NC Agricultural Cost Share Program.</li> <li>-For flood reduction-Beaver Management Program-Public health and human safety.</li> <li>-For flood reduction -Stream Debris Removal.</li> <li>-For conservation buffering - Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program.</li> <li>-For youth conservation education-Environment Field Days.</li> </ul>
<b>Solid Waste</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Maintenance/Repair to Convenience Site Buildings.</li> <li>-New Cell Expansion Project for the LCID Facility.</li> <li>-Contract for Debris Management during inclement weather.</li> </ul>
<b>Tax Office</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Reval - finish all field inspections.</li> <li>-BIS software system upgrade.</li> <li>-Conduct a business personal property countywide audit.</li> <li>-Working hard to cross train the Tax Office personnel.</li> <li>-Need to replace 04 F150 that has over 250,000 miles.</li> </ul>
<b>Transportation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-To replace aged out vehicles.</li> <li>-To decide what we are going to replace our current radio system with.</li> <li>-I need to start looking into getting estimate on what it will take to do the building improvements that need to be done.</li> </ul>
<b>Veteran Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Providing our county's veterans with accurate and current information and assisting them in applying for and obtaining their maximum VA benefits.</li> <li>-Training is required to accomplish our number one goal.</li> <li>-Maintaining current service levels that our veterans are accustomed to by providing courteous and accurate information to them.</li> <li>-Provide a safe working environment for employees and our veterans by complying with county safety policies, identifying and correcting potential safety hazards and participating in county safety programs.</li> <li>-To be good stewards of taxpayers money but maintaining and protecting county property and providing a valuable service to our county.</li> </ul>

## **FY 2020/2021 BUDGET GOALS/REQUESTS DISCUSSION:**

Lengthy and in-depth discussion was conducted relative to the requests that were submitted by each department, inclusive of the wants and needs.

## **LEGISLATIVE GOALS / REQUESTS:**

After lengthy discussion, the top five (5) legislative goals were as follows, and will be sent to our legislators:

1. \$12 million for school systems' needs for cyber security, technology and pandemic;
2. \$2 million for the restoration of the Historic Courthouse which was included in last year's budget;
3. \$9 Million for water infrastructure expansion;
4. \$5 Million for the Sheriff's Office; **and**
5. Additional funds for drainage issues associated with hurricane flooding.

## **MEETING ADJOURNED:**

At 8:24 P.M., Commissioner Bullard made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Commissioner Byrd. The motion unanimously passed.

**APPROVED:**

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**JUNE B. HALL, Clerk to Board**

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**P. EDWIN RUSS, Chairman**