

MEETING MINUTES
WATAUGA COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2025

The Watauga County Board of Commissioners held a regular meeting on Tuesday, October 7, 2025, at 5:30 P.M. in the Commissioners' Board Room located in the Watauga County Administration Building in Boone, North Carolina.

1. CALL REGULAR MEETING TO ORDER

Chairman Eggers called the meeting to order at 5:30 P.M. The following were present:

PRESENT: Braxton Eggers, Chairman
 Todd Castle, Vice-Chairman
 Emily Greene, Commissioner
 Tim Hodges, Commissioner
 Ronnie Marsh, Commissioner
 Nathan Miller, County Attorney
 Deron Geouque, County Manager
 Katie Hancock, Clerk to the Board

Vice-Chairman Castle offered a prayer and Commissioner Greene led the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Chairman Eggers presented the September 16, 2025, regular and closed session meeting minutes.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to approve the September 16, 2025, regular meeting minutes as presented.

VOTE: Aye – 5
 Nay – 0

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to approve the September 16, 2025, closed session minutes as presented.

VOTE: Aye – 5
 Nay – 0

3. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Chairman Eggers called for additions or corrections to the October 7, 2025, agenda.

County Manager Geouque requested the following additions:

- Agenda Item 8 to include the following:
 - A. Old Cove Creek Park Update

- Agenda Item 9 to include the following:
 - G. New Ambulances Upfit
 - H. Purchase of New Ambulance
- Possible Action after Closed Session

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to approve the October 7, 2025, agenda as amended.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

4. PUBLIC COMMENT

- **Jana Smith**, a 15-year resident of Powder Horn Mountain and longtime fire department and EMT volunteer, spoke in support of the Powder Horn Mountain Tower, citing ongoing communication challenges for first responders. She stated that pager reception is unreliable and that during Hurricane Helene, volunteers had to staff a bike station 24/7 due to the inability to communicate with medics or dispatch.
- **Victor Hamby**, Chief of the Deep Gap Fire Department, spoke in support of the Powder Horn Mountain Tower, citing frequent radio communication issues with the Stewart Simmons Volunteer Fire Department. He noted that the departments work closely together, but the lack of reliable communication affects responder safety.
- **Jimmy Isaacs**, Fire Chief for the Town of Boone, spoke in support of the Powder Horn Mountain Tower, noting that his department's territory borders that of the Stewart Simmons Volunteer Fire Department. He cited limited communications in a wildfire-prone area and shared an example of losing coverage during a search in Heavenly Mountain. He emphasized that while no one wants a tower in their view, its construction is essential for safety.
- **Diane Nilan**, a resident of Blowing Rock, spoke in opposition to Senate Bill 759, ratified in 2023, expressing concern that the new voting districts constituted gerrymandering intended to disadvantage Democrats and suppress student votes at Appalachian State University.
- **Doug Berry**, Chief of the Stewart Simmons Volunteer Fire Department with 30 years of service, spoke in support of the Powder Horn Mountain Tower. He cited significant communication gaps that can create life-threatening situations and noted that it took years to identify a suitable tower site, acknowledging that some residents may experience minor changes to their view.
- **Marian Peters**, a Boone resident living near Appalachian State University, spoke in opposition to Senate Bill 759, ratified in 2023. She stated that she believed the bill effectively took away her vote while she continues to pay taxes, describing the situation as “taxation without representation.”

