

**MACON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
SPECIAL MEETING
FEBRUARY 26, 2021
MINUTES**

Chairman Tate called the meeting to order at 2:00 p.m. as provided for in the Notice of Special Meeting of the Macon County Board of Commissioners, a copy of which is attached (Attachment 1) and is hereby made a part of these minutes. All Board Members, County Manager Derek Roland, Deputy Clerk Mike Decker, Finance Director Lori Carpenter were present. Also present were members of the news media and representatives of the Macon County School System.

The stated purpose of the meeting was for the board to “consider postponing the Macon Middle School Renovation Project to evaluate alternative plans related to Macon Middle School/Macon Middle School Campus.”

Chairman Tate said he was going to read from a statement he had prepared, and started by giving a brief history of the Macon Middle School (MMS) project, leading up to the proposed renovation of the facility. He said Commissioner Young called him two weeks ago, and as a new board liaison, along with Commissioner Shields, to the county’s school system and Board of Education, Chairman Tate said that Commissioner Young expressed “significant reservations” about proceeding with the renovation. He said Commissioner Young asked two questions – is it too late in the process to present another idea, and would Chairman Tate support Commissioner Young’s introduction of a different concept to the board? Chairman Tate said his answer to those questions was, in order, that he was “not sure” and “yes.” Chairman Tate said that Commissioner Young “thinks we are making a tremendous mistake” but is “hurting inside” with what Chairman Tate referred to as “commissioner anguish” over being a new commissioner yet worried about the hours and money spent on a project like this one. Chairman Tate said this is what led to today’s meeting and a “very difficult but important conversation.”

Commissioner Young then spent about half an hour outlining his thoughts and proposal. He said he hasn’t taken his liaison assignment lightly, adding that he was not here to undermine his fellow commissioners or county staff. While he said it is not his job to be a “Monday morning quarterback,” he explained that he would feel regret if he didn’t do this, and began to address his concerns about

the renovation. He said he made a trip to MMS and talked with school maintenance staff and others, which prompted him to call a liaison meeting. Saying, "I don't mean to sound harsh," he described the project as a "Band-Aid" and questioned making "a \$13-million investment on a 1974 building." He further commented that it would take an estimated \$30-million to bring the building up to code, and said there are "large problems with that building," including 45-year-old plumbing, sewer issues that have not been addressed, "thermal barrier" issues with the walls, problems with the metal windows and other structural issues. With 32 points of entry, he said MMS has a lack of modernization and functional ability. After briefly discussing problems with the track at Franklin High School (FHS), Commissioner Young proposed a plan that would have the county purchase a tract near the existing middle school that would allow for expansion of the campus, and to take the money planned for the renovation and put it toward looking at different and much larger plans for MMS and FHS, saying that the board members owe it to the taxpayers to look at different avenues. He spoke of expanding capacity at all of the county's schools, and said it is up to the commissioners to figure out where the money to do this comes from, and suggested that it could come from money in the county's fund balance, issuance of bonds and other sources. He noted that the county is on the verge of selling bonds to finance the MMS renovation, but told the board, "I feel like we're in reaction mode." He said that keeping the high school at its current site and facility could be viewed as "sentimental," adding that "everything has a life span." He then suggested leveling MMS and building a new, three-story high school on that site, adding that he was asking for time to perform the due diligence to look into a bigger plan. He spoke briefly about possible uses for the existing high school facility, and again asked the board members "that we go down this road." He again mentioned his thought of putting a Band-Aid on really big wounds, and said he felt an urgency and "wanted to get this off my chest." He said there are already "major traffic problems at the MSS/Mountain View Intermediate School area, but talked about a "staging plan" that takes a 10-year view on school improvements. In closing, he asked the board not to cancel the MMS renovation, but to "take a deep breath."

