

Special Meeting – May 20, 2022

The Graham County Board of Commissioners met Friday, May 20, 2022, at 9:00 a.m. for a Special ARPA/Budget Workshop Meeting in the Graham County Community building located at 196 Knight Street Robbinsville, NC. Board present Connie Orr, Keith Eller, Jacob Nelms and Lynn Cody. Board absent Dale Wiggins. Also, present Manager Jason Marino, Finance Director Becky Garland, and Clerk Kim Crisp.

1. Chair Orr called the meeting to order.
2. Chair Orr asks for a motion to approve the agenda. Commissioner Eller made the motion to approve. Commissioner Cody seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.
3. Chair Orr asks Manager Marino to begin with the discussions. Manager Marino stated that Director Garland wanted to discuss and work through the ARPA Funds spelling out what the priorities are for the money and discuss the upcoming budget.
4. Director Garland stated that we will be receiving around \$870,000.00 for our next allotment and we have \$82,000.00 remaining from the first allotments and she was not quite sure how the board wanted to obligate the funding. Director Garland stated that the board has until 2023 to fully obligate the funds and until 2026 to expend the funding. Director Garland stated that the Federal Government rules at first were much stricter that they are currently, but the board is required to stay within the broad categories that are set by the federal government. Director Garland stated that the categories are premium pay, broadband, infrastructure, public health, economic displacement, and housing. Commissioner Nelms asks in what ways can the money be used in context. Director Garland stated that the board could use the money as match money for a grant through Dogwood Trust; be used on our CDBG project to make up the shortfall due to price increases or used as match money through our Rural Development Projects.
5. Chair Orr stated that we needed to drill down and see which priorities have the best highest and best use and make a path forward. Chair Orr stated that we do not know how long the pricing for supplies will rise and this will be a challenge. Manager Marino stated that the pricing cannot be tracked but we would like to finish the CDBG program that the board agreed to do four years ago. Director Garland stated that we can leverage the opioid money for mental health and substance abuse and can be used toward programs that have already been established or fund non-profits that deal with mental health and substance abuse. Chair Orr stated that Celebrate Recovery and Celebrate Grace are two that she knows are here in this county. Director Garland stated that we need a step-down unit here in our county as well.
6. Director Garland stated that the money can be used for the cost of Eagle View – Pictometry because this will have a positive impact for our 911 service and public safety.
7. Commissioner Nelms stated the board can give some type of premium pay.
8. Director Garland stated that from her finance side she would like to see some support for our folks that needed the CDBG assistance, we need homes built in this county, our substance abuse issue is a great pandemic and then if funds remain the board can look to premium pay.
9. Commissioner Nelms stated that we were looking at one half million in projects on the CDBG four years ago and the costs will be much more today. The board discussed possible grant funding matches for the ARPA funding.
10. Commissioner Nelms stated that he would agree to \$15,000.00 match funds for the broadband for a total of no more than \$45,000.00.
11. Chair Orr stated that they needed to send a letter to NCDOT asking help on the Pate Cooper Road, all board agreed.
12. Director Garland stated that our paramedicine program has taken off and now there is discussion on incorporating this program with the Opioid Substance Abuse folk that need help on the recovery side. Director Garland stated that she will work closely with Director Beth Booth on this grant funding because our Recovery to Work and our Paramedicine Program are now models that other counties are following. Chair Orr stated that our Paramedic Program has a full slate with (37) patients and we would need to talk with EM Director Brian Stevens to see what this would look like.
13. Manager Marino stated that they needed to crunch some numbers and bring the tally back to the board on their priority areas and see what funds will be remaining.
14. Commissioner Nelms stated that we needed to use some of the funds for mental health with our school. Commissioner Cody stated that he wanted Manager Jason to get with the school on the mental health crisis and we need to pay attention to the drug abuse and look for all avenues for resources. Chair Orr stated that we have a lot of needs in our county.
15. Director Garland stated that we can apply for a PARTF grant for infrastructure of parks and facilities to improve our economic development, public health which helps children being outdoors. Manager Marino asks what percentage the PARTF match is. Director Garland stated that this is a 50/50 match.