- **Donna Lisenby**, a Watauga County election official, spoke in opposition to Senate Bill 759, ratified in 2023. She stated that, in her experience, Watauga County election officials work collaboratively regardless of political affiliation and expressed her belief that the bill constituted gerrymandering. She referenced a pending lawsuit challenging the legislation and urged the Board not to oppose it.
- **Janet Montgomery**, a resident of Vilas since 2001, thanked the Board for their service and for the opportunity to speak. She urged the Board to consider spending decisions carefully, advocate for fair elections and voting maps, and avoid wasting tax dollars on a lawsuit. She noted that fair maps are needed, as approximately 20,000 voters are currently unable to cast ballots.
- **Brian Juneau** thanked the Board for the opportunity to speak and acknowledged the first responders who spoke before him. He expressed concern that some voters feel their votes are not being fairly represented and urged the Board to consider these issues.
- **Misty Mayfield**, a resident of Vilas for 26 years, thanked the Board for the opportunity to speak. She expressed concern that Watauga County has received only 9% of requested federal funding for Hurricane Helene recovery and urged the Board to prioritize recovery efforts rather than using funds to oppose the pending lawsuit, emphasizing respect for citizens' votes.
- **Richard Tidyman**, a resident of Deep Gap, spoke in opposition to Senate Bill 759, ratified in 2023. He advocated for election integrity, including the creation of fair maps, and urged the Board not to contest the pending lawsuit, stating they would likely lose. He described such action as "money thrown down the drain" and suggested that the funds would be better spent on K-12 education, Hurricane Helene recovery efforts, and improvements to parks and trails. He concluded by encouraging the Board to avoid wasting money on the lawsuit.

5. ISAIAH 177 HOUSE PROGRAM PRESENTATION

Julie Dixon, Multi-State Director for Isaiah 117 House, provided an overview of the nonprofit, which partners with child welfare agencies to support children entering foster care. In 2024, the organization operated 29 homes across 12 states with over 6,000 volunteers, serving more than 4,000 children directly and assisting many more through resources such as car seats and beds.

Julie shared her personal journey, explaining that she felt called to foster care and, shortly after becoming an approved foster parent, welcomed an 18-day-old baby. She emphasized that children often arrive with nothing, sometimes even being removed while at school. The Isaiah 117 House ensures children arrive at fully stocked homes rather than offices, leaving with everything needed for the following week. The organization provides basic care, including baths and lice treatments, as well as emotional support for the children, foster families, and caseworkers. A visitation space, allows caseworkers to provide parenting skill support, with the ultimate goal being reunification.

During discussion, Commissioner Greene asked about the length of stay for children, and Julie explained that stays are typically up to 72 hours but may be extended for children who are more difficult to place. Commissioner Marsh inquired about volunteer turnover, and Julie noted that

each house starts with around 60 trained volunteers, often growing to over 100. She affirmed that there is a clear need for such services in the region, particularly for mental health support. Commissioner Hodges asked about funding from counties, and Julie explained that the organization is debt-free and community-funded, with Johnston County, NC, being the first to provide direct county support. Commissioner Greene asked about steps for opening a house in Watauga County; Julie described a two-year application process including community outreach and land acquisition if needed. Chairman Eggers suggested the commissioners consider visiting an existing Isaiah 117 House to better understand operations.

The presentation was for informational purposes only, and no action was required by the Board.

6. DISSOLUTION OF THE WATAUGA COUNTY FIRE COMMISSION

Steve Marks, Chair of the Watauga County Fire Commission, presented a proposal to dissolve the existing commission, explaining that its functions have become largely redundant. The County maintains individual service contracts with each fire department, and compliance is monitored through the ISO rating system and annual inspections by the County Fire Marshal's Office.

Mr. Marks noted that the current resolution establishing the Fire Commission is outdated and recommended its rescission to allow for the creation of the Watauga County Fire Chiefs Council. This new council, working in conjunction with the Firefighters' Association, will provide a collaborative forum to support and enhance fire protection. He suggested that one Board member serve in an advisory capacity and expressed support for adding another member to act as a liaison.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to rescind the Resolution establishing the Watauga County Fire Commission and establish the Watauga County Fire Chiefs Council to work in conjunction with the Firefighters' Association.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

Potential for Fire Training Facility

Following the vote, Mr. Marks addressed the need for a local Fire Training Facility. He explained that while the County prefers to conduct firefighter training in-house, they currently must use facilities elsewhere. Mr. Marks noted the potential to create a Fire Training Facility on the property currently occupied by the National Guard in the Town of Boone, which already contains the necessary infrastructure. He stated that the proposal has unanimous support from both the Town and the County. Commissioner Marsh acknowledged that this has been an ongoing discussion and noted that available sites are becoming increasingly limited. Mr. Marks concluded by recognizing that the property is not currently available but expressed the desire to be considered a priority when it does become available.

