

January 24, 2019

The Washington County Board of Commissioners met in a Special Called Meeting on Thursday, January 24, 2019 at 9:30 AM at the Commissioners' Room, 116 Adams Street, Plymouth, NC. Commissioners Johnson, Riddick, Sexton and Walker were present. Also present were County Manager/County Attorney Curtis Potter and Clerk to the Board Julie J. Bennett. Commissioner Phelps was unable to attend due to being in court.

MEET AND GREET WITH SENATOR BOB STEINBURG:

Chair Tracey Johnson introduced Sen. Bob Steinburg to the Commissioners. Sen. Steinburg has 11 counties, one of which is Washington County. Sen. Steinburg said his goal today was to come hear from the Commissioners. His job is to facilitate for Washington County. He said he doesn't know anything about Washington County but is honored to represent us. Sen. Steinburg noted that Representative Ed Goodwin was in the audience and stated that he also represents Washington County. Sen. Steinburg introduced Mr. Ed Stiles, his legislative assistant, and stated that he who would also be taking notes from today's meeting.

Mr. Potter said he defers to the Board and agreed with them that Washington County does not want any unmandated funding projects because it puts a strain on our budget. Mr. Potter also stated that he would like to see an increase in funding for school capital. Washington County has many aging school buildings. Mr. Potter said he would like to see if Sen. Steinburg could secure extra funding for JCPC. Mr. Potter also noted that Washington County needs broadband accessibility. In the rural areas, we feel we have been bypassed by the larger areas. The middle mile needs to be included, not just the beginning and end mile. Mr. Potter also mentioned issues with our local hospital and voiced that he hoped we could get some assistance from the Senator, not if, but when, the County needs it regarding keeping the Washington County Hospital open. The County is planning for the worst and hoping for the best.

Sen. Steinburg stated he was aware that the JCPC was not funded to the max initially, but it will be addressed. He also agreed that the broadband issue is very significant. He and Rep. Goodwin met with Ms. Bunny Sanders in Raleigh for about 2 hours regarding broadband. There were some discrepancies in the numbers that she showed. Sen. Steinburg said he has met with her in the Edenton library before also. During course of the meeting in Raleigh with Ms. Sanders, there was someone from the Speakers Office, Sen. Pro Tem's Office and IT people there who could address her concerns. The Sen. said it was a great meeting. Sen. Steinburg said there is \$10M in the bill that Ms. Sanders was talking about and there are a couple of more days for folks to apply. The Senator wanted to know what it would take to implement broadband statewide. He feels it is a key to economic development. Sen. Steinburg said someone there from the UNCV Flagler School (Professor Didow) has been working with Ms. Sanders and the Sen. asked Professor Didow to come up with a figure of how much this would cost. Professor Didow quoted somewhere in the range of \$350 Million. That is a significant amount of money. However, when you look at some of the things the State has done or tried to do, there are packages of money that have exceeded that. The

Senator said if they can have that type of money on the table for broadband, we should be able to get businesses into the area. He did say that others in the General Assembly are aware of the need for site wide broadband. He just doesn't know what the budget can stand.

The Senator said he received a note from one of our citizens a few days ago about Washington County Hospital. It sounds bad. He said he feels criminal charges could be filed-- that's how bad it is. He is glad to know that the Commissioners are aware of what is going on. Sen. Steinburg said he didn't know what kind of impact the hospital has on the County, but the hospital is in trouble. He asked if the Commissioners heard about insurance deductions being taken from employee's paychecks but not being paid on their insurance. Mr. Potter said he has passed on this information to the appropriate people. The Senator asked if the County has tried to sell the hospital to someone else. Mr. Potter said the hospital was sold in 2007 so the County doesn't own it but we are trying to put out feelers to see if there is anyone interested in coming in and taking it over. Commissioner Sexton said an important factor that the Senator could help with is the Certificate of Need that the hospital holds. Commissioner Sexton said he feels that if the County could retain that document then it might help the County to get someone in here. Sen. Steinburg asked if this information had been in the local papers. Mr. Potter said not in our local papers but in surrounding places where this company owns other hospitals, it has been in their news outlets.

