

STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA )  
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COUNTY OF STOKES )  
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OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONERS  
STOKES COUNTY GOVERNMENT  
DANBURY, NORTH CAROLINA  
THURSDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2023

The Stokes County Board of County Commissioners and the Stokes County Board of Education met for a joint meeting on Thursday, February 23, 2023 at 4:00 pm in the Commissioners' Chambers located in the Administrative Building in Danbury, North Carolina.

The following Commissioners were present for the joint meeting: Chairman Rick Morris, Vice Chairman Brad Chandler, Commissioner Sonya Cox, Commissioner Ronnie Mendenhall, and Commissioner Keith Wood.

The following Board of Education members were present for the joint meeting: Chairperson Von Robertson, Vice Chairperson Dwayne Bryant, Member Justin Duncan, Member Cheryl Knight, and Member Mike Rogers.

The following school administrative staff was present for the joint meeting: Dr. Brad Rice, Superintendent, Dr. Jared Jones, Assistant Superintendent, Chief Academic Officer Doug Rose, Executive Director of Finance Lanette Moore, Director of Maintenance/Facilities Ricky Goins, Maintenance Supervisor Richie Roberts, and Administrative Assistant to the Board of Education Pam Bolejack.

The following county administrative staff were present for the joint meeting: County Manager Shannon Shaver and Assistant County Manager/Clerk to the Board Amber Brown.

#### **CALL TO ORDER**

Chairman Morris called the meeting for the Board of County Commissioners to order at 4:00 pm.

Chairperson Robertson called the meeting for the Board of Education to order at 4:00 pm.

#### **INVOCATION**

Chairman Morris invited those in attendance to join the Boards in the invocation is so desired.

Board of Education Member Duncan delivered the invocation.

#### **GENERAL GOVERNMENT-GOVERNING BODY-PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

Chairman Morris invited those in attendance to join the Board in the Pledge of Allegiance.

#### **GENERAL GOVERNMENT – GOVERNING BODY – APPROVAL OF AGENDA**

Chairman Morris entertained a motion to approve today's agenda.

Commissioner Mendenhall moved to approve the agenda as presented. Vice Chairman Chandler seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

Chairperson Robertson entertained a motion to approve today's agenda.

Member Rogers moved to approve the agenda as presented. Vice Chairperson Bryant seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

### **Discussion of Facilities' Study and Planning – Joint Board Discussion**

Chairman Morris commented:

- Great to have everyone here today
- Dr. Rice will start the discussion with members of both Boards being allowed to speak afterwards

Dr. Rice, Superintendent, commented:

- Just a little background information of what we have been doing – looking at our numbers, our facilities, and how we are serving our students
- Wondering if what we are doing is the most efficient and best thing we can do
- To do this with full transparency, a population study was completed in 2021- 2022
- Contracted with a group to look at data, talk with staff, etc. to project long term data regarding attendance
- Study projected a drop in enrollment in the upcoming future, but looks to stabilize all the way to 2050
- Second stage - facility study done this year detailing the findings at each facility and shared with commissioners
- Third stage (efficiency study not done yet) will obtain three opinions from Masonboro Group, NC State ORED Lab (Operations Research and Education), and the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) (DPI may not participate due to personnel changes)
- The Masonboro Group is finalizing their report and should receive it soon
- Want the most information to make an informed decision
- Board of Education understands it's their responsibility to close a school or to consolidate schools or not
- In part of the planning process, if the recommendation is to build a new school somewhere or renovation schools – all that cost money
- Don't think it is wise to develop a plan if there is no funding available
- Purpose of the meeting today is to start the conversation regarding funding availability which would help the Board of Education with its planning

Chairperson Robertson commented:

- Appreciate the commissioners for meeting with us today
- It is great we can work together to solve issues
- Believe these two Boards have a good working relationship
- Problems that we are dealing with today are really issues that we have not created ourselves, but problems/issues that have been developing for years
- Maybe what worked 40-50 years ago is not working today

- Several of our schools have aged out and are not functionable along with schools dealing with safety issues
- This Board of Education is willing to address issues/problems that were not dealt with in the past
- Our Board is willing to make the hard decisions and do what we need to do to move Stokes County Schools forward
- Need the support of the commissioners
- Here today to try to determine what kind of funding could be available, know we will not be able to get all the answers today, just want to start the conversation
- Know it is not going to be popular with everyone in the county
- Feel the commissioners have been very gracious to the schools, funding per student is not low
- Current model is inefficient, taking a lot of funding to operate schools
- Hope we can come up with a budget that we can work with to move our schools forward

Member Rogers commented:

- We have all been here before with the exception of Commissioners Chandler and Wood
- We are currently facing decisions that were made in Stokes County 70 years ago
- When North and South Stokes were built, population growth was anticipated in two sectors
- Currently, the population in one of those sectors is not growing, it is declining immensely with the other one holding fast
- King population is swelling and potentially going to continue to swell
- Have to look at what we are given and spend it wisely – make the best use of it
- Not a decision we made, North and South Stokes are approaching 70 years old with an 80-year life span
- Could renovate these schools to possibly get 30 more years, but have to make sure we have the students to go in them
- Bothers me that some elementary schools might have combinations (K-1, 2-3, and 4-5) which are not teaching the students efficiently nor fair to the students
- We have to decide as a group, how we can best serve our students as they are the next generation of Stokes County citizens
- Currently, we have approximately 5400 students
- The recent study shows increasing population down the road, so we have to make the best decisions
- That is why we are getting opinions from three different groups in order to make the best decisions
- It is time to put this out in the open and figure the path forward

Member Duncan commented:

- New to the process of a joint meeting but appreciate the opportunity
- Ran on the political platform that no matter where you are in Stokes County, you have access to a quality education
- Population shift is not only a concern for the Board of Education, but for the county also

- Each Board of Education member met individually with the Masonboro Group to discuss the needs
- Lived in Stokes County my entire life, I have learned that every area of the county has its own personality and needs
- Our joint venture with the commissioners is to make sure those needs are met along with making sure we use our funding wisely
- Public can't see the bones of the aging buildings such as heating/air and plumbing issues
- As previously mentioned, this is not going to be popular, but I think we can all agree we want to do what is best for all the students in Stokes County and what is best to move our schools forward

Member Knight commented:

- Appreciate the opportunity to have this open discussion
- Consider us the clean crew with the ongoing issues, deterioration of older buildings, and less and less students
- COVID did hurt the overall attendance, parents in a pinch had to do what was best for their families
- Must be wise with funding offering our students the best opportunities for great careers
- Equal opportunity to education is very important, can't make the drive and ride times excessive
- Combination classes are challenging for students and teachers
- Look forward to the open communication

Vice Chairperson Bryant commented:

- Thank you for meeting with us today
- Everyone has already said pretty much everything, but I want to emphasize we need to do what is best for our students
- Combination classes are hurting the children's education (the child never gets caught up)
- Feel combinations classes also effects our performance rating
- Currently, have elementary schools that were high schools 50 years ago – life of those schools is gone
- Have worked in Forsyth and Guilford County School Systems, they similar problems
- School systems today have to be reactive instead of proactive, there is not enough funding to fix anything before it breaks
- Stokes County School System does a fantastic job using what funding they do receive

Chairman Morris commented:

- Will start with a few comments that might help facilitate the discussion between the two boards
- My understanding is that given the third parties and experts that the Board of Education is working with, it is the school board's plan to bring the commissioners a comprehensive plan that is either consolidation, building new schools, etc. that will provide cost figures associated with each recommendation
- Will the plan also take a long view at things in the future, as much as possible, to prevent the reoccurrence of problems that we are dealing with now

Dr. Rice, Superintendent, responded:

- Yes, the plan is to come up with possibly a multistage projection of things to happen over the next ten years or so
- Don't want to waste their time creating a plan that may cost \$100 million if there is only \$10 million on the table
- If we can get a ballpark number, we can tell them what we have available to help solve our issues
- The goal is to come back with a full laid out plan that is fundable allowing the outside firm to plan effectively
- Don't expect a specific number from you today, but maybe a ballpark figure

Chairman Morris commented:

- Not sure we can give you a number today
- We have the authority to borrow money, but borrowing a lot of money can be very risky
- Did a similar project for schools while serving as county manager, there was a 4-cent tax increase earmarked for schools only, the public knew it was needed and promised it wouldn't be used for anything else
- As the county manager at the time, I received no complaints
- Made sure the public knew if anything changed regarding the 4-cent tax, it would be advertised
- It may work well again as long as you have the public's buy in – showing the need
- It is the Board of Education's role to decide what is needed - consolidating or building new schools and then bring the commissioners a recommendation
- Feel it is the Board's role to work with Board of Education to provide the necessary funding
- Another piece of this is to have a clear analysis why the status quo will not work so people can understand why we have to do something
- When we borrow money, it is a timely, complex process with the Local Government Commission along with talking with our financial advisors
- The sooner we can get our arms around a plan, the better
- One thing to be thinking about is for us collectively putting together a schedule with the key milestones, whatever they happen to be, so we can start the planning process
- Still have debt left from projects done with the 4-cent fund, will need to see how new debt would blend in
- Have a lot of county requirements also – just been through 20 hours of departmental work sessions

Dr. Rice, Superintendent, questioned if what is needed would have to be paid from the current 4 cent tax or what would we be limited to borrow what a new 4 cent tax would generate to cover loan payment.