7. FISCAL AGENT AND GRANT MATCH REQUEST FOR WATAUGA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Kendra Phipps, Livestock Extension Agent with NC Cooperative Extension, requested that Watauga County serve as fiscal agent and provide the required 15% match for an NC Agricultural Development Grant. The grant would fund shared-use agricultural equipment, including a rock windrower, picker, fence stapler, T-post driver, and fencing wire unrollers, to help local producers recover from Hurricane Helene. The County's match would include \$2,500 in-kind through personnel/administrative support and a \$3,500 monetary contribution, with equipment stored at the Ag Services office for local farmers to rent.

Ms. Phipps explained that many hayfields could not be harvested after Hurricane Helene due to rocks and sediment, and that the grant-funded equipment would help farmers recover. She noted that rental fees help cover maintenance costs and that the equipment is heavily used by local farmers. Commissioner Hodges commented that this is a valuable service to the community.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved that Watauga County serve as fiscal agent and provide the \$6,000 match if the grant is awarded.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

8. ANNUAL COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION FOR PROJECT ON AGING

Angie Boitnotte, Project on Aging Director, presented the annual comprehensive evaluation of the Project on Aging, as required by the NC Division of Health Service Regulation. The report included client, service, and revenue statistics, along with a review of agency policies. Ms. Boitnotte explained that she is responsible for preparing the annual report and reviewing policies to determine if updates are needed. The Board was asked to approve updates to agency policies, including the addition of "Level III" under Scope of Services and Admission of Clients, and a correction to a page reference under Service Records.

Commissioner Hodges, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to approve the annual report and the policy changes as presented.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

8A. OLD COVE CREEK PARK UPDATE

Derrick Goddard, Vice President of BREC, provided an update on the restoration of Old Cove Creek Park, which sustained significant damage during Hurricane Helene. The restoration project is scheduled to go to bid on Friday, October 10, 2025, with the goal of ensuring the County receives FEMA funding.

Mr. Goddard shared site plans and project details with the Board. Planned upgrades include restoring the creek, cleaning debris, raising the field by five feet, adding 41 parking spaces, and

widening the trail to eight feet for handicap accessibility. Recreational improvements include three pickleball courts, a full basketball court, a playground, a 90 x 290 ft playing field, a half-mile walking track, and a concrete pad for the Doc Watson Festival. Additional improvements include a restroom/picnic pavilion with two unisex bathrooms, dedicated crosswalks, and potentially a new well. Bids are due by 4:00 PM on October 10, 2025.

The presentation was for informational purposes only, and no action was required by the Board.

9. MISCELLANEOUS ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

A. Recommended Contract Award for Employee Medical, Dental, Vision, and Life Insurance

County Manager Deron Geouque presented renewal rates for employee medical, dental, vision, and life insurance benefits. The initial CIGNA medical renewal reflected a 42.3% increase, which was negotiated down to 14.4% through market analysis and bidding. United HealthCare offered the same medical plan structure with a 14.4% increase and without major changes to benefits. Eligible employees would also receive \$1,000 funded into their HSA accounts.

Vision insurance with Community Eye Care were presented with minimal increases, including a new benefit covering an annual contact lens fitting fee through the voluntary eyewear plan, at no additional cost to the County. Life insurance through The Standard will continue with no changes.

Chairman Eggers asked about typical annual increases, and Mr. Geouque noted they average about 5%, explaining that the final 14.4% medical increase aligns with current market trends. He also highlighted that the plan deductible is \$2,500 and that employees can receive the HSA contribution, and that the life insurance plan remains unchanged. Dental negotiations are ongoing and will be presented at a later date.

Commissioner Greene, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to approve United HealthCare for medical insurance with \$1,000 HSA contributions and Community Eye Care for vision, with the respective increases.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

B. Change Order 7 for Valle Crucis School

County Manager Deron Geouque presented Change Order 7 from H&M Constructors for Valle Crucis School, which includes adjustments such as relocation of the grease trap, door hardware, kitchen mixing valves, well house slab, soffits, cafeteria casework revisions, and various landscape and millwork changes. The net effect of the change order is a decrease of \$37,438.28 to the contract amount. Supporting documentation from Clark Nexsen was provided for review.

