

Cherokee County Board of Commissioners
Meeting Minutes
February 15, 2021
6:30 p.m.
Penland Senior Center

Members present: Dr. Dan Eichenbaum, Chairman; Jan Griggs, Vice-Chairman; Cal Stiles, member; Randy Phillips, member; and Gary Westmoreland, member.

Staff present: Randy Wiggins, County Manager; Maria Hass, Assistant County Manager/Clerk to the Board; Candy Anderson, Finance Director; and, Darryl Brown, County Attorney.

Also present: WKRC Radio, Local TV4 and Cherokee Scout.

Call to order and ethics statement by Chairman.

Invocation and Pledge

Modification of Agenda

- Motion made by Commissioner Phillips to add a budget revision to the agenda for Cherokee County Schools (CCS) request for use of sales tax for various school projects. Motion seconded by Commissioner Stiles. Motion passed unanimously.
- Motion made by Commissioner Westmoreland to remove the Social Worker III position from item "b" under Budget and Finance. Motion seconded by Commissioner Phillips. Motion passed unanimously.
- Motion made by Commissioner Stiles to remove item "XVI. Armory Worksession" from the agenda, and to schedule a special worksession for February 22nd at 6:30 p.m. at the Penland Senior Center. Motion seconded by Commissioner Griggs. Motion passed unanimously.

Agenda Adoption

Motion made by Commissioner Stiles to adopt the agenda, as modified. Motion seconded by Commissioner Phillips. Motion passed unanimously.

Public Hearing for the following proposed road names: Lanes Way; Summersville Road; and Whispering Trails Lane.

Motion made by Commissioner Phillips to open the floor for public comments. Motion seconded by Commissioner Griggs. Motion passed unanimously.

Mark Kephart commented that the new roads do not show up on GPS right away and this creates issues for contractors. Sam Davis, 911 Addressing Coordinator, told Mr. Kephart that the county has no control over GPS updates.

There were no other comments.

Motion made by Commissioner Stiles to close the public hearing. Motion seconded by Commissioner Griggs. Motion passed unanimously.

Motion made by Commissioner Westmoreland to adopt the road names, as presented. Motion seconded by Commissioner Phillips. Motion passed unanimously.

Public Forum

Several residents spoke out against Cherokee County Schools (CCS) plan for a one consolidated high school, and to ask the Board of County Commissioners to vote no to funding the one high school consolidation project.

Concerns expressed were:

- Location of new high school is not centrally located—Peachtree (Cherokee/Clay County line) is not the center of Cherokee County
- Increased time that students will be on buses each day
- Location presents unsafe driving distance for inexperienced teen drivers
- One high school model is not best option for students, due to the county's large geographic area
- The most vulnerable and academically challenged students will fall through the cracks or get left behind, due to increased class sizes
- Lack of public input, before making decision--residents deserve to be heard
- Lack of transparency by CCS and delayed meeting minutes
- Loss of community schools will result in reduced property values and an increase in crime
- Closing community schools will negatively impact the economy
- Lack of due diligence by CCS to explore and consider all options for addressing facility needs
- CCS should have a cost and feasibility study done, before any decision is made to close schools and build a new consolidated high school
- The one high school plan is being forced on parents, students and taxpayers
- Missing CCS study from the early 2000's showing that a two high school model is a better option--Where is the plan and why is no one considering it?
- Build two schools that are in locations more central to where the students live
- If the current project plan is approved, many parents will opt for virtual learning platforms and homeschooling, or parents on the west-end of the county will send their children to Copper Basin and parents on students on the east-end will go to Robbinsville or Nantahala--ADM will continue to decline
- CCS and Commissioners approving a plan without knowing the true project cost is irresponsible
- Commissioners raising property taxes to fund the project--placing more tax burden on the backs of property owners who do not support the plan
- Proposed tax increase for the project should be placed on a ballot for voters to support or oppose

- Athletic teams will have to travel longer distances to compete, due to becoming a 2A high school
- There will be children who want to play sports, but get left out, due to limited number of team members allowed—not all children will have an opportunity to participate
- Current acreage for new school is not sufficient--plan does not include cost and location of new sports facilities that will be necessary to support athletic programs
- Threat of losing grant money is not a valid argument for the decision, and grants are not free money
- Renovate current schools
- Students need vocational opportunities—skilled workers are aging out-who will replace them?
- If taxes continue to increase, families that have been here for generations will not be able to retain their property or pass it on to their children and grandchildren
- Step back and look at all options and do it right the first time, even if it costs more money, and fund it with increased sales tax, not property tax
- Closing Andrews High School will have a negative economic impact on the communities and the town

List of persons speaking against the CCS one high school consolidation plan.

