



Chatham County, NC

Meeting Minutes

Board of Commissioners

Thursday, May 20, 2021

9:00 AM

Agriculture and Conference Center

CALL TO ORDER

Chair Dasher called the meeting to order at 9:01 AM.

Present: 4 - Commissioner Mike Dasher, Commissioner Diana Hales, Commissioner Jim Crawford and Chair Karen Howard

BOARD PRIORITIES

Chair Dasher added a resolution electing directors and officers of the Chatham County Public Facilities Corporation to the agenda.

Vice Chair Hales asked why the Board of Commissioners needed to vote on this resolution. Finance Director Holly Tally explained that the corporation is administered by the Board of Commissioners.

A motion was made by Commissioner Howard, seconded by Commissioner Gomez Flores, that this Resolution electing directors and officers of the Chatham County Public Facilities Corporation, attached hereto and by reference made a part hereof, be adopted. The motion carried by the following vote:

Aye: 4 - Commissioner Dasher, Commissioner Hales, Gomez Flores, and Chair Howard

Absent: 1 - Commissioner Crawford

[21-3881](#)

Introduction

County Manager Dan LaMontagne stated there were no surprises in the budget after the two one-on-one meetings with the commissioners. There was not much public input. Most public input was about the trail coordinator position, but some input was about expanding land conservation along the Haw River.

Chair Dasher asked if governments were set up to be a conservancy for people to donate land. LaMontagne stated people can deed land to the County, but a lot of people put it into conservation. Assistant County Manager Bryan Thompson stated the Triangle Land Conservancy was a partner with the trails project.

Vice Chair Hales asked if there would be a consultant to put together the Farm Preservation Plan. Budget Director Darrell Butts stated that, yes, Professor Maddox would handle the Farm Preservation Plan. LaMontagne said Chuck Flink, who was renowned in parks, had also offered to help. He stated the trail coordinator position was in the future, just not right now. Thompson stated that work this coming year may compel this issue.

LaMontagne stated there was also public input about why a public information officer was hired in the Health Department. It had been a position since 2016, and Mike Zelek filled part of that role until he became health director for the Public Health Department. Another person was needed after Zelek was promoted.

Vice Chair Hales asked if anyone was at the Siler City library for the public hearing. Clerk Lindsay Ray said no one showed up.

Chair Dasher asked if everyone had received emails from Habitat for Humanity. LaMontagne stated that he had responded. He said it was unclear how federal opportunities for affordable housing would shake out for Habitat. Vice Chair Hales thought Habitat wanted infrastructure funds for Robert Run. Staff had not received that request, just a general funding request from the County.

Chair Dasher asked if the Habitat project had scoring issues. Thompson stated there were timing issues with the Housing Trust Fund, so they were low on scoring. Vice Chair Hales asked if Siler City utilities would count. LaMontagne stated any utilities qualified under the Department of Social Services program. The American Rescue Plan would allow the County to help with these requests over three years.

Chair Dasher asked phone, and broadband services would be considered as a utility. LaMontagne stated that right now it was unclear. It looked like there was going to be some federal funding for those services. The County was working with Chatham County Schools to provide broadband to over three hundred homes in the Siler City area.

Vice Chair Hales asked if construction on the final cell blocks in the Detention Center would halt for seven years. Thompson replied that was correct, but it could move up if necessary.

Commissioner Howard asked if the Maintenance and Replacement Plan was new fund. Thompson stated it was a new category, and the County was implementing that fund. The budget team consolidated different areas into one category. That offered more flexibility.

Chair Dasher stated he would like to look at the debt modeling. Dasher said there were significant potential needs down the road. Dasher asked what it would look like if an additional half cent was added now. Finance Director Hope Tally stated staff would modify the debt model once this was approved and once the borrowing this summer took place. Chair Dasher would like to see it before the budget was approved. He thought a penny contribution could help much more. Tally stated that sales tax revenue had allowed the County to pull from the debt reserve less over the last couple of years.

Commissioner Gomez Flores asked if the County had looked into hiring a person to identify how to diversify revenue and assets like the land behind the hospital. LaMontagne stated the best option for that land was to build shell buildings. It had been marketed but there had not been much interest. Commissioner Gomez Flores asked about partnerships with landowners. He did not think residents agreed with a high dependency on residential property tax. LaMontagne stated non-residential property tax was what really helped.

Commissioner Howard stated Chatham County may always be a bedroom community. Residential developers see Chatham as an opportunity much sooner than a commercial developer. The County may always be heavily residential. Part of the

board's focus was how to reduce residential developers and increase the amount of industry and commercial tax base. Thompson stated the County tried to leverage County land holdings for the public good, whether affordable housing or economic development. LaMontagne said that any foreclosed land went to Habitat for Humanity for first right of refusal. Commissioner Howard stated there was the thought about having in-house economic development instead of contracting out with the Economic Development Corporation. The Economic Development Corporation had better flexibility than the County would have as a local government.

This Agenda Item was received and filed.

21-3882

General Fund Revenue

Budget Director Darrell Butts reviewed the General Fund Revenue.

