

**MACON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
CONTINUED SESSION
FEBRUARY 4, 2021
MINUTES**

Chairman Tate reconvened the meeting at 12:03 p.m. as recessed from the January 12, 2021 regular meeting and welcomed those in attendance. All board members, County Manager Derek Roland, Finance Director Lori Carpenter, a number of county department heads and members of the news media were present. Deputy Clerk Mike Decker viewed the meeting via livestream.

Chairman Tate stated that the primary purpose of the meeting was for a budget work session.

COVID-19 MITIGATION EFFORT UPDATE: Mr. Roland began the update on the county's COVID-19 mitigation effort by telling the board that Macon is handling this situation "as good as any other rural county." He explained that the county public health telephone system was initially overwhelmed by callers seeking a COVID-19 vaccination. At one point, he said the calls exceeded 500 per hour every day, and that this problem was not unique to Macon County. He said callers experienced a 45-minute wait, if they were able to get a call through at all. This overwhelmed the department's staff, which had as many as 700 phone messages at one time. Mr. Roland said all of those calls have now been returned. With additional help, he said many county citizens have now been enrolled in the vaccination system, and the "wait time" on an incoming call is now at four seconds. He said the health department's call center has been staffed daily with 15 to 20 workers since January 16, and he thanked Phil Drake for allowing the county to use the Drake Education Center to house the call center, adding that the "partnership has been a game-changer." He said county employees from multiple departments have been utilized at the center, with five part-time processing assistants having been hired with five more "in the pipeline ready to go," and that volunteers have been used as well. At this time, he said some 5,000 citizens have registered and are on a waiting list for a vaccine. As of January 21, Mr. Roland said the county has been offering driving through COVID-19 testing and vaccination from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. every weekday in a manner that is extremely convenient for the consumer. He noted that Emergency Medical Services (EMS) staff assumed all testing duties on that date, and that 481 people have been tested since. He also pointed out that the demand for

testing has declined. With the assignment of 10 National Guardsmen to assist with vaccinations, he told the board that a total of 2,250 vaccinations per week was possible, but after state officials told all counties to “ramp up,” on January 22 the county was informed it would only receive 200 doses, as the bulk of the vaccines were instead sent to large events in metropolitan areas such as Charlotte. He said county officials were later told we would get 300 doses per week in three-week allotments, and that number was later upped to 400 doses. However, Mr. Roland added that the federal government isn’t getting the doses out to the states, and that in Macon County, “We cannot administer those we don’t have.” He provided the board with three “bullet points,” as follows”

- As of February 4, a resident can call the call center and have their call answered within an average of four seconds and can then be put on a waiting list within four minutes.
- If a resident needs a COVID-19 test, they can have an appointment the next day.
- At present, the county is capable of administering 7.5 times the amount of vaccines it is getting from the state.

Mr. Roland told the board that if the doses were available, “we could have everyone vaccinated by May,” but with the shortage, “all you can do is all you can do.” He concluded by saying, “This organization is doing all we can do.” Public Health Director Kathy McGaha then gave the board an overview of the doses of the vaccine that have been received and how they have been distributed. She also pointed out that there are times when more than the standard amount of 10 doses can be obtained from one vial, and she assured the board that the “bonus doses” are not going to waste. She explained that while the county has 270 doses in inventory, all of those will be gone by Friday (February 5). After the board’s January 12 meeting, she said she learned of the possibility of help from the National Guard, adding that the 10 guardsmen assigned to the county are here through February 19, but that could be extended. She also noted that on Friday, February 5, the county will begin administering the “second” COVID dose to those who have received the initial vaccination. As Mr. Roland noted, she said the county has “quite a bit of capacity but no vaccines.” The discussion turned to the state’s “phasing” for COVID vaccinations, particularly as it involves teachers, but Mrs. McGaha pointed out that the county cannot vaccinate individuals “out of phase” or would risk getting less doses from the state. Emergency Services Director Warren Cabe presented next, and provided the board with an “Emergency Services Report,” a copy of which is attached **(Attachment 1)** and is hereby made a part of these minutes. Mr. Cabe told the board that the demand for COVID-19 test has decreased, and the “rolling average” has been 42 tests per day, with the numbers “tapering off.” He said he informed his staff that he did not want committees, he wanted results, and for the testers “to go home safe.” He said the testing effort has been no detriment to the daily EMS service, even though “we’re spread a little thin.” Following a question from Commissioner Higdon, Mr. Cabe responded that he was no fan of

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regional vaccination clinics like the one planned for Western Carolina University in Cullowhee. He talked about the process that has been set up outside the health department, and noted that some of the cold, rainy mornings have been “brutal” on staff. While it would be easier on the staff to do the testing in the afternoons, Mr. Cabe pointed out that it is better for citizens to do it in the morning, as it speeds up the possibility of them getting test results more quickly. There was some discussion regarding the benefits of walk-in clinics versus drive-through clinics, and the board members expressed their pleasure with the EMS response to the testing effort. Sheriff Robbie Holland was up next, and explained how the idea to use the Drake Education Center for the call center became a reality. He noted that Phil Drake has not asked for any recognition for either himself or his staff at the center, and has even gone so far as to provide snacks for the call center workers. The sheriff also said that local businesses have stepped up to provide lunch for those manning the call center. Commissioner Shields raised a number of questions about COVID-19 sick leave for county employees. Mr. Roland explained that the federal Emergency Paid Sick Leave (EPSL) expired on December 31, 2020 and was not renewed. He said if the board wanted to consider a county-based paid sick leave program, he would have county staff prepare something for the board’s consideration at the February 9, 2021 regular meeting. No action was taken.

