

**January 26, 2021**

The Martin County Board of Commissioners met in a Special Called Session on Tuesday, January 26, 2021 in the Commissioners' Boardroom and electronically, 305 E. Main Street, Williamston, North Carolina.

## **ASSEMBLY**

Present in the Commissioners' Boardroom: Chairman Ronnie Smith, Vice Chairman Dempsey Bond, Jr., Commissioner Emily Biggs, Commissioner David "Skip" Gurganus, Interim County Manager Cindy Ange, County Attorney Richard James and Clerk to the Board Jessica Godard.

Present via Cisco Webex: Lead for North Carolina Fellow Elizabeth Mitchell.

Commissioner Joe R. Ayers was absent.

Chairman Smith called the meeting to order at 7:01 p.m. Vice Chairman Bond led the Pledge of Allegiance. Commissioner Gurganus provided the invocation.

Commissioner Smith welcome everyone participating in person and virtually.

## **AGENDA APPROVAL**

Chairman Smith made a MOTION to approve the agenda as revised, with a SECOND by Commissioner Gurganus. The Board APPROVED the motion unanimously (4-0).

## **Discussion on Top 5 Goals for Martin County to be Advocated for in the Legislative Budget Process**

Chairman Smith stated he had spoken with Rep. Shelley Willingham, and Rep. Willingham was asking for the top five priorities for Martin County to be advocated for during the legislative budget process. Chairman Smith stated broadband was one of the top items, not only for Martin County, but also for the entire state of North Carolina. There were some other things in Martin County that needed emphasis, but he wanted input from the other Commissioners.

Vice Chairman Bond suggested Rep. Willingham take a look at regional jails, as local help would be needed in order to help with funding for the BMR Jail. Repairs would be needed and the building needed to be brought up to certain standards. Chairman Smith stated there were only a few counties that had regional jails, so that was not a top goal. However, that was put into the ears of other Commissioners and counties. There had been discussions regarding regionalization.

Commissioner Biggs expressed her desire for increased funding for schools. She stated there were many buildings needed repairs, and many talented and dedicated classified positions within the school system (bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and custodial staff) that needed an increase in pay. She was in favor of funding to provide \$15/hour for classified staff. Commissioner Biggs was also in favor of funding for community policing and training.

Commissioner Gurganus discussed the ongoing broadband conversations, stating there was some legislation with terms discussing how grant money was handled. He stated in order to get some

of that money freed up to provide more access to citizens, he asked consideration to advocate for changing in the wording of the current legislation. Chairman Smith stated the legislative goals process for the NCACC, broadband was one of the top priorities. Chairman Smith stated the NCACC would continue to advocate for broadband access.

Chairman Smith also discussed the water plant in Martin County being built, stating the County did not have control over a lot and did not want to build the water plant. Due to the depletion in the aquifers in the area, the plant had to be built to maintain the aquifers and decrease the usage of the aquifer. He stated the county was promised a certain amount of money by building the plant on the river, but that did not happen. Chairman Smith stated he looked at water as “blue gold” in the future, but it was putting a financial burden on the County currently. The county had not been able to stay on top of the financial situation with no requiring residents to be on the county system. Chairman Smith is advocating for financial relief, in regards to the water debt situation in Martin County.

Sheriff Tim Manning stated his biggest concern was keeping SRO’s funded and keeping them at each school. Sheriff Manning also agreed with advocating for community policing, stated he had campaigned on that and had started some. Due to COVID, the home visits and things associated with community policing had decreased, but he hoped to start it back up after the pandemic. Chairman Smith stated there was a push for more training, as well. Sheriff Manning stated the state Sheriff’s Association was also pushing for more training. Chairman Smith asked how many SRO’s there were in Martin County, Sheriff Manning stated nine, including the SROs at Martin Community College.