Chairman Tate responded first, saying he thought it was "an idea of merit" and "might be a good rabbit to chase." However, he also noted he could come up with or list a "whole page of questions," such as – how does the county pay for it, what does a 30-day delay cost, do we put Band-Aids on other things, and are we doing the best we can with the money we have? He did express his support of Commission Young's thoughts, and said he also desires some sort of plan, and he encouraged the board to investigate a little bit deeper, adding he was "happy to be open-minded and discuss it."

Commissioner Beale then shared his thoughts. He started by asking Mr. Roland how much the county has spent on schools in recent years, and the reply was

\$25-million over the last 10 years. Commissioner Beale said the county is looking at \$90-\$100-million to build a new high school, and that will necessitate “a huge tax hike.” While he said he appreciated Commissioner Young’s effort, “We’ve already looked at this.” He described the land Commissioner Young is interested in purchasing as being in a swamp and unusable. He also said it has taken county and school officials two years to get to the point of the MMS renovation, adding that the improvements “should get decades more use out of this school,” and he did agree that there are too many points of entry. Commissioner Beale reflected on the various board members who have served as liaisons to the school system and noted that “we’ve been down all these roads” and added that no one desires to see a tax increase. He said the county has other needs “on the burner” and that it has taken decades to get the county’s fund balance where it is today. He said his thought is that, while Commissioner Young’s ideas should have some merit, the MMS location is not good for a high school and is too congested now. At this time, he said the best the county can do is renovate MMS and that they will lose \$1-million if we stop now. He expressed his desire to move forward with the renovation as planned, because to do anything more, “You’ve got to have the money,” and the board would need it get it “out of the pockets of the citizens.” Commissioner Beale added that he doesn’t know what schools “are going to look like in 10 years,” and that MMS is already “late getting done.” He said he appreciates Commissioner Young’s insight into the future, but he will support moving ahead as planned. However, he said the county has “got to look down the road,” as there are needs involving senior citizens, the sheriff’s office and emergency services. He said the board could not make a better decision than to renovate MMS, but added it was a great idea for the county’s board of education and the members of the commission’s liaison committee “to bring us a proposal” regarding future plans.

Commissioner Shields, saying Commissioner Young “knows where my position is,” explained that he wanted to continue with the renovation project. He noted that a referendum on a possible local option sales tax would allow the board to “get a reading of the county.” As to placing the high school at the current MMS location, he said that if you put 300 more cars on Wells Grove Road and Clarks Chapel Road “you are in for a mess.” He voiced his concern about delaying the project, adding that sometimes a Band-Aid can stabilize something. He said he encouraged Commissioner Young to present his position, but from his personal perspective, he is 74 years old and “what I’m dealing with now is in the moment.” He suggested placing a local option sales tax on the ballot for 2022, said that he is for the renovation but is also for planning for the future, but that planning can be “a slow train.” He said he doesn’t want to see MMS “bleed out” in the meantime, adding that, “We’re in a dire situation” at the school. Referring to the county’s space needs analysis, Commissioner Shields pointed out that “this county has a lot of needs.”

Commissioner Higdon called this “a very important topic,” and from his point of view, he had opposed a new high school because there was no overall plan for school facilities. He said he was impressed by Commissioner Young’s “youthful vigor” and strongly supported his plan, adding that Commissioner Young’s ideas on consolidation “intrigue me.” He said he would hate to see the \$1-million invested in the proposed renovation project “gone,” and he asked what a new middle school would cost, to which Mr. Roland replied that it would be approximately \$30-million for just the facility with no property cost. However, Mr. Roland also noted there would be the cost of developing the plans for the new school.

Commissioner Young commented that the board needs “hard numbers” to know what the costs of new facilities would truly be, and again stated that, “A few months isn’t going to hurt anything” in terms of delaying the renovation and looking at other plans. Commissioner Shields responded, saying if you delay something six months, that’s “six more months of bleeding out.” He also noted the county would “give up a million dollar study,” adding, “I have a hard time with that.” He told the board he compared this to a football game in which, “we’re in the fourth quarter and fourth down with inches to go and the team comes off the field.” He reiterated that he is ready to do the renovation.