Sen. Steinburg said that he and Rep. Goodwin will be meeting with Vidant folks on February 1st. Mr. Potter said he spoke with the President of Vidant Chowan yesterday and he is going to speak to other folks in Vidant. Mr. Potter said it would help the County to have legislative assistance in this manner. Sen. Steinburg asked about what happened to the hospital in Belhaven. Mr. Potter said it closed down, but did reopen as an "urgent care" facility. Rep. Goodwin said the people in Belhaven were extremely upset over the closing of its hospital and talked to everyone they could. Sen. Steinburg said he wants to be here for Washington County—please contact him anytime we need help. Sen. Steinburg said the County is going to have to get through the bad press first and that the County needs to try to get in front of it. Mayor Roth thanked Sen. Steinburg and Rep. Goodwin for coming to Washington County. This information is just breaking this week regarding the hospital. Mayor Roth said his opinion in negotiating from a hospital to an urgent care facility is not the way to go. It's about the 87 year old that has kidney failure that has to have a referral by their primary care physician and then surgery. Our citizens need to have access to long term/continual care, not critical care. This is not about triage. Mayor Roth said a helicopter will fly in here in and take someone to another hospital. He does not want to see us negotiate against our own self. He feels it will be catastrophic for the community. Sen. Steinburg said he now knows this issue with the hospital has been going on for a while, but more information is now coming out. He will assist however he can. Mr. Potter said that there are a few places he will reach out to. Mr. Potter also said that Washington County also covers two counties (Washington County and Tyrrell County) with our EMS staff. If we lose the ability to take patients to the Emergency Department, it will impact the County's EMS system.

Commissioner Riddick stated that the County needs funding for new schools at the local level and that is key to getting economic development here in our area also. Commissioner Riddick said that we need to have more resources in our schools, but it

costs money. Creswell's Mayor Blount was in attendance and Commissioner Riddick asked him about Creswell's schools. Mayor Blount said that they consolidated schools and are trying to get a charter school in Creswell. Commissioner Riddick said the school system is using the previous Creswell High School building as a training facility. Sen. Steinburg said while campaigning, consolidating schools was a hot button issue. Mr. Potter said he can't speak for the school system but the County has five (5) school buildings. Sen. Steinburg asked how was the money that was saved being redirected. Chair Johnson said she's not sure but thought some of the money had to go back to the state. Commissioner Riddick said some students left Creswell to go to private schools. Mr. Potter thinks the idea is to build a new school for K – 12, rather than just moving kids out of their school. Many of our school buildings are aging and have significant operating costs. Mr. Potter said that new schools that are more efficient have an astronomical price tag. Sen. Steinburg said they are about \$40M. Sen. Steinburg said Washington County is not alone in that rural NC has a lot of challenges. He also said broadband would help the kids in school or doing their homework at their house.

Chair Johnson said Sen. Steinburg will be receiving the NCACC goals and priorities next week. Chair Johnson said the top priority goals are as follows:

- 1) Seek legislation, funding, and other efforts to expand digital infrastructure/broadband capability to the unserved and under-served areas and residents of the state.
- 2) Seek additional revenue sources, including a statewide bond and lottery proceeds, to equitably address statewide public school and community college capital challenges.
- 3) Support efforts to preserve and expand the existing local revenue base of counties and authorize local option revenue sources already given to any other jurisdiction to all counties. Oppose efforts to divert to the state, fees or taxes currently allocated to the counties or to erode existing county revenue streams.
- 4) Support provision of state resources to ensure county ability to provide essential public health, behavioral health and social services, with specific consideration to the challenges of incarcerated persons, the continued county role in behavioral health governance, and programs addressing substance use disorder, throughout Medicaid transformation.
- 5) Seek legislation to repeal the statutory authority under N.C. Gen. Stat. 115C-431(c) that allows a local school board to file suit against a county board of commissioners over appropriations to the local board of education's capital outlay fund.

Sen. Steinburg said when he has been in meetings with other counties, that broadband is their top priority also. Chair Johnson spoke briefly about the other four priorities. Commissioner Johnson said it didn't sit well with Commissioners who had to sign the MOU between their counties and DHHS with no input or negotiation. Sen. Steinburg asked Chair Johnson to send him her thoughts on how that should have been handled.

Commissioner Sexton stated that he met with Sen. Steinburg and Rep. Goodwin regarding Lake Phelps. DOT was there last week regarding cleaning out the canals. Commissioner Sexton said he went to the RPO meeting yesterday where some of this was discussed. There is a lot of sediment in the lake.. Nobody seems to want to do anything but let the gates down and let water out. Sen. Steinburg said there needs to be a long term plan, not just deal with the aftermath of a catastrophe. Rep. Goodwin said the lake does not have a canal. The bottom is flat where the gate is. He said he is working on a bill with DOT to find out all the canals, culverts, etc. so they can be put on a program for

cleaning them out. He knows there needs to be proper drainage. Commissioner Sexton said a lot of these places are filled with sediment. Sen. Steinburg said it seems that the funds get held up with the Federal government, not the State government.