- Chuck Hoesch
- Elliott Southard
- Shannon Raper
- Sarah Burrell
- Mike Stiles
- Jack Simons
- Michael Starks
- Chad McNabb
- Ray Cook
- Mark Kephart
- Donald Saxton
- Michael Stiles
- James Ellis
- Chery Milligan
- James Reid
- Brittney Stiles
- Taxpayer (name unknown)

Chairman Eichenbaum asked CCS Superintendent, Jeana Conley to speak. Dr. Conley said she had the opportunity to hear from many of those in attendance, either on the phone or in her office, and said appreciated that. She said the Board of Education, nor the Board of Commissioners, has an agenda to do anything that would hurt students. She said that what they are seeing in the county, besides buildings that are in decline, is a decline in population. She discussed declining enrollment and loss of funding for teachers. She said the county is currently funding a million dollars for local teacher positions. She said the State of North Carolina no

longer supports a funding model where they fund by school, it is all about numbers. She said a couple of schools are slated to drop below 100 students in the next couple of years, unless the population increases. She went on to say that she understands the need for vocational classes, and that they are very expensive. She said that the State of North Carolina with the Career and College Promise allows all juniors and seniors to take classes for college credit at no charge, and that program has recently been extended on down to 9th graders. She said in the 90's students could get on a bus and come to Murphy to take vocational classes, but that isn't possible now, because taking those classes in the middle of the day interferes with class credits. She said there is a serious equity issue in Cherokee County and that not every kid has the same opportunity. She went on to say that she has met with realtors and industries and that people are not moving here to take their kids to the schools that we have, but hopes the School of Innovation will change that. She said that she has teachers that take their children to school in Union County, Georgia. In regards to the location of the one high school, she said they have reviewed bus routes. She said she knows that Peachtree is not the center of the county, but that early college students from every point in the county get on a bus at their home school and travel to the early college in Peachtree every day. She also discussed the lack of coaches for the current schools. She said the school board has looked at a lot of different proposals, and that closing the feeder schools is an option that has been looked at. She said feeder schools are where the small classes are, and that those are the schools that are bleeding CCS financially. She said a school last year had a classroom of six students and the school did not show growth. She said "it wasn't because the students didn't have potential; it's about teacher quality, not about classroom size". She disagreed that classroom size impacts student ability, saying it's all about teacher quality. She shared personal experiences about keeping her own children at Andrews High School, when there were more opportunities at Murphy High School. She said everything is driven by numbers. She said CCS has been talking about this for seven years and questioned when diligence is over.

Tim Radford of WKRC talked about the shrinking student population and how the pandemic has impacted the way students learn. He asked Dr. Conley, now that the county is getting broadband grants to build out broadband infrastructure across the county, what kind of competition she is seeing with students choosing virtual learning over classroom learning. Dr. Conley said that it's a buyers' market for education. She said it has been a buyer's market for some time. She said students have several different choices for learning. She mentioned the charter school, homeschools, and free online schools. Mr. Radford asked her if online learning has taken large numbers away from the local public schools. She did not have numbers for the local impact from students choosing alternate learning options, but believes that more families, because of virtual learning during the pandemic, may choose virtual learning over the public school.

After all public comments were heard, Chairman Eichenbaum said he wanted to correct two misconceptions. He said the U.S. is not a democracy, and that "We the People" do not get to vote on every single issue. He said it would paralyze the government if it worked that way. He said, "You elect people to represent you". He went on to explain a millage rate increase and the actual dollar impact to property owners.

Public forum concluded at 8:30 p.m.

A Motion was made by Commissioner Stiles to take a short recess. Motion seconded by Commissioner Westmoreland. Motion passed unanimously.

Meeting reconvened at 8:41 p.m.

Minutes

Motion made by Commissioner Stiles to approve the meeting minutes of 9/15/20, 10/19/20, 11/23/20, 12/7/20 (organizational meeting), and 1/4/21. Motion seconded by Commissioner Westmoreland. Motion passed unanimously.

Finance and Budget

- Motion made by Commissioner Stiles to approve the following health department fees: OOO11A-Admin First Vaccine \$16.94 and OOO12A-Admin Second Vaccine \$28.39. Motion seconded by Commissioner Westmoreland. Motion passed unanimously.
- Motion made by Commissioner Griggs to approve a budget revision for the DSS One Home program. Motion seconded by Commissioner Phillips. Motion passed unanimously.
- Motion made by Commissioner Phillips to approve two budget revisions for use of sales tax for various school projects. Motion seconded by Commissioner Eichenbaum. Motion passed unanimously.
- Motion made by Commissioner Westmoreland to approve a budget revision for carry-forward of FY19 economic development funds. Motion seconded by Commissioner Stiles. Motion passed unanimously.
- Motion made by Commissioner Griggs to approve a budget revision for receipt of grant funds to purchase a van for the senior center. Motion seconded by Commissioner Phillips. Motion passed unanimously.
- Motion made by Commissioner Phillips to approve a budget revision for cleaning and sealing the courthouse coping caps by Cox & Son Roofing. Motion seconded by Commissioner Westmoreland. Motion passed unanimously.
- Motion made by Commissioner Stiles to approve N.C. Community Foundation's distribution and closing of the JCPC Youth Endowment Fund. Motion seconded by Commissioner Phillips. Motion passed unanimously.
- Motion made by Commissioner Stiles to approve two budget revisions for completing building renovations and furnishing the 911 Backup Center. Motion seconded by Commissioner Griggs. Motion passed unanimously.
- Motion made by Commissioner Phillips to approve a budget revision to replace the interrogation/interview system at the sheriff's office. Motion seconded by Commissioner Griggs. Motion passed unanimously.
- Motion made by Commissioner Stiles to approve additional contract lab costs related to COVID-19 testing. Motion seconded by Commissioner Phillips. Motion passed unanimously.