Chairman Morris responded:

- Not saying anything for certain, believe you would have to add more to the current 4 cent tax if you took the approach to raise taxes to generate what is needed

- That fund is already in place
- The model is set up to pay the debt for all those projects – has a lot of components
- It gets some lottery funding and has a fund balance for contingencies

County Manager Shaver noted the model has a general fund transfer of approximately \$893,000 each year to keep the model going.

Chairman Morris noted the need to see what funding is needed to determine the path the County would need to take regarding funding.

Member Rogers responded:

- Forsyth Tech gets one and a quarter cent of that 4-cent tax fund

Chairman Morris opened the floor for other commissioners to speak.

Commissioner Cox commented:

- Glad to meet and work with the Board of Education
- Believe we are the beneficiaries of years ago of planning who could not have foreseen what it would look like today
- Several of us have been involved in closing schools in the past and it wasn't a good situation
- Would like to keep all our community schools if possible, but don't think we can afford to replace all our aging schools
- Feel there is a value to a community school, it defines a community, but I know that we live in the real world
- Would like to see the studies, if there are any, provide definitive data, about sending students to consolidated or larger schools and how that improves student achievement
- In the real world, sometimes what is best for the student is not best for the community
- What is best for the student is what the Board of Education is charged to do – tried to talk to the community when Francisco Elementary School was closed – very hard for a community to understand
- If we don't do something, it will be like the old Nancy Reynolds Elementary situation
- When a building is condemned, you are forced to either build or consolidate
- Got to be a multi phased approach
- Got to have an 8, 10, 15-year plan
- This is a very big issue
- Think our Board needs to talk about options – for example – bond referendum, tax increase, etc.
- Don't think this big of project can be done without some type of tax increase
- There will tough decisions to make but feel it is time to put it all out on the table and make the best decisions
- I am willing to support the Board of Education's decision on what is best for the schools, we can't continue down the current road

Commissioner Wood commented:

- Compliment the Board of Education for doing all these studies – feel it is the right direction
- Confirmed with Dr. Rice the studies should all be completed by first of June
- Feel we all need to work smart together
- Need options of what you want
- Have been in constructing for over 50 years and can get construction costs
- Material cost has started to come down, not sure how long it will last
- Need to know what you need as far as funding
- Here is how I strongly feel – “don’t need to be putting new tires on a car that has a blown engine”
- Community is important but a child’s education is more important
- This is not a problem, it is an opportunity

Vice Chairman Chandler commented:

- Board of County Commissioners has to do their part
- Think we all already know the answer to the problem, just need to get to that point
- Would like for consolidation to began this school year, start putting the least geographic areas of where the students are going to be going
- Willing to raise taxes for schools
- The need is here, but it is not going to be popular in the communities
- But, it is not going to be popular with the kids who are not getting the education needed for further education or the workforce
- Would like to get proactive, possibly form a subcommittee (possibly two members from each board and finance departments) and get to work
- If you give us a recommendation that needs \$50 million funding then I am willing to fight to get you the money

Commissioner Mendenhall commented:

- Know what the school system is going through because I have been there
- Closing a community school is not an easy chore, there are going to be some tough decisions to make
- When Francisco was closed, five Board members had a vote, but the superintendent did not have a vote; however, people in Francisco thought I had a vote too
- It is not going to be easy, there is going to be resistance
- Confirmed with Dr. Rice, the school system has eight schools that are not halfway at full capacity
- Read that Sandy Ridge was built in 1950 and Pine Hall in 1954
- South and North Stokes High Schools were built in 1964
- While I was superintendent – 7 schools either had additions or a new school built (Lawsonville and Southeastern had new additions; new schools were Popular Springs, Nancy Reynolds, Early College, West Stokes, and Piney Grove)
- I appreciate education and want the kids to be successful – my motto was always “Students First”
- Have always pushed for students first

- Have to look at the entire county – county already has debt along with estimated \$6 million this year for the courthouse renovations
- Can't give you everything you need
- Under 100 students, you lose funding for a principal
- Feel it is going to take consolidation
- Going to do everything I can to help the Stokes County School System
- Agree this Board needs options
- Davie County recently went to one high school at a cost of \$56 million (bond referendum)
- Confirmed with D. Rice the amount of funding received from the County has increased every year since 2016
- Will continue to support the school system
- Board of Education has a tough job ahead of them
- Going to have to take some serious looks at what we can do for the Board of Education

Chairman Morris commented:

- Would like the Board of Education's thoughts on a bond referendum mentioned by Commissioner Cox
- Confirmed with Dr. Rice that their consultants will be looking at multiple options by cost
- Might have a better idea after our Board receives the proposed 2023/24 budget
- Just had departmental work sessions that revealed a lot of requests – have a lot of issues

Chairperson Robertson commented:

- Have had good conversation today and looking forward to getting the results from Masonboro Group and both Boards meeting with them
- Need to have a plan on paper
- Facility study revealed about \$90 million needed for repairs/renovations
- Masonboro Group met individually with each Board member last week, very impressed, and feel that will come back with some helpful suggestions

Chairman Morris confirmed with Dr. Rice that the Masonboro Group representatives were past superintendents who have been through consolidation and building new schools and have built a very successful business working with multiple districts.