16. 911 Director Misty Hembree stated that she had some updated information for the board on the PayScale for her department and stated that the information includes Jackson and Swain Counties PayScale study. Director Hembree asked if the board had settled on an ARPA policy. Chair Orr stated that the board is setting some priorities today for the money.
17. Director Garland stated that our budget is sitting at a \$2.6 million deficit and the State is continuing to push unfunded mandates down to the counties and the board needed to have further discussion on the pay plan in general.
18. Chair Orr stated that broadband is a priority for the funding as mentioned earlier and she felt that we needed to help with premium pay and asks that Director Garland run the numbers on three departments to see what this amount looks like. Commissioner Cody stated that he agrees with paying the premium pay to three departments because they did deserve some money but when the money runs out the taxes will go up and they need to understand if the board agrees to a certain amount over a period their salary will decrease to where it was at when the money runs out. Commissioner Cody stated that he understands some increases, but we needed to use this once in a lifetime money for other things that would benefit the county instead of just a few people and our elderly and low-income residents needed help with repairs to their homes that they cannot afford to pay. Commissioner Cody stated that our kids in school need counselors that they can go to at school and we need a program that focuses on addiction, and we need to see results instead of throwing money to something with no action. Commissioner Cody stated that some departments never change and sometimes it could be the leadership that needed to be retrained or schooled to understand how hard it is for Graham County to come up with the monies to use across the board and some departments do not think of the other departments in the whole county. Commissioner Cody stated that we needed to use this money wisely and invest in what we can for the betterment of the entire county.
19. Commissioner Nelms stated that his view of the consensus is:
  - a. \$125K to CDBG Home repairs
  - b. \$250K to PARTF for parks and recreation
  - c. \$45K for Broadband match
  - d. \$250K for mental health in our school and paramedicine program
  - e. \$300K for employment wage equity
20. Commissioner Cody stated that premium pay is not the answer and felt that this should be given over a period, but he does not agree to a lump sum of money. Commissioner Cody stated that the ARPA funds are not a magic bullet and the county needed to create an updated pay/wage plan.
21. Manager Marino stated that no decisions had to be final today and the board has stated their priorities with kids in parks which will improve the standard of living. Chair Orr stated that the impact and value and effect will be to represent everyone in this county, and we need to think long term for investment into not only our children but for all our people.
22. Commissioner Cody stated that the larger counties received a lot more ARPA monies than our county did, and we must be prudent on getting public input, ask them how they feel and make good investments for our county. Commissioner Cody stated that our county has a low tax base, and we cannot compete with the larger counties like Buncombe County who can pay the higher wages, but we cannot. Chair Orr stated that we have a general idea of the needs for the money, and she appreciated the boards thoughtfulness and depth of concern because this board does not take this lightly. Director Garland stated that we have wonderful employees, but we need to do the greatest good for the people with this opportunity. Director Garland stated that a park will last many years where premium pay will not last.
23. Manager Marino stated that our health insurance has increased to 38% but after working with a new firm we hope to see a final coming in around 15-16%.
24. Director Garland stated she provided highlights of inequities which include public safety wage plan increases, health insurance, retirement, DSS wage increase requests, other department wage requests, additional legal fees, school request increase, school capital outlay, library request increase and inflationary impacts such as fuel, etc. Director Garland stated that the board needed to look at the wages because the increases are affecting employees overall.
25. Director Garland stated that in public safety the board allowed for the EMS shift change which was a very good move and according to our EM Director it has lifted morale and things are working smoother than estimated. Director Stevens has shown good understanding for the budget, and we will reap the benefits as he progresses in his duties.
26. Director Garland stated that we needed to have conversation on public safety Sheriff, Jail and 911 because those increases come out around \$380,000.00; our health insurance \$487,365.00; retirement \$50,130.00; fuel and supplies \$210,000.00 and our close out for the inmate cost was \$165,000.00 more than was budgeted last year. Director Garland stated that these are a percentage of the increases that the board is looking at for the upcoming fiscal year over and above regular funding.

27. Director Garland stated that the board has discussed a public safety fee to cover some of the costs of the increases and the fee could be set to cover the proposed public safety wage plan increase. Commissioner Cody stated that this affects those who have limited money or are on a fixed income. Commissioner Cody stated that we needed to consider longevity in discussing rates of pay because we will have some inequities once the minimum rate is raised.
28. Director Garland stated that she had spoken with Lester Greene, Finance Officer at the School on their capital outlay and requested and he, Superintendent Dr. Angela Knight would like to come and speak with the board next Friday. Director Garland stated that the State has mandated that all employees be paid no less than \$14.00 per hour and of course these mandates are unfunded. Director Garland stated that these unfunded mandates have put a lot of pressure on the budget. Director Garland stated that the school did as request and used their fund balance and now they need more funding. Director Garland stated that we did get full low wealth this year and this was in credit to the board of commissioners keeping the milrate at the state median rate.
29. Sheriff Jerry Crisp was present and asked the board if there were any questions for him concerning the PayScale and budget request for the sheriff department and/or jail. Chair Orr stated that they did not have any questions at this time. Sheriff Crisp stated that he was implementing a policy to eliminate overtime for some folks and the ones that would accrue would be for sergeants and below. Sheriff Crisp stated that they had another jail inspection and will be forced to reduce the number of inmates that are being housed at the jail and will not be allowed to keep any females. Sheriff Crisp stated that they are always averaging 13 to 23 inmates and if they do not comply then Raleigh will be shutting the jail down and we will have to pay for all inmates out of county. Sheriff Crisp stated that the State requires detention officers to take a six-week training and we were having a hard time finding help prior to the new mandates. Chair Orr stated that this has been a decades long problem and they do understand that Sheriff Crisp is looking for solutions.
30. Director Garland stated that the NC Forest Service had requested a 25% increase in their budget request and the library requested a \$35,000.00 increase.
31. Director Garland stated that she has been listening to our volunteer fire and rescue departments need for capital outlay and would like to begin adding \$10,000.00 and set aside for capital outlay.
32. Director Garland stated that most of the requests for special appropriations came in the same as last year and she did add \$5,000.00 for the Cancer Support Group in the county.
33. Manager Marino stated that our courthouse is looking at major repairs and asks the board's permission to put out RFQ's for the design of the new Justice/Jail facility. Commissioner Nelms made the motion to move forward. Commissioner Eller seconded this motion. Vote unanimous. Manager Marino stated that Representatives Karl Gillespie and Kevin Corbin are asking for more money for our Justice/Jail facility. Manager Marino stated that Hickory had just received \$10,000,000.00 to go toward their new courthouse. Manager Marino stated that the board would need to have a selection committee once the new facility gets going, have a starting place and move forward.
34. Chair Orr asks for a motion to continue this meeting to Friday, May 27, 2022. Commissioner Nelms made the motion to continue as stated. Commissioner Eller seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.

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Connie Orr, Chair

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Keith Eller, Vice-Chairman

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Lynn Cody, Member

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Jacob Nelms, Member

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Dale Wiggins, Member

ATTEST: \_\_\_\_\_  
Kim Crisp, Clerk to the Board