

Special Meeting – September 1, 2022

The Graham County Board of Commissioners met Thursday, September 1, 2022, at 2:00 p.m. in the Graham County Community Building located at 196 Knight Street Robbinsville, NC for a special meeting with Senator Kevin Corbin and Representative Karl Gillespie. All board was present (Commissioner Lynn Cody joined by teleconference). Also, present Manager Jason Marino, Finance Officer Becky Garland, School Superintendent Dr. Angela Knight, School Finance Officer Lester Greene, Town of Robbinsville Alderman Debbie Beasley and Kenneth Hyde, IT Specialist Abraham Husmillo and Clerk Kim Crisp. Public present Hank Dinschel, Susan Kirkpatrick, Jack and Connie Gross, Graham Star Reporter Randy Foster.

1. Chair Orr called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone giving thanks to our State Representatives.
2. Chair Orr asks for a motion to approve the agenda. Commissioner Eller made the motion to approve. Commissioner Wiggins seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.
3. Chair Orr stated that the board and the school would be having discussion on unfunded mandates and funding needs with our State Representatives. Chair Orr asks Dr. Angela Knight to speak first.
4. Dr. Knight thanked the board for this opportunity to share information with the board and our legislators and stated the new state budget was very educational friendly and they were very excited with the attention that it has been receiving regarding educational funding. Dr. Knight stated that they have added mental health services in our schools as we are ranked at 200% for child abuse and 200% of the State rate. Dr. Knight stated that after the pandemic the numbers jumped to 400% and the school has made many referrals concerning mental health with the extra funding that they had received but this type funding will be ending in 2024 and this will leave a serious issue for our school concerning services, salaries, and services for children.
5. Finance Officer Greene presented figures explaining how state, federal and county dollars affect the budget and how some mandates affect the local dollars. Officer Greene gave the comparisons from fiscal year 2012 to current showing the increased amounts from local dollars. Officer Greene stated that mandates from the state become unfunded mandates to the local dollars at times. Officer Greene stated that the retirement match has increased 260% since 2006. Office Greene stated that in 2006 we matched 6.80% but are now matching 24.50% that must be taken from our allotment. Office Greene stated that health insurance continues to increase, and that cost has doubled, and they must provide insurance to all full-time employees. Officer Greene stated that he gave a very detailed reporting to the county commissioners, and they did increase their appropriation of which the school is very grateful. Officer Greene stated that the PRC19 Small School Supplemental Funding has not seen an increase since 2008 and it has gone down. Officer Greene stated that cost of living since 2008 has more than tripled so again, they must reach out for local funding. Officer Greene stated that in child nutrition the salaries were raised to \$13.00 per hour without funding to support those raises so this decreases their allotment as well. Dr. Knight stated that when we go into the red with child nutrition, we must get local funds and as the salary mandates continue the funding is not provided by the state or federal funding sources. Dr. Knight stated that during our pandemic our front-line workers were child nutrition workers and our custodians. Dr. Knight stated that Officer Greene does a terrific job with the budgeting but as a small school we face many challenges. Dr. Knight stated that the mandates for classroom reduction is very hard to accomplish in small schools because of the space needed and the teachers availability. Officer Greene stated that our Low Wealth Funding supports large counties and Graham County ends up with an appropriation of \$187,812.00 and over 70% of our county is federally and state owned. Officer Greene stated that the formula is not correct and should be reworked because we get penalized for being a small land mass county in low wealth funding. Dr. Knight stated that Tier 1 counties should have the largest appropriation regarding low wealth, but it is the other way around and the larger counties receive the most money due to their land mass. Director Garland stated that she has tried for years to figure out the low wealth funding system but there are pieces that she cannot see, and she cannot get the data, but we do need to bring this to light.
6. Senator Corbin thanked the school and the county and for their leadership staying in a communication with state leadership and is very impressed with the information presented in a professional manner and further stated that our biggest obstacle is Urban versus Rural. Senator Corbin stated that he and Representative Gillespie are up against this, but they have been successful, and they are addressing these gaps and will keep addressing them. Senator Corbin stated that they fought hard on the salaries increase and they are reoccurring and stated that they are aware that the formula is not advantageous for all the state. Senator Corbin stated that he did not realize the small school funding had decreased since 2008 but does know other counties that are smaller than Graham County who are dealing with the same issues. Senator

Corbin stated that he is also aware of the rule to have one teacher per (18) kindergarteners and this can be a challenge in our rural areas, and they will continue to fight for our smaller school systems.

