

Continued Meeting – February 19, 2020

The Graham County Board of Commissioners met Wednesday, February 19, 2020 at 10:00 a.m. in the Graham County Community Building located at 196 Knight Street Robbinsville, NC for a continued meeting from the Regular Meeting held on February 18, 2020. All board was present.

1. Chairman Wiggins called the meeting to order.
2. Chairman Wiggins asks the representatives from the USFS to speak. Allen Nicholas, Forest Supervisor stated that he was here to take questions from the Commission Board on the new Forest Plan and to give people the places to go to get information or to ask questions. Mr. Nicholas thanked the board for their time and for the relationship that they are having with District Ranger Andy Gaston. Mr. Nicholas asks that Alice Cohen, Collaboration Specialist speak to the board concerning the public comment period.
3. Ms. Cohen stated that she was here to orient the board to what is being presented in the packets for the boards review. Ms. Cohen stated that the Forest Management Plan is 1000 pages. Ms. Cohen stated that this plan has an environmental analysis of four approaches or alternatives to implement the forest plan and has a Reader's Guide on an overview of the forest plan with reference to the alternatives. Ms. Cohen stated that the guide will show future projects along with a press release and myth busters to offer answers to questions that are routinely asked.
4. Mr. Nicholas stated that they went to areas and talked about the activities and what was special to those people of these areas; what can or cannot be done in the forest plan, etc. Mr. Nicholas stated that Andy Gaston has to be coordinated with the plan to move forward. Mr. Nicholas stated that the plan would guide them on achieving strategic goals and guide timber sales.
5. Mr. Nicholas stated that the one asset for the county was Sophia Paulos, EDC Director and her involvement in the process and she can assist in finding the topics that the board wants to spot light. Ms. Paulos stated that this information was gathered during the countywide meeting where Graham County Citizens came and completed forms on what they wanted to see in the forest plan. Ms. Paulos stated that the objective was to develop a plan to carry out the objectives that the people wished to see.
6. Mr. Nicholas stated that they did not have the agency capacity to do all the stuff that the partnership, the public, and a variety of other groups wanted to see. Mr. Nicholas stated that they have Tier 1 and Tier 2 objectives.
7. Mr. Nicholas stated that this plan is allowing a 90-day public review and comment period.
8. Ms. Cohen stated that on page 17 of the guide it discusses the Tier 1 and Tier 2 objectives for timber harvest. Commissioner Nelms asks if the staff only has the capacity to allow for 800 acres of timber activity in a forest just over one million acres. Mr. Allen Gaston stated that over the last several years we have had activity on 800 acres. Commissioner Nelms stated that the timber activity is based solely on capacity and not what is best overall for the forest. Ms. Paulos stated that Tier 2 allows for more work. The information on page 17 of the Readers Guide stated that the majority of timber activity will occur in the Matrix management areas where there is the most flexibility to design timber treatments. Timber activity will still occur with lesser frequency and with a focus on restoration in other management areas, including but not limited to Backcountry, Interface and Ecological Interest Areas. In each of these management areas, there are restrictions on the tools or purposes for which timber activity can be used. The placement of management areas varies among alternatives, thus the footprint of potential timber harvest activity varies among alternatives as well. Ms. Paulos stated that part of the capacity includes the overall budget and their budget has been cut year after year but Tier 2 does allow for budget increasing planning in looking forward to five years from now. Ms. Paulos stated that for Graham County you need to plan for increased capacity in recreation and recreation access and allow for five to ten years from now on any increased capacity to acres. Ms. Cohen stated that they took the acres that are operable and not what is available for logging. Ms. Cohen stated that the potential commercial operations over multiple generations varies between 265,000 and 235,000 acres. Commissioner Nelms stated that ¼ of million acres is all that is available for whatever type of activity. Mr. Allen stated that parts of the forest is off limits such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, creeks are off limits to logging and this has to be excluded from harvest. Chairman Wiggins stated that the plan reads one place that there are suitable timber activity and the next part says not suitable for timber harvest so which is it. Chairman

