

**MINUTES OF A
REGULAR MEETING
OF THE JACKSON COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
HELD ON
NOVEMBER 18, 2013**

The Jackson County Board of Commissioners met in a Regular Session on November 18, 2013, 6:00 pm, Justice & Administration Building, Room A201, 401 Grindstaff Cove Rd., Sylva, North Carolina.

Present: Jack Debnam, Chairman
Doug Cody, Vice Chair
Mark Jones, Commissioner
Charles Elders, Commissioner
Vicki Greene, Commissioner

Chuck Wooten, County Manager
J. K. Coward, Jr., County Attorney
Pat Parris, Clerk to Board

Chairman Debnam called the meeting to order.

AGENDA: Chairman Debnam amended the Agenda by adding Comprehensive Transportation Plan – Project Priority List. Commissioner Elders moved to approve the amended Agenda. Commissioner Jones seconded the Motion. Motion carried.

MINUTES: Commissioner Cody moved to approve the Minutes of a Public Hearing and Regular Meeting of November 4, 2013. Commissioner Greene seconded the Motion. Motion carried.

(1) COUNTY MANAGER REPORT: Mr. Wooten reported:

(a) Recreation Director: Rusty Ellis was introduced as the director.

(b) Harris Hospital: Based on the recent announcement about the sale of CJ Harris Hospital, he requested Bobby McMahan to research the tax records and identify properties listed in the name of the hospital that may be included in the sale. With the conversion from an exempt entity to a taxable entity, the real property, buildings, and personal property will become taxable. The parcels with an identifier of CJ Harris Hospital, Harris Hospital, WestCare, or MedWest have heretofore been classified as tax exempt and have a current tax value of \$73,846,020. Based on the current tax rate, they would generate \$206,769 in new revenue for the County if all the properties are included in the sale to Duke/LifePoint. These properties would also be taxable by the Town of Sylva.

(c) Social Services on the Cherokee Reservation: The Jackson County Department of Social Services has been providing services to the Tribe under a Memorandum of Agreement signed in 2007. This MOA covers the NC Department of Health and Human Services, Jackson, Swain, Graham, and Cherokee counties. The Tribe is in the process of creating their own Department of Social Services which will assume the services that have heretofore been provided by the various counties. A formal notice has not been issued; however, it is anticipated the transition may take place in 2015. The Jackson County FY 13-14 budget has 6 positions that provide services to the Tribe so those positions will be eliminated when the responsibility for social services is transferred. The Board of Social Services and the Director are discussing how best to handle this transition. He will provide additional information as it becomes available.

(d) Jackson County Airport: In response to a request from the Airport Authority, he has been discussing how best to staff the airport following the resignation of Rollin Stickle as part time operations manager. It appears there are a couple of current airplane owners that are willing to assume the responsibility of being the contact person for the FAA, NCDOT Aviation Division, and other pilots who are inquiring about accessing and utilizing the airport facilities. He plans to utilize Public Works employees to make periodic inspections of the facilities and perform routine maintenance activities. By utilizing both groups, a plan can be developed to provide coverage to the airport and ensure that facilities and equipment are properly maintained.

(e) **Transit Vehicles Conversion to Propane**: The transit vehicles have now been converted and are operating on propane with gasoline as a back-up fuel source. He will update the Board as operational information becomes available as to the fuel cost savings from the conversion.

(2) **CONSENT AGENDA**: Darlene Fox, Finance Director, presented Finance, Tax Collector and Refund Reports for October 2013, and two budget amendments.

Motion: *Commissioner Greene moved to approve the consent agenda.*

Commissioner Cody seconded the Motion. Motion carried by unanimous vote.

(3) **DILLSBORO MERCHANTS - GSMR**: John Faulk, Dillsboro merchant, stated that several years ago due to concerns over lost jobs, lost wages, empty businesses, a sharp decline in local tourism and real estate values, brought about feelings of despair and fear of the future for Dillsboro. A careful review of economic data revealed that Dillsboro was one of the hardest hit towns during one of the worst economic times in history. Citizens, business owners, town and county leaders all agreed that something needed to be done. People were invited to get involved, which they did, and the broadest, brightest collection of citizens, businesses and government leaders at the town and county level endorsed and encouraged the process. This process required dozens of people to invest thousands of hours to reach a consensus which was to support increased rail transportation in Jackson County. The town knows what it needs to do and needs bold leadership from the county to make it happen. The county commissioners are responsible for the assets of the county and are the risk managers elected to represent and act on behalf of the people. Everyone knows what Dillsboro was like with the train and there is every reason to believe it can be that way once again. There are risks from doing something, but sometimes there are even greater risks from doing nothing. Citizens believe that if the county leadership passes on the railroad opportunity without any other economic development opportunities on the horizon, many town businesses will most likely fail. Leaders should never risk a lot to save a little, but rather should invest a little to get a lot. While \$700,000 is a lot of money to invest over a fifteen year period, it equals less than \$50,000 per year. According to WCU's economic impact study, the railroad would generate approximately \$26 million annually for businesses in Jackson County and is a big return for a little risk. The town is asking the county to recognize and appreciate the years of research, brain storming, planning and negotiating that has put this opportunity up for consideration. He urged the county to support and work with everyone involved to return rail transportation to Dillsboro.