BROADBAND EXPANSION IN MACON COUNTY: Tommy Jenkins, the county’s Economic Development Director, updated the board on efforts to expand broadband in the county. For what he referred to as the “South Macon” project, Mr. Jenkins said that Balsam West submitted the best proposal to provide services and that a grant agreement was being drawn up, with anticipated approval by the board in March. In this agreement, a 22-mile fiber “backbone” would be built, extending from the Addington Bridge area to Highlands and would accommodate 2,600 potential users. He said that of the two payments on the project, one would come in this budget year and the other from the 2021-22 budget, adding that certain benchmarks must be reached before the second payment is released. Mr. Jenkins said the “West Macon” broadband project is a “beta” project undertaken by Balsam West and is being deployed from the West Macon Fire Department and he provided some of the initial details on it. Finally, he said that Southwestern Commission staff is assisting with a project in the Nantahala community that would provide a wireless deployment from the community center there. No action was taken.

Chairman Tate declared a recess at 1:36 p.m.

Chairman Tate called the meeting back to order at 1:51 p.m.

MID-YEAR FINANCIAL REVIEW: Finance Director Lori Carpenter presented a PowerPoint presentation that provided the board with a mid-year financial

update. In comparing four months of sales tax revenue between 2020 and 2021, she noted that 2021 saw an increase over the previous year. The total for the first four months of 2021 was \$4,645,027, compared to \$3,999,766 for the same period in 2020. Meanwhile, the county has collected 84.9 percent of its anticipated tax revenue through the first six months of the fiscal year, compared to 82.8 percent in 2020. General fund revenue has come in at 61.8 percent of the revised budget, compared to 59.7 percent in the previous year, while expenditures are at 43.2 percent of budget, compared to 44.4 percent in 2020. In closing, she provided the board with a timeline of the county's general fund debt through Fiscal Year 2034. A copy of the presentation is attached (Attachment 2) and is hereby made a part of these minutes.

FISCAL YEAR 2021 BUDGET REVISIONS AND FISCAL YEAR 2022 BUDGET OUTLOOK: Mr. Roland began his presentation by reflecting on the county's mid-year budget work session last year, and outlined the topics that were under discussion at that time. He noted that many of the goals the board set then had been accomplished, despite the impact of COVID-19 – a topic no one had talked about at that time. He briefly reviewed the economic uncertainty that was brought about by the pandemic, as well as an outline of the county's goals from his May 2020 budget presentation, pointing out the impact of COVID-19 on such items as county employee training and travel and fuel costs. He then presented an amended budget comparison for Fiscal Year 2021, along with a copy of his budget message from last year. With “better than expected” economic circumstances, he pointed out that the expected revenue loss of nearly \$2 million turned out to be an amended amount of \$253,476, which leads to “a phenomenal year” with approximately \$1,727,000 in amended revenue. He explained that allocating that revenue will still “leave us agile,” while allowing just over \$1-million to go toward capital expenditures, including the restoration of the school system's capital request. He said it will also allow the county to retain a consultant to look at the county's pay scale and job descriptions, and to develop policies in regard to employee recruitment and retention. It will also aid in paying for operating expenses “out of our control” such as out-of-county jail housing as well as inmate medical treatment, and it will restore \$37,500 to the Community Funding Pool. He recommended that the board consider approval of a budget amendment to amend the Fiscal Year 2021 budget as presented in the amount of \$1,727,000. Following some questions from the board members, Chairman Tate told Mr. Roland that he was the “captain” of the “ship” and he expected him to “run the ship” and to make corrections if there is a problem, adding that he favored the budget amendment. Following a brief discussion regarding a possible new position at the Department of Social Services, Commissioner Beale made a motion to approve the budget amendment as presented, and it was seconded by Commissioner Shields and all favored. A copy of the amendment is attached (Attachment 3) and is hereby made a part of these minutes.

MACON COUNTY SCHOOLS FISCAL YEAR 2022 OPERATING BUDGET: Josh Lynch with Macon County Schools made a brief presentation in place of Macon County School Superintendent Dr. Chris Baldwin. He presented the board with a local personnel request for the upcoming school year that he noted was “preliminary” and had not been approved by the Board of Education. He also discussed other needs for the 2021-22 school year. No action was taken.

FISCAL YEAR 2022 GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS: Chairman Tate led off the board members’ individual goals and expectations for the upcoming budget year. He said that his “perception” was that the county as a whole needs to keep our taxes flat this year,” but he did endorse the pay study to address issues such as those at the Sheriff’s Department. He also expressed his desire to see that county buildings and facilities are kept clean and that the county is viewed as an “extremely desirable place.” Commissioner Beale focused his comments on anticipated improvements to county roadways and bridges by the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT), and he stated, “We want North Carolina to keep our roads,” pointing out the implications of the county taking over local road maintenance. Commissioner Young’s comments centered primarily on school facilities and a county pay structure to “keep our employees here.” Commissioner Higdon said the county cannot “drop” the broadband issue, and he also spoke of taking a look at changing the district representation on the board, something he said he would like to discuss at a future board meeting. Commissioner Beale also commented on the need to look at projects that have been put off.

PROPOSED BUDGET CALENDAR: Upon a motion by Commissioner Beale, seconded by Commissioner Young, the board voted unanimously to approve the proposed Fiscal Year 2021-22 budget calendar as presented, a copy of which is attached (Attachment 4) and is hereby made a part of these minutes.

ADJOURN: With no other business, and at 3:13 p.m., upon a motion by Commissioner Higdon, seconded by Commissioner Young, the board voted unanimously to adjourn.

Derek Roland
Ex Officio Clerk to the Board

Jim Tate
Board Chairman