Commissioner Jim Crawford joined the meeting at 10:00 AM.

Chair Dasher asked about the Department of Building Inspections. LaMontagne stated the department was transitioning from City View to Open Gov software. The department was still recovering from the cyber incident while also switching to a new system. Open Gov was much more user friendly and familiar to a lot of the County's builders.

Vice Chair Hales asked if the two new inspector positions were both starting on July 1st. Butts replied that one position was beginning on July 1st and one on January 1st because it made more sense to train one inspector at a time and then the hiring process could stop for the second position if the need was not there. Thompson stated that the front-end of the permitting process was improving. Butts said the Watershed department was struggling to keep up with re-inspections. LaMontagne stated that maintaining trained inspectors had been difficult. There was a lot of competition to hire new inspectors.

Vice Chair Hales asked if bacteriological sampling was for new wells. Butts said bacteriological sampling was when the County had to send water through new pipes and test for bacteria. The cost of materials to do the testing was the reason for the increase in fees. Anytime a water main breaks, the County had to test for bacteria.

Commissioner Howard asked what fire flow testing meant. LaMontagne said the County had to test flow on fire hydrants to make sure there was adequate volume to put out fires in neighborhoods.

Vice Chair Hales asked if the County collected charging station revenue. Butts stated that a vendor collected the revenue and remitted it to the County. This was for public charging stations, not County stations.

Chair Dasher asked if the Mosaic Hotel was supposed to come online this year. Commissioner Crawford stated his understanding was it would not be online until 2023.

Butts stated that erosion control fees were the hardest to assess because it depended entirely on when the project ended. If a big project did not hit one year you could see a forty-seven percent decrease that year. It was not a stable revenue source.

Commissioner Howard asked why there was a decrease in impact fees but increase in construction. Butts stated that it was because sales tax revenue had been more than anticipated.

Vice Chair Hales asked if utilities included phone services. Tax Administrator Jenny Williams replied that services included phone, gas, electric, and railroad.

Commissioner Gomez Flores asked if real property included new construction. Williams stated that how the property existed on January 1st was how it was valued. If the construction was thirty-five percent complete, that was how tax evaluated it. Williams stated that one thousand six hundred and forty-two appeals were received for revaluations. Twenty eight would be heard by the Board of Equalization and Review in June. One hundred and seventeen had been closed. They were waiting to hear back from four hundred and thirty-two. Seventy-seven more appeals would later be heard by the Board of Equalization and Review. Six hundred and eighty-two were still being reviewed.

Vice Chair Hales asked if most of the appeals that were closed were also negotiated. Williams stated that most were negotiated. Some people even appeal because they feel their value was too low.

Chair Dasher asked if fees included staff time, transportation, etc. LaMontagne stated that it varied. The County tried to look at the average time spent.

This Agenda Item was received and filed.

21-3883

General Fund Expense

Budget Analyst Lisa West continued the presentation by reviewing the General Fund Expense.

Chair Dasher asked if Geographic Information Systems was a state requirement and why it was free. Vice Chair Hales stated it helped generate revenue through land records and taxation. Chair Dasher asked if counties were allowed to charge for more detailed layers. LaMontagne stated a lot of the use was by staff, so it was hard to charge for layers that are also needed by staff. Vice Chair Hales stated it was against state law to charge. West replied that it was an investment.

Chair Dasher asked if commissioners were included in the pay study. Human Resources Director Carolyn Miller stated they were not. They would really only look at commissioner pay at the Board's request. The Board requested staff evaluate commissioner pay compared to surrounding jurisdictions. LaMontagne stated that he will call the commissioners with the results.

Commissioner Howard asked if the Register of Deeds previously redacted personal information. West stated the Register of Deeds used to manually redact but now the software would do it and it would be more secure.

Vice Chair Hales asked if every employee for revaluation was part of the contracted service. LaMontagne stated revaluation was self-contained under a contractor. Chatham Staff were part of ongoing evaluations of property.

Vice Chair Hales asked if the County provided the salary for the director of Chatham Trades. Ms. West stated the County did not. The County gave Chatham Trades an allocation and the director's salary was drawn from that allocation.

Chair Dasher asked if Chatham Transit would be adding electric vehicles. LaMontagne said the busiest route was from Siler City to Pittsboro to Chapel Hill. An electric

vehicle was not feasible. The charging time on buses was long, but that Executive Director Anna Testerman was looking into it.

Commissioner Karen Howard asked why no funding was given to Chatham Education Foundation. Mr. Thompson stated that the Chatham Education Foundation received a grant, but the request was not funded because it was one of the lower scoring applications. Chair Dasher asked if there would be an increase built in each year for nonprofit funding. Butts said staff would bring the Board of Commissioners that mechanism in December. Chair Dasher stated it was a great use of public dollars. Commissioner Crawford asked if more nonprofit agencies were being funded or if agencies were being funded with more money. LaMontagne stated that both were correct.