Chairperson Robertson noted:

- Masonboro Group representatives have been to every school in the county and spoken to a number of staff members/students – been very thorough in the assessment of Stokes County School System
- Believe the Masonboro Group will be bringing back things other than consolidation that will be more efficient and save the school system money
- They have done their own population study projected to 2060
- The group is looking at it very objective – making the recommendations on what is based for the students and the county



Chairman Morris confirmed with Dr. Rice that the group will contract with a public relations firm to help with the plan – hold townhall/community meetings to get community by in.

Chairman Morris requested possibly both Boards creating a timeline with key milestones today.

Dr. Rice, Superintendent, responded:

- Will have Masonboro Group's report within the next month, will get the ORED's report at the end of June and still working to hopefully get the DPI report
- The Board of Education will then develop a plan (not sure how long that will take) to present to the commissioners

Chairman Morris suggested making this a priority project at June 30<sup>th</sup>; both Boards will have completed their budgets.

Chairperson Robertson commented:

- Once the Masonboro Group has submitted their report, the Board may choose to implement cost savings recommendations that aren't very costly
- The longer we continue with nineteen schools, the less efficient we are
- That is why we are here – we have to make those hard decisions
- May not be the most popular decision, but believe there will be a lot of people that will be appreciative because it will save money in the long run

Chairman Morris opened the floor for any further comments.

Member Knight commented:

- Need for more communication now to prevent parents from being blindsided or surprised
- Already getting phone calls
- Communication is key – possibly putting out a timeline
- One key component in all of this is economic development – bringing in new businesses, creating more tourism, etc. – without it, not going to see population growth
- If consolidation occurs, want to make sure there are no long bus rides for students
- The northern part of the county will no go for long, long bus rides; they will go across the line to closer schools, charter schools, home schools, etc. – there will be unintended consequences
- Reiterated the need for communication

Member Rogers commented:

- We understand the community school concept, but our goal is to put the student first
- As we look at potential consolidation, once the building is idle, it is in the Board of Commissioners' control
- Would strongly encourage the commissioners to consider potentially using part of those facilities for the community – that community can maintain its focus, and its tightknit ability to bond

Vice Chairperson Bryant commented:

- Would like to backup what Member Rogers said
- For example, the communities use those facilities now – gyms, baseball/softball fields, etc.
- They have an invested interest

Chairman Morris responded there would have to funding allocated for that.

Member Knight responded that communities definitely have an invested interest.

Member Duncan commented:

- Agree with other members that students come first
- Agree with allowing communities to use facilities if there is consolidation
- Have a lot of visitors that come to this county – need to recoup on those spending money in Stokes County – thousands and thousands of visitors come to Hanging Rock each year
- Possibly look at the ¼ cents sales tax strictly for schools
- Schools are just like the hospital – every community has different needs
- Agree with Member Knight – communication is the key
- Want to make sure the community is well informed

Chairperson Robertson agreed looking at ¼ cents sales tax strictly for schools.

Chairman Morris noted the need for community buy in to pass a ¼ cents sales tax.

Vice Chairperson Bryant noted that he will support whatever is best for the kids in Stokes County – bond referendum, sales tax, etc.

Member Duncan noted that a bond referendum/sales tax could not be until 2024.

County Manager Shaver suggested possibly adding further discussion at the upcoming joint budget meeting in June.

Chairperson Robertson expressed the Board of Education’s appreciation for the joint meeting.

### **Adjournment**

With no further business, Chairman Morris entertained a motion to adjourn the meeting for the Board of County Commissioners.

Commissioner Mendenhall moved to adjourn the meeting.

Vice Chairman Chandler seconded and the motion carried unanimously.

With no further business, Chairperson Robertson entertained a motion to adjourn the meeting for the Board of Education.

Member Rogers moved to adjourn the meeting. Vice Chairperson Bryant seconded and the motion carried unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at 5:29 pm.

Amber Brown

**Amber Brown**

**Clerk to the Board**

Rick Morris

**Rick Morris**

**Chairman**