At this point, Commissioner Young said he would like to hear from the school system personnel in the audience. Macon County Schools Superintendent Dr. Chris Baldwin responded that the system has had plenty of plans for a new high school, and commented that Commissioner Young’s proposal “certainly has merit.” Following some brief comments from some of the commissioners, Jim Breedlove, the chairman of the Macon County Board of Education, noted that Commissioner Young had asked members of the school board if they would “go against him” if he proposed his plan, and Mr. Breedlove said the board’s response was that they were open to it and if the county commissioners chose to “relook,” they would support it wholeheartedly.

Commissioner Young questioned whether the county’s Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) addressed schools, and Mr. Roland said that issues with MMS came up in October of 2017 and were put into the CIP. He said that at that time, the project was estimated to cost \$2.7-million, and he then provided an extensive, detailed history of the project to date, noting that in late 2020 the cost of the renovation was revised to approximately \$15-million. Pointing out that this was “not something we started working on last month,” Mr. Roland said the county is scheduled to issue a preliminary position statement on March 1 regarding the sale of bonds to finance the project, with those bonds to go on sale on March 8 and the loan to be closed on March 25. He also reiterated that the county had already spent approximately \$1-million on the project.

Mr. Breedlove addressed the \$2.7-million figure, stating that it was a quote to repair the HVAC system at the school. He also said that the school board had discussed combining the middle school and high school facilities and had looked at seven or eight sites for a possible high school location. He said the school board members are “well aware of the need” and the huge investment on the county’s part to address it, adding that, “We’ve tried to help expedite and move forward.”

Commissioner Higdon commented that he could explain to those he represents that he voted to lose \$1-million rather than spend \$12-million and still have problems.

Chairman Tate spoke next, and said that “a Band-Aid is not \$10-million” but more like plastic surgery. He admitted that “my stomach is in an absolute knot over this right now,” likening it to a time when his child was three-years old and wanted a toy he could not afford to buy. “I want it,” he said in reference to Commissioner Young’s proposal, “but how do we afford it,” adding that the board could look for reasons why we should. He said that he did not want to “pull the reins back” on Commissioner Young. “I’m torn, I really am,” he said, and spoke of possibly pulling back on the project for 90 days, which prompted Mrs. Carpenter to address the repercussions of postponing. She also pointed out that the bond sale includes funds to refinance existing county loans that would save the county some \$600,000 over the life of those loans. She also noted that the county would likely have to readvertise for bids on the project, as the selected contractor won’t hold their bid for 90 days and might not have the appetite to go through the bid process again. All of these things have costs associated with them, she said.

At this point, Commissioner Beale made the following motion, and it was seconded by Commissioner Shields: Based on the information given, and where we’re at and where we stand on our timeline, and what we’ve invested, motion to move ahead with the renovations as voted on unanimously by this board and by the school board and with one caveat that we authorize the county manager to please go ahead and see what processes we would have to do to do the new athletic building at the middle grade school. This was followed by further discussion. During that time, Chairman Tate said he had told Commissioner Young that he might be “a little late to the party with this [idea],” and that while he loves the concept and idea, there are a lot of unknowns. Commissioner Young asked one more time for a 90-day postponement and for the board to “tap the brakes.” Commissioner Beale “called the question,” and the board voted 3-2 to approve the motion made by Commissioner Beale, with Chairman Tate and commissioners Beale and Shields voting in favor, and with commissioners Young and Higdon opposing.

Chairman Tate said he wanted to give Commissioner Young his word that the board is “going to move forward with helping you keep your enthusiasm.”

At 3:43 p.m., upon a motion by Commissioner Higdon, seconded by Commissioner Shields, the board voted unanimously to adjourn.

Derek Roland
Ex Officio Clerk to the Board

Jim Tate
Board Chairman