Betty Farmer, WCU Professor, stated she believes in the power of partnerships. WCU partnered with the Town of Dillsboro about four years ago and since that time faculty, staff and students have invested thousands of hours in the town. They conducted survey research, completed an economic impact study, created a new mobile web app, provided training and social media, implemented several promotional campaigns to bring more visitors to the town. The town is currently planning the third annual "WCU Night" to kick off the annual Lights and Luminaries Festival. During last year's WCU Night, merchants reported sales doubled and are hoping for similar results this year. Everyone is also excited about a new partnership with SCC's small business center. Together, WCU and SCC are promoting a business plan competition to attract new businesses to Dillsboro.

These activities emphasize the point that some great working relationships have already been established. There is a credible potential for a private/public partnership that brings together the Great Smoky Mountains Railway, the Town of Dillsboro, Jackson County, the Chamber of Commerce and Western Carolina University. The last four years has not really been just about Dillsboro, it is about the over all economic well being of the county and the western NC region. If Dillsboro benefits the entire area will benefit. The railroad has the product, Dillsboro has the infrastructure, the county has the resources and WCU stands as a ready partner. This could be a role model partnership for other communities to follow. She requested the county to support the return of the train and allow the potential of a powerful partnership to be realized.

(4) COMPREHENSIVE TRANSPORTATION PLAN – PROJECT

PRIORITY LIST: The following 2013 priority projects were recommended during the Work Session:

- (a) NC 107 from US 23 Business to NC 116 – upgrade to boulevard with median, improve intersections, and construct access management improvements.
- (b) US 64 from NC 107 to Lance Road – replace 2-lane road with 3-lane road, construct round-about at intersection of US 64 and NC 107.
- (c) US 74 at US 23 Business – construct westbound ramp.
- (d) US 23 Business from Hospital Road to NC 107 – widen to 4-lane divided boulevard
- (e) Old Settlement Road from NC 107 to NC 116 – widen to minimum 22’.
- (f) Ledbetter Road/Monteith Gap Road – widen with multi-use paths/bike lanes, extend Ledbetter Road to connect to Monteith Gap Road as a loop road.
- (g) Wilmont Bridge- construct new bridge and modernize intersection.

Motion: *Commissioner Greene moved to approve the priority projects.*

Commissioner Jones seconded the Motion. Motion carried by unanimous vote.

(5) CASHIERS COMMERCIAL AREA DEVELOPMENT ORDINANCE AMENDMENTS:

A public hearing was held on November 18, 2013 at 5:50 p.m. and no public comments were made. The Cashiers Community Planning Council recommended amendments to Sections 7-2 and 7-3 of the ordinance. Those sections establish the thresholds for a project being reviewed as a conditional use in the Village Center and General Commercial Districts. Currently the threshold is 2,500 sf in the Village Center District and 5,000 sf in the General Commercial District. The proposed amendments would reduce the threshold to 1,500 sf in both districts.

Motion: *Commissioner Jones moved to adopt the amendments. Commissioner Elders seconded the Motion. Motion carried by unanimous vote.*

(6) RECREATION BOARD:

Motion: *Commissioner Jones moved to reappoint Bill Gross to a 3-year term on the Recreation Board. Commissioner Elders seconded the Motion. Motion carried by unanimous vote.*

(7) COMMUNITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR LONG TERM CARE:

Carry over.

(8) TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY: *Carry over.*

(9) TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY CHAIRMAN: *Carry over.*

Informal Comments by Public:

(a) Marie Leatherwood of Sylva stated her disapproval of any support from the county to GSMR.

(b) Rose Anne Johnson, owner of Bradley's General Store in Dillsboro, stated that based on the numbers she has been able to gather from June through November, the train made 63 trips over a period of 169 days and transported over 9,700 visitors to Dillsboro. The train chose only to come approximately one third of the days that were available during those months and did not come at all during September. It is worth considering assistance to the railroad since it is a great boost to the economy. Dillsboro is a national treasure and needs help to preserve and promote it.