Chair Dasher asked if the Board of Commissioners would see the Economic Development Corporation's ideas for the seventy-five thousand dollars for small businesses hurt by COVID. LaMontagne stated there was a subcommittee that would make those decisions. Chair Dasher stated he would like to see organizations that help small businesses also be eligible. Commissioner Crawford would like to see an update from Economic Development Corporation on the small business loan program. Thompson stated Economic Development Corporation was doing this program because local government cannot. Chair Dasher asked if there was an understanding that Economic Development Corporation would use the seventy-five thousand dollars to assist businesses. LaMontagne said the allocation was to increase the Economic Development Corporation's capacity to provide funds to small businesses.

Chair Dasher asked if Kevin Lindley could give an update soon on County electric vehicles.

Vice Chair Hales asked if there was a new Emergency Management Systems base being built at Briar Chapel. LaMontagne stated that, yes, First Health would go there. Chair Dasher stated that he continued to hear complaints about Emergency Management Systems' arrival times, especially in his district. LaMontagne said he would have Emergency Management Director Steve Newton come to a work session to talk about Emergency Management Systems.

Vice Chair Hales asked when the new Animal Resources Center building would open. Mr. LaMontagne stated that the new building was open and renovations of the old building should be completed in July. Sheriff Robeson would have a ribbon cutting at the new Animal Resources Center for the public and elected officials.

West share information on the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies request. It is an accreditation program for both law enforcement and detention. Chatham County currently does not have this accreditation. The Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies Administrator would be a non-sworn employee. Vice Chair Hales asked if the County was receiving this because of County's growing size. LaMontagne said no, that the Sheriff wanted to do it for the public trust. A third party evaluated the operations and procedures. Vice Chair Hales asked if the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies Administrator could be shared with the towns. Thompson stated municipalities would have to do their own evaluations.

Commissioner Crawford asked if court services staff would be part of the evaluation. LaMontagne replied yes, they would. Commissioner Howard stated there was a disconnection between what the standards call for and what was practiced on the ground, and it was not monitored. This was needed and was beneficial.

This Agenda Item was received and filed.

[21-3884](#)

Other Funds

Vice Chair Hales asked when the Sheriff's Office acquired property through seizures. LaMontagne replied that they use seizures for things like drugs and vehicles used for trafficking.

Vice Chair Hales asked what the Sheriff's Office spent seizure money on. Tally stated there was a vehicle purchased and law enforcement supplies. The Sheriff's Office undercover funds and upkeep of a drug dog also came out of that account.

This Agenda Item was received and filed.

[21-3885](#)

Discussion

Staff recommendation was a three percent raise for County staff that meet expectations. The Board of Commissioners agreed to set the Sheriff, Register of Deeds, and County Manager salary increases at the same increase as County staff that meet expectations. Vice Chair Hales stated the County budget is just shy of one hundred and fifty million dollars. She asked what the County budget was from four years ago. Butts stated it was just under one hundred and eleven million dollars in fiscal year 2018. In fiscal year 2015 the budget was just over ninety-four million dollars.

Tally stated the staff recommendation was to change the wording in the budget ordinance to allow the funds approved Monday night to be amended and staff would report back to the board at the next meeting with the changes. The Board of Commissioners agreed with that plan.

Miller was able to gather commissioner salaries from surrounding counties. Vice Chair Hales thought Chatham's compensation was adequate, but some people may not run for commissioner because they did not have the time if it meant they would have to continue their full-time job. The pay was too low to quit their job. Commissioner Howard stated that, historically, middle-class and wealthy white people had served in this role. People like teachers and hourly workers could not be a commissioner and maintain their full-time jobs. Commissioner Gomez Flores said when he was running that he would not be able to have a first or second shift job if he was elected. Miller stated she could have this info annually at the retreat. Thompson asked if it would be helpful to consider a mechanism so that it was built in every year.

Staff asked the Board of Commissioners if they would like a three percent increase in salary like staff. Chair Dasher would be more comfortable if staff developed a mechanism instead of just doing it right now. Thompson suggested just always coming to the Board with a request every year for the Board of Commissioners pay to mirror whatever was being recommended for staff that meet expectations. This would eliminate the Board of Commissioners setting their salary and lump them in with staff. Butts stated they could add the Board of Commissioners to the section where Manager, Sheriff, and Register of Deeds were listed. The Board of Commissioners agreed to have commissioner salaries mirror the increase in salaries for county employees who met expectations.

Chair Dasher stated the County should keep the tax rate at 0.67 cents and use the half cent increase for the debt reserve. Commissioners Hales and Crawford supported

knocking down the tax rate with the half cent as recommended. Commissioner Howard believed this was an easily justifiable position to take.

Chair Dasher thanked the staff for all their hard work on the budget.

LaMontagne thanked the Board for their dedication and support of staff.

Butts let the Board know that another month of Article 46 has come in and any additional revenue collected would go to the other three areas selected. Chair Dasher said he thought they should have a news release on Article 46 after the budget was approved.

This Agenda Item was received and filed

ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Commissioner Howard, seconded by Vice Chair Hales, that the meeting be adjourned. The motion carried by the following vote:

Aye: 5 - Commissioner Dasher, Commissioner Hales, Gomez Flores,
Commissioner Crawford, and Chair Howard