New Business

- Gary Kilpatrick, Board of Elections Chairman and Leighsa Jones, Election Director, came before the Board to request a permanent part-time position. The plan would be to hire poll worker, Jennifer O'Dell, who has been working in the department, post-election. Mrs. Jones said she needs a permanent part-time employee, due to the increase in election

responsibilities, and as a backup in the event that one of the two current employees had to be out of the office for any extended period of time. After discussion, a Motion was made by Commissioner Westmoreland to approve a permanent part-time position for the elections office. Motion seconded by Commissioner Stiles. Motion passed unanimously.

- Motion made by Commissioner Stiles to approve tax releases and refunds and the NCVTS report. Motion seconded by Commissioner Phillips. Motion passed unanimously.
- Motion made by Commissioner Phillips to appoint Dave West, Clay County resident, to Tri-County Community College Board of Trustees. Motion seconded by Commissioner Westmoreland. Motion passed unanimously.
- Gail Stansell came before the Board for an introduction and to express her interest in serving on the Cherokee County Board of Health.
- Dr. Lynn Taylor came before the Board for an introduction and to express her interest in serving on the Cherokee County Board of Health.
- Motion was made by Commissioner Phillips to approve a resolution authorizing conveyance of real property to Unaka Volunteer Fire Department. Motion seconded by Commissioner Griggs. Motion passed unanimously.
- John Glenn submitted an update to the Board concerning the Peachtree Manor Assisted Living project, reporting the project is in the underwriting process.
- Motion made by Commissioner Eichenbaum to approve a budget revision for ballfield renovations and to assist Dizzy Dean with the purchase of PPE and uniforms. Motion seconded by Commissioner Phillips. Motion passed unanimously.

County Manager Items-None

Commissioner Items

- A Motion was made by Commissioner Eichenbaum to table the consolidated high school decision until the March 15th meeting. Motion seconded by Commissioner Stiles. Motion passed unanimously.
- Commissioner Griggs said she would like the Board to create an "Anti-Litter in Action Coalition" in honor and memory of Gary Chamberlain. She would like to have each commissioner recruit two volunteers from their respective district to make up the initial Coalition membership. She said the purpose of the Coalition would be to carry forward Gary's vision of a litter-free county. She said once the Coalition was established, the members could add members and become self-perpetuating. Commissioner Stiles said he would like to advertise for coalition members. Penny Ray of the Cherokee Scout was in attendance and agreed to make the announcement in the newspaper.

Closed Session

Motion made by Commissioner Stiles to go into closed session, pursuant to §143-318.11 (a) (4) to discuss economic development incentives; (a) (5) to discuss terms of a proposed contract for the acquisition of property; and (a) (6) to receive information from county attorney, regarding a personnel issue. Motion seconded by Commissioner Phillips. Motion passed unanimously.

While in closed session, the following matters were discussed:

- 1) Economic Development Director, Paul Worley, discussed economic development incentive offerings for recruiting and retaining industries.
- 2) The County Manager updated the Board on the following: a) status of negotiations for acquisition of property for future relocation of the Texana convenience site; b) an offer he received from a business interested in purchasing the armory; and c) to receive instruction from the Board on the position to be taken, concerning the terms of listing the Wilderness Lake Estates property.
- 3) The county attorney updated the Board on the Hogan vs. Cherokee County case.

After returning to open session, a Motion was made by Commissioner Phillips to approve a resolution authorizing electronic auction for the Wilderness Lake Estates property on GovDeals, with a minimum starting bid of \$50,000 and subsequent bids to be bid in \$500 increments. Motion seconded by Commissioner Westmoreland. Motion passed unanimously.

Adjournment

There being no further business, a Motion was made by Commissioner Stiles to adjourn. Motion seconded by Commissioner Griggs. Motion passed unanimously.

THESE MINUTES WERE APPROVED AT A REGULAR MEETING OF THE CHEROKEE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS ON MARCH 15, 2021.