(c) Jim Mueller of Glenville stated he supports the railroad returning to Dillsboro. If the opportunity of getting the railroad is lost, it will end up in Cherokee and once it gets there it will not come back. The railroad belongs in Dillsboro. There is a risk in doing everything, but there is a greater risk in not doing what should be done. He urged the Board to act and keep the railroad in Dillsboro.

(d) Robert Lindsey, Dillsboro business owner, stated Dillsboro is the crossroads for NC 19/23 and US 441. He has seen the economic activity in Swain County and the unbelievable economic activity the train has done for Bryson City. The train should operate from Dillsboro. The issue of having the train return to Dillsboro is an important decision that all the commissioners need to make. He urged the commissioners to think long and hard, on a nonpartisan basis, and consider the economic impact the railroad will have on Jackson County not just in the next ten years, but maybe twenty years.

(e) T. J. Walker, Dillsboro Inn, stated a Petition will be presented which shows half of the signatures are county citizens and half are from tourists who came to town and said they remember the train being here and were sorry to see it go and wanted to support its return. For 18-20 years Jackson County benefited with the train having its point of origin in Dillsboro. There was a tremendous return on the investment. Ms. Farmer talked about a regional partnership and has already seen a full commitment of Swain County and Bryson City as the central station between the two railroad excursions. Swain County has made an economic commitment which strengthens the economic viability of GSMR which makes Nantahala, Bryson City, and Dillsboro an enterprise zone for tourism.

(f) Mike Potts, owner of Nancy Tut's Christmas Shop in Dillsboro, presented a Petition with over 3,300 signatures in support of GSMR. Nineteen years ago the Dillsboro Merchants Association had 53 active members and now there only 30. Not long ago there were some proposals to either grant or loan GSMR \$700,000. The railroad made it perfectly clear from the very beginning they wanted the funds in the form of a grant. The county required that the railroad must do certain things such as provide a certain number of jobs, originate runs from Dillsboro and make runs to Dillsboro and, in return, about 1/15th or \$46,667.67 of the \$700,000 would be forgiven on a yearly basis. Based on the 2012 census, he calculates the investment would be about 9 cents per month per person. Even though all of the population does not pay taxes, all are protected and provided with schools, benefits, etc. by the county. He stated he believes tremendously in the railroad.

(g) Janet Chinnners, Country Tradition in Dillsboro, stated that November was a huge success in Dillsboro with the festival which had thousands of people roaming the streets. There was not an empty bed in town and sales were up for almost every merchant. What the train did was not just bring people in, they advertised so people knew that Dillsboro was the town where the train was located. GSMR spent thousands of dollars per year for advertising so when they advertised for Dillsboro, they advertised for Jackson County. \$700,000 is an investment in advertising because the merchants do not have that kind of money. She urged the Board to help the train come back – even just the turntable itself which will generate a lot of interest. With the train, Dillsboro could be back on the map as a town and where everybody knows it is in Jackson County.

(h) Robert Williams, the Chocolate Factory in Dillsboro, stated this is his 15th year in business. The \$700,000 is an investment in community development. His small business employees 14 people throughout the year. His October revenue was the best October in years, a lot of which was due to the train. The investment is just not in the train, but in Jackson County, Dillsboro, Sylva, Cullowhee and Cashiers because that is where the money goes. Because of the train and his increase in revenue, he advertises on WRGC - thus the money gets spread around. The train means a lot to business owners, the town and community.

(i) Susan Leveille, Riverwood Shops in Dillsboro, stated she supports the train which will be an incredible benefit to the economy of Dillsboro. The train did much to make awareness of the town and the county through its advertising and through people just coming in who told their friends - word of mouth is very incredible to any business. The train will not be the sole salvation of Dillsboro, but it will be a very influential component. She urged the county to be cautious about giving money without the possibility of a pay back. Any for profit business would love to have an influx of money. The money should be repaid in some manner - cash as well as an overall contribution. During the recent pottery festival, the train blocked off the entire street to Riverwood Shops for 2 ½ hours. She hopes that is not how they are going to treat their neighbors if they return.

Press Conference

There being no further business, Commissioner Greene moved to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Elders seconded the Motion. Motion carried and the meeting adjourned at 7:15 p.m.

Attest:

Approved:

Patsy C. Parris, Clerk to Board

W. J. Debnam, Chairman