Wiggins stated that the guide stated 430,000 to 560,000 acres of forest in old growth conditions across the Eco zones and elevations and currently the forest has an estimated 95,700 acres that meet the minimum Eco zone age for acquiring old growth characteristics however, these sites may not be classified as old growth on the ground. Chairman Wiggins stated that this is a smoke screen to allow one million acres of forest to have 800 acres for timber activity. Chairman Wiggins further stated that the plan says operability is higher at one quarter of a million so which is it. Chairman Wiggins stated that the charts are very confusing and why section so many acres as not suitable when other activities could be done other than timber harvest. Mr. Nicholas stated that the plan was not perfect, he would look into these concerns, and they have a 90-day comment period to say what is wrong with the plan and what is right with the plan. Ms. Cohen stated that the plan addresses the old forest and the young forest, the wilderness areas and asks that the county does not talk economics because very seldom does this meet the expectations of the county. Chairman Wiggins stated that the board would get a consensus on the plan and get back to them but he stated that the plan has too much backcountry and he understands the staff cuts from Congress but this plan will affect our locals and small communities. Mr. Allen stated that in 36 years, they are down 40% of their staff from where they were and this causes many constraints. Ms. Cohen stated that 100 acres of new roads is proposed in the plan. Ms. Paulos stated that new roads would help the timber people. Mr. Allen stated that part of the conflict is the lack of disturbance that people want to see, they want the forest kept clean, and logging is not light on the land business. Mr. Allen stated that this plan would be hamstrung if he goes back to DC with agreeing to what is viable to counties and striving to produce more timber sales. Mr. Allen stated that we have to know where we are going and what we need to do to work with other federal agencies. Mr. Allen stated that grant opportunities could facilitate funds that they need.

9. Commissioner Orr stated that we needed to strongly think about what is best for Graham County in the long term. Ms. Paulos stated that T&T had been doing a lot of work on the recreation piece. Commissioner Orr stated that they needed to consider our sustainability and find ways to push jobs. Ms. Paulos stated that she is working with the Growing Outdoors Board and trying to find ways that are feasible because the sustainability is in recreation. Ms. Paulos stated that examples are permitting for cabins around the lake, mountain bike trails and other recreation areas. Ms. Paulos stated that there are three million dollars in funds waiting for people to apply and we need to support tourism. Ms. Paulos stated that it is very apparent of the differences in recreation between the Nantahala and Pisgah Forests. Ms. Paulos stated that Buncombe County uses their forests for their recreation but people are wearing those places out and we need to move the focus to other areas of the forest. The board learned that Allen Nicholas is the one that can approve trails in our forests, and the only one.
10. The board discussed areas of the plan and would like to culture historical traditions such as bear hunting. The board discussed Wilderness and stated that it will always be treated as Wilderness because it is a Wilderness Study Area and being treated as such.
11. Mr. Nicholas needs to know the board's concerns, what effects will this plan bring and suggestions for alternatives. Mr. Nicholas stated that economic zones drive the forest service lands and it is their responsibility to provide support but the final decision will lie in the forest plan. Mr. Nicholas stated that after the board submits questions and concerns he would go to his boss to define why this is important and how it is to be fixed.
12. Ms. Paulos stated that she would hopefully be involved.
13. Ms. Cohen stated that the timeline is (90) days with the deadline being May 14th to supply the comments, questions and concerns. Ms. Cohen stated that thousands of comments are expected and after these are all reviewed then the draft will become final. Ms. Cohen stated that the USFS would continue to work under our current plan until September 2021.
14. Ms. Cohen stated that the board could take their concerns to Andy Gaston. Ms. Cohen gave the board copies of the maps for the board to review and a digital copy of the forest plan. Ms. Cohen stated that this plan is required to support our OPT-In Southwestern Community Strategic Plan, Our Gateway to Tomorrow Plan, the Graham County Travel and Tourism Plan and the 2017 Citizen Report.
15. Mr. Nicholas, Mr. Gaston and Ms. Cohen thanked the board for their time and encouraged them to call with any questions. Ms. Cohen asks if they could use the community room on March 31 for a public meeting to allow citizens to come and look at the plan, the maps, etc.
16. The board reviewed the options in the plan. Ms. Paulos asks that a copy of the plan be given to the library so more citizens could review the plan. The board was fine with this request.

17. Commissioner Orr made the motion to adjourn. Commissioner Eller seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.

Dale Wiggins, Chairman, Graham County Board of Commissioners

Lynn Cody, Vice-Chairman, Graham County Board of Commissioners

Keith Eller, Member, Graham County Board of Commissioners

Jacob Nelms, Member, Graham County Board of Commissioners

Connie Orr, Member, Graham County Board of Commissioners

ATTEST:

Kim Crisp, Clerk to the Board