Vice Chairman Bond asked about incentives to push for industry. Vice Chairman Bond stated Martin County was in a prime location for industry with the railroad, I-87, etc. If the stated provided some incentives like in other states, it would be beneficial for our Tier 1 County. This would provide more jobs for Martin County citizens. Chairman Smith agreed with the benefits of the railroad in Martin County.

### **Martin County RPO TAC Reappointments**

The Mid-East Regional Planning Organization (RPO) provides rural areas the opportunity to work in partnership with NCDOT to develop sound, short and long-range transportation planning for the rural areas of our region. The RPO utilizes a Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) and a Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC) to assist in the decision-making process for the region. Representation on each committee is appointed by the Board of Commissioners from each participating county.

The Board of Commissioners was asked to approve the appointments of the following individuals:

#### RPO Technical Advisory Committee:

County – Commissioner Dempsey Bond, Jr.

Towns – Bear Grass Mayor Charlotte Griffin

Vice Chairman Bond explained the purpose of the TAC and spoke of his experience on that Board and in transportation, in general.

Commissioner Smith made a MOTION to approve the above listed reappointments, with a SECOND from Commissioner Gurganus. The Board APPROVED the motion (4-0).

### **Update on Broadband and Local Providers in Martin County**

Commissioner Gurganus provided an update to the Board regarding the efforts in broadband for Martin County. The mission was to seek out solution for long term and near term broadband access for underserved and unserved areas in Martin County.

Commissioner Gurganus discussed a timeline from 2008 to the present regarding broadband efforts.

- 2008 Federal and State incentives to provide broadband to rural areas in our county have failed to produce a viable solution.
- Our current DSL provider, Century Link, has failed to maintain their current copper systems. They are reluctant to invest in fiber in our county due what they define as “inadequate return on investment”.
- Our current cable provider, Mediacom, serves a smaller portion of the county and does not have any plans to expand their service to rural areas for the same reason. Return on Investment is inadequate to support the capital outlay.
- Smaller ISP’s are not able to reach rural areas due to the limits of their technology, in part, because of where our fiber backbone ends. This Fiber backbone belongs to Century Link.

Chairman Smith asked if towers would make a difference in those areas beyond where the fiber ended. Commissioner Gurganus stated, “No”. He stated there was some technology out there where AT&T was broadcasting a signal over a large are in Farm Life, providing increased service. Commissioner Gurganus stated he went out on the eastern end of Martin County and mapped out where all Century Link equipment was, to understand where the end of the fiber was. He stated it would take about 15 miles of fiber in the area he surveyed to be able to reach the underserved and unserved areas. Commissioner Gurganus reported this part of the county also had issues with spotty phone service, as well.

Commissioner Gurganus stated the concerns had been expressed to Century Link about the issues with service. The fix would only help one area of the county, so it would not be a total solution.

Next, Commissioner Gurganus provided an update of “where we are today”.

- Cloudwyze will not be able to provide rural citizens with access as they fall into the last category as previously discussed.
- Century Link has announced they will no longer invest on DSL “copper” service, as it is a technology that requires too much maintenance and service cost. They have elected to advance their fiber network but only in areas of high return on investment, or the most densely populated areas.
- There is an incentive out from the FCC on a federal level to put rural areas out for bid. That process has taken place. The areas to be served may have been bid on. IN about 2 weeks, this can be discussed because it has not been put out for public knowledge.
- We have to extend our fiber reach to gain access to smaller ISPs technology and make it work.

Next, Commissioner Gurganus discussed “what can we do?”

- Work with Century link based on already poor phone line service to get them to install fiber from Holly Springs Area to Farm Life Area. This would be based on a client complaint approach and a history of phone outages and known issues. This would be collected and delivered to both Century Link and the FCC.
- There are other possibilities for service from another company (unnamed at this time) in the near future. Once that does happen, we can immediately start a dialog with them to try to expedite their plan in our area and to see if they can be incentivized to move us up the priority list.
- Work with Century link and or other companies to see if we can at least have our fiber extended to the point that a smaller IPS could connect and broadcast a signal to rural areas. This would be a shorter-term fix until another company gets fiber into our area and actually into homes. This effort could take as much as 5 to 7 years.
- Finally work with AT&T and other ISPs to get the latest and greatest technology put forward to get those citizens who are willing to pay more some access.