7. Senator Corbin stated that they do know of the issues with abuse and neglect all over the state and it is contributed to the 888 days of shutdown during COVID, and they did put policies in place that will not allow a shutdown to happen again in this manner. Senator Corbin stated that the kids, the parents, the learning all struggled, and they are unsure if there will ever be a complete recovery. Dr. Knight thanked Senator Corbin for his work for our county.
8. Representative Gillespie stated that they appreciate real input that they can put together and take back to Raleigh with them. Representative Gillespie assured that they do not sit in Raleigh, but do fight for our counties, our cities, and our schools. Representative Gillespie stated that 50% of the State Budget is in education and they have been making some headway regarding the salaries. Representative Gillespie stated that when the county grows, the school grows, and he will continue to pursue money for expansion here in Graham County Schools and money for the cost of maintenance on those buildings. Representative Gillespie stated that the boards are welcome to call his office any time, they have an open dialogue and are glad to assist.
9. Dr. Knight stated that our county has come a long way, and it was an honor to sit with the county commissioners to bring our concerns to our state legislators and she thanked everyone. Chair Orr stated that this board is very excited that we work as a team for the people of our county. Chair Orr stated that the board was happy to have Dr. Knight here and looks forward to working together in the future.
10. Chair Orr thanked Senator Corbin and Representative Gillespie for their time in meeting with the board and for working across the isles in Raleigh for us. Chair Orr stated that we have an outstanding Finance Officer who was instrumental in the opioid settlement, commended Manager Marino for his work and stated that they have the best Clerk to the Board that holds us all together, so she feels that we have the best representation in the State and in the county. Chair Orr stated that we are all working for the same goals, and they consider Senator Corbin and Representative Gillespie as part of the team.
11. Senator Corbin stated that they were able to get the SCIF funding reallocated from renovation to renovation and new construction and was pleased to do so. Senator Corbin asks the plans for the current courthouse; will it be torn down? Chair Orr stated that we will retain the courthouse and we are currently looking into the possibility of building a new addition at the current location. Chair Orr stated that the board intends to hold public hearings prior to any formal decision being made. Senator Corbin stated that the funding is for a Justice Center and asks the approximate cost for the new facility. Manager Marino stated that pre-covid the estimate to renovate the courthouse was \$1million but now it would be much more. Manager Marino stated that the structure of the courthouse is very solid, but they will need upgrading in the wiring, the plumbing, the heating system, and they will address some asbestos removal. Representative Gillespie stated that they did not have access to a lot of funds until they go back to Raleigh, but they would look for other funding streams to assist in the renovation. Representative Gillespie asks the total cost for a new facility. Manager Marino stated that the cost pre-covid was \$20-24 million for new construction and \$1M for renovation of the existing courthouse. Senator Corbin stated that whatever the board decides to build the \$1M could be allocated from the SCIF Funding to renovate or be used for the new construction and we can apply for further funding every year. Manager Marino stated that they were looking at a 40-bed jail but with an uptick in arrests we are now are considering a 50-bed jail so the county will need help with the expense. Representative Gillespie stated that depending on what the board decides depends on what pots of money are available so there are several ways to obtain funding for these types of projects so they need clear direction, and they will go to work looking for sources. Chair Orr stated that they will be using the best path forward for our people.
12. Commissioner Wiggins stated that our Little Snowbird project needs additional grant money as well. Manager Marino stated that he has been trying to apply for further grant funding under the emergency watershed funding. Senator Corbin asks what happened in this area. Commissioner Eller stated that we had a microburst above snowbird creek causing bridges to be taken out by debris that washed down the creek. Commissioner Eller stated that the debris took out ten bridges before stopping and if that debris is not removed and another storm takes place then the bridges below will get taken out as well. Commissioner Nelms stated that the environmental regulations will not allow for equipment to be used to remove the debris, so the bid came in at a little under one million dollars. Representative Gillespie stated that this is one of the areas that the legislation is dealing with because most of the funding goes for flood mitigation to the costal areas. Senator Corbin stated that the same thing happened in Haywood County, and it looked as if an atomic bomb had gone off. Senator Corbin stated that microbursts are not common in the mountains, but they are seeing an uprise of them. Commissioner Nelms stated that we have existing homes that are affected but the land is all privately owned so

NCDOT is not involved in the clean-up. Manager Marino stated that we received a grant from the state for \$238,000.00 and the bid came in at \$997,000.00 so they are trying to work with the contractor and trying to seek additional funding sources. Manager Marino stated that he is aware that with State funds you must go through the bid process, and this can cause the scope of work to be reduced if the bids come back in higher than anticipated. Manager Marino stated that the board chose to go with phase 1 of the project so they are short \$494,000.00.

Commissioner Nelms asks if Senator Corbin could try and get a waiver to allow equipment to be used to remove the debris instead of hand removal. Senator Corbin stated that he would investigate this possibility. Manager Marino asks permission from the board to be the contact for this project with Senator Corbin and Representative Gillespie. Commissioner Nelms made the motion to give board authority to allow our representatives to report to Manager Marino regarding this contract. Commissioner Eller seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.

13. Manager Marino stated that the next item for discussion is the forest plan that was approved by the USFS without using any input from the county or any other entity. Commissioner Wiggins stated that we are 74% owned by the federal government and they continue to make wilderness areas bigger and bigger but have begun to use different titles such as wilderness study areas, NC Heritage areas, etc. Senator Corbin stated that he would be glad to get in touch with Senator Tillis and let him know of the board's concerns. The board thanked Senator Corbin. Chair Orr stated that we need help with our PILT monies because this needs to be increased due to the large percentage of nontaxable land that we have. Senator Corbin stated that he was very aware of the issues with PILT, and he will be glad to speak with Ted Budd on this as well. Chair Orr stated that this is a very serious issue for Graham County. Representative Gillespie asked that we pull together all the numbers concerning these issues and they will compile them and get them to the federal level and agrees that PILT is not enough to cover the tax revenue loss that Graham County has. Chair Orr stated that we have many acres that are underwater that does not get counted. Chair Orr stated that she appreciated Senator Corbin and Representative Gillespie's time and for listening to our concerns.
14. Senator Corbin and Representative Gillespie stated that they look forward to working with Graham County.
15. Chair Orr asks for a motion to adjourn. Commissioner Wiggins made the motion to adjourn. Commissioner Eller seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.

Connie Orr, Chair

Keith Eller, Vice-Chairman

Lynn Cody, Member

Jacob Nelms, Member

Dale Wiggins, Member

ATTEST

Kim Crisp, Clerk to the Board