Commissioner Sexton said that the Ferry Projects came out well at the RPO meeting yesterday. He agrees that some of the ferries do need to be replaced, but it has pushed back two of our counties projects, one of them being Newland Road. Commissioner Sexton said that the County also needs help from the legislature in getting someone in our Commerce Building.

Commissioner Sexton said that he is not against private property rights and solar farms, but his concern is the decommissioning of these farms. Washington County wants a 25% bond on the companies so that it covers the decommissioning. He doesn't want to see a company declare bankruptcy and leave the County holding the bag. Commissioner Sexton wonders if the State feels that 25% is unreasonable. The companies say it is not fair what we are trying to charge. Commissioner Sexton said that some solar panels are less hazardous than others, but the comment from the woman from SunEnergy said they use whatever is available. Sen. Steinburg suggested that the oneness is on the County to do their homework to make sure that the safeguards are in the ordinance. Sen. Steinburg said he deals with renewable energy. The County should negotiate the agreement so that it is where it needs to be addressed. Mr. Potter said that the County is not opposed to the development of these solar farms but the solar farm companies only pay taxes on 10% of the land value. Sen. Steinburg talked about wind farms. They are a way to bring money into the County. The farm land can still be used. Sen. Steinburg says that Washington County gives teacher supplements and that helps us to get new teachers. Money from wind farms can be used to increase teacher supplements. He encouraged the Commissioners to make fair deals. Rep. Goodwin says in order to change our Tier status, if wind energy and solar energy is up for a vote, vote for it. Sen. Steinburg said the Senators that didn't want the wind turbines said that the military didn't want them. The General Assembly doesn't do anything that hurts the military. However, developers made changes as to where the turbines would be and the moratorium from the military was dropped and is no longer an issue. Chair Johnson asked Rep. Goodwin about the solar farm that got destroyed during one of the storms, did they have insurance? Rep. Goodwin replied that they had insurance on the equipment and the items fenced in. Mr. Potter explained that the bond (not insurance) is from the County to help ensure clean up. Sen. Steinburg said the County might want to look at the development of solar panels. There is a shortage of them. Companies are looking for places to make these in the US so they don't have to pay tariffs.

Commissioner Walker said that all the issues he wanted to discuss have been covered: the hospital, Newland Road, the schools and the JCPC issue. Commissioner Walker said Washington County has a lot of young folks who fall in the gray area and need help. Commissioner Walker also mentioned recreation and that it needs to be expanded--not everyone plays football. Commissioner Riddick told the Senator that she, Mr. Potter and Chair Johnson went and viewed the County's gym. The County would need a grant to fix it up. She said she knows about the PARTF grant, but it is a dollar for dollar match and Washington County can't do that. Sen. Steinburg asked the County to figure out how much they could pay. Mayor Roth talked about the Town of Plymouth having to return PARTF grant that was received because the match could not be obtained

(too many heirs on the property). Sen Steinburg said to look for another grant. Chair Johnson said that the PARTF grant is strictly for recreation. Mayor Roth said he asked Sen. Smith to sponsor a bill for a CAMA access grant and ask for a 10% match. It died in committee a year and a half ago. He doesn't feel like anyone understood it.

Sen. Steinburg said that in 18-19 he doesn't feel that anything drastic will be done because of funding. Sen. Steinburg and Rep. Goodwin both feel that broadband is the highest priority. They would like to go to the energy co-ops (like Tideland) and discuss that the broadband could be put on their infrastructure to get it to the most underserved areas. Sen. Steinburg also made the comment that some counties don't want to get out of Tier 1 status because there are some benefits available to Tier 1 counties that are not available to the Tier 2 and Tier 3 status counties.

Sen. Steinburg thanked everyone for coming out to the meeting. Chair Johnson did the same including Sam Styons, Plymouth Town Manager, Brian Roth, Plymouth Town Mayor Roth, Creswell Town Mayor Blount, Ms. Ann Keyes, Planning/Safety and EM Director, Sheriff Barnes and Chief Deputy Norman.

Tracey A. Johnson
Chair

Julie J. Bennett, CMC, NCCCC
Clerk to the Board