Next, Commissioner Gurganus showed a map showing underserved rural areas, showing the areas Cloudwzye would have not been able to serve were areas that had gone out to “bid”.

Commissioner Gurganus stated Commissioner Biggs brought a valuable perspective as an educator, a Commissioner, and as someone who has had technology available for most of her life. He also stated EDC President Semple had been a wealth of knowledge as well.

There were some technology issues, and the Board was not able to hear President Semple speaking.

Commissioner Gurganus stated the current technologies only allowed the technology to reach but so far. 5 years ago, the current service may have been enough, but it is not enough to sustain the needs of the current environment. Commissioner Gurganus stated Century Link claimed they were providing everyone with what the FCC required, but they were not.

Commissioner Biggs stated many children were having issues with internet connections and problems with virtual school. One particular situation she reported was in the Jamesville are. Commissioner Gurganus asked for Commissioner Biggs or anyone with any reports like this to send that information to him so he could compile the information.

Chairman Smith reported he contacted the Pitt County Chair and explained what Martin County was working on regarding broadband. He stated he had talked with Washington County, as well and planned to speak with all surrounding counties regarding their broadband concerns and efforts. He suggested trying to collaborate with other counties to help better serve citizens. He discussed a new satellite technology that he learned about that could be a future possibility.

Chairman Smith thanked Commissioner Gurganus for explaining the situation and stated Martin County would continue working towards trying to obtain greater broadband access for the citizens. He further stated broadband access was unfortunately a problem all across the state.

## **CLOSED SESSION**

At 8:01 p.m., Vice Chairman Bond made a MOTION to enter a closed session, pursuant to NC G.S. § 143-318.11(a)(6) – Personnel, with a SECOND from Commissioner Biggs. The Board APPROVED the motion unanimously (4-0).

At 9:19 p.m., Vice Chairman Bond made a MOTION to go out of closed session, with a SECOND from Commissioner Biggs. The Board APPROVED the motion unanimously (4-0).

### **Hiring of New Martin County Manager**

Chairman Smith stated during the closed session, the Board of Commissioners conducted an interview Mr. James Bennett for the County Manager position.

Vice Chairman Bond made a MOTION to hire Mr. James Bennett as the County Manager, with a SECOND from Commissioner Biggs. When asked if there was any discussion, Commissioner Gurganus stated he saw no fault with the candidate, but he expressed his concerns because this was the only candidate he had ever spoken too. Commissioner Gurganus stated in all fairness and for the good of the county, the Board should have examined a couple of other candidates, and may have ended up with the same result. Commissioner Gurganus stated Mr. Bennett had all of the qualifications and he did enjoy speaking with him. Commissioner Gurganus stated it did not seem his concerns would make any difference in the proceedings, but he wanted to make his feelings known.

The motion was APPROVED by a 3-1 vote.

For:	Against:
Smith	Gurganus
Bond	
Biggs	

Chairman Smith congratulated Mr. Bennett on his position and stated the County Attorney would compose a contract, and then move forward.

Mr. Bennett thanked the Board for hiring him. Chairman Smith asked when Mr. Bennett would be available to start, he stated February 1, 2021.

### **ADJOURNMENT**

With no further business to discuss, Vice Chairman Bond made a MOTION to adjourn, with a SECOND from Commissioner Biggs. The Board APPROVED the motion (4-0). Chairman Smith adjourned the meeting at 9:30 p.m.

The next scheduled meeting would be Wednesday, February 10, 2021 at 7:00 p.m. in the Commissioners' Boardroom, 305 East Main Street, Williamston, NC 27892.

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Ronnie Smith, Chair

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Jessica Godard, Clerk to the Board