Commissioner Marsh inquired if additional change orders were expected. Mr. Geouque stated that at least one more for landscaping is anticipated to create a screen using maple trees along the parking lot, with potential additional unused allowances and security-related change orders. County Attorney Nathan Miller asked about the method of receiving the reduction from H&M, and Mr. Geouque confirmed it would be an overall contract reduction.

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to approve deductive Change Order 7 for Valle Crucis School.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

C. Guy Ford Road License Agreement

Greg Derby, property owner adjacent to the County's Guy Ford paddle access, requested authorization to extend the existing fence to the bank in the parking lot to prevent trespassing on his property. Mr. Derby agreed to fund the fence installation. County Attorney Nathan Miller drafted a license agreement for the Board's approval.

Commissioner Hodges, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to approve the license allowing Mr. Derby to extend the fence at the Guy Ford paddle access.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

D. American Red Cross License Renewal

County Manager Deron Geouque presented a request from the American Red Cross to renew their license agreement for the property located at 331 Queen Street, Boone, NC. The current agreement is set to expire on February 27, 2026. The proposed one-year renewal would extend the agreement under the same terms and conditions, allowing the Red Cross to continue providing disaster and shelter assistance in the community.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to approve a one-year renewal of the license agreement with the American Red Cross for 331 Queen Street, Boone, NC.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

E. Parks and Recreation Department Out-of-State Travel Request

Craig Lands, Assistant Director of Parks and Recreation, requested approval to travel out of state to attend the 2025 Special Olympics North America Tennis & Pickleball Championships, October 15–18, 2025. All expenses will be covered by the Special Olympics Watauga County budget, and use of the County van was requested.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to approve the out-of-state travel and use of the County van.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

F. Boards and Commissions

AppalCART Board

The terms of Frank David V. (Quint), David Jackson, and Joe Eller on the AppalCART Board were set to expire. All three members have provided valuable feedback and faithfully fulfilled their duties during their terms and expressed willingness to continue serving. The Board considered reappointment for an additional two-year term in accordance with the AppalCART formative resolution.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to waive the first reading and reappoint Frank David V. (Quint), David Jackson, and Joe Eller to the AppalCART Board for an additional two-year term.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

G. New Ambulance Upfit

County Manager Deron Geouque presented a quote from ETA for graphics and painting of three (3) new ambulances recently purchased as remounts. The total cost is \$15,145 per ambulance, for a combined total of \$45,435.

Vice-Chairman Castle asked about the expected time frame for completion, and Mr. Geouque indicated that the upfitting is expected to be completed by mid-December.

Commissioner Greene, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to approve ETA's quote in the amount of \$45,435 for graphics and painting of the three (3) new ambulances.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

H. Purchase of New Ambulance

County staff was notified of a new ambulance available for purchase from Northwestern Emergency Vehicles for \$216,544, as the original client was unable to proceed with the purchase. The unit is on the HGAC contract and was competitively bid. Staff recommended the purchase to assist with the transition from Watauga Medics to County-operated services.

County Manager Geouque suggested that the Board may wish to defer action on this item until after Closed Session and moved the item to "Potential Action after Closed Session".

10. COMMISSIONER COMMENTS

There were no Commissioner comments.

11. CLOSED SESSION

At 7:20 PM, Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to enter Closed Session pursuant to G.S. § 143-318.11(a)(3) to discuss attorney-client privileged matters and § 143-318.11(a)(5) to consider matters related to land acquisition. County Attorney Miller noted that, under attorney-client privileged matters, the Board would discuss Case No. 5:25-cv-157.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

At 9:13 PM, Chairman Eggers, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to resume the open meeting.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

12. POSSIBLE ACTION AFTER CLOSED SESSION

Purchase of New Ambulance

The Board had deferred action on this item (Item 9H) until after Closed Session.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to accept Northwestern Emergency Vehicles' quote of \$216,544 for a new 2025 Chevy Silverado 4X4 Type I AEV ambulance.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

13. ADJOURN

At 9:16 PM, Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to adjourn the meeting.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

Braxton Eggers, Chairman

ATTEST: Katie Hancock, Clerk to the Board