

**MINUTES OF A
WORK SESSION
OF THE JACKSON COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
HELD ON
OCTOBER 07, 2025**

The Jackson County Board of Commissioners met in a Work Session on October 07, 2025, 9:00 p.m., Justice and Administration Building, Room A201, 401 Grindstaff Cove Road, Sylva, North Carolina.

Present: Mark A. Letson, Chairman	Kevin King, County Manager
Todd Bryson, Vice Chair	Darlene Fox, Finance Director
Jenny Lynn Hooper, Commissioner	Angela M. Winchester, Clerk to the Board
Michael Jennings, Commissioner	
John W. Smith, Commissioner	

Chairman Letson called the meeting to order.

(1) COMPREHENSIVE PARKS AND RECREATION PLAN: Nate Halubka, Project Consultant, McGill Associates (via Zoom), presented: System-wide Parks and Recreation status update:

(a) The two views of recreation offerings:

- Expense: Money goes in, services come out. Nothing more, no significant impact on bottom line.
- Investment: Money goes in, services come out. Additional ROI comes from the investment.

(b) Research supports that parks and recreation acts more like an investment:

- Property values increase
- Economic development
- Visitor spending

(c) Programs and System Analysis:

- Park system acreage was well below the national median
- Budget was slightly below the average
- Benchmarking facilities:
 - Within range for a significant amount of facilities
 - It was atypical for a community to be in range for every facility type
 - The county's work to increase trails/greenways was needed as the county was below the national lower quartile
- A system in very good shape:
 - System was very well maintained
 - The one distressed part of the system had been planned for
- Program offerings and participation were growing
- Some facilities were artificially capping enrollment

(d) Webpage project: keeping residents informed

(e) Public input meetings top 10 requests from residents:

- 1. Adventure playground/ropes course
- 2. Greenways
- 3. Restrooms
- 4. Pickleball courts
- 5. Dog park

- 6. Skateboard park
 - 7. Bike pump track
 - 8. Indoor aquatics center
 - 9. Amphitheater
 - 10. Blueway/paddle access
- (f)** Public input meetings top 10 requests from visitors:
- 1. Pickleball courts
 - 2. Adventure playground/ropes course
 - 3. Greenways
 - 4. Bike trails
 - 5. Dog park
 - 6. Amphitheater
 - 7. Blueway/paddle access
 - 8. Baseball/softball fields
 - 9. Restrooms
 - 10. Playgrounds
- (g)** Focus group findings:
- Residents and staff were proud of the county's offerings
 - Not enough life guards for aquatics
 - Partnerships really well
 - County leadership was very supportive
 - Trails and greenways were vital
 - Land availability was a major barrier
 - The park system was helping the local economy
- (h)** Open survey: able to see geographic differences in need:
- District 1 top 5:
 - Nature trails
 - Jogging/walking trails (paved)
 - Fitness facility
 - Open space
 - Farmers market
 - District 2 top 5:
 - Jogging/walking trails (paved)
 - Nature trails
 - Open space
 - Farmers market
 - Bicycle trails
 - District 3 top 5:
 - Jogging/walking trails (paved)
 - Nature trails
 - Open space
 - Fitness facility
 - Indoor swimming pool
 - District 4 top 5:
 - Fitness facility
 - Jogging/walking trails (paved)
 - Indoor swimming pool
 - Nature trails
 - Outdoor swimming pool

(i) Emerging themes:

- More trails and greenways
- More event space and environmental education
- Some facilities were below benchmark levels
- Part-time staff were impacting some program/facility offerings
- System was in good shape
- Flat land constraints were impacting program offerings
- Continued system development

General discussions were held.

Informational item.

(2) HEADWATERS DISTRICT CONSERVATION PLAN: Owen Carson, Botanist/Senior Ecologist, Equinox, presented: Headwaters District Conservation Plan:

(a) Purpose: To develop a Conservation Plan that assesses the conservation priorities of the community and generates recommendations to ensure the rural, scenic and natural character were conserved in the face of increasing development pressure.

(b) Process:

- Vision: The Conservation Plan for the county Headwaters District was an authoritative blueprint to make responsible land use decisions that conserved and enhanced the biodiverse mountainous landscape: forest, streams, rivers, farms, wetlands and wildlife, in the face of ever-increasing development pressure and climate challenges. Implementing the strategies and best practices in the plan allowed for a balance between development and land conservation that sustained the unique ecology, rural character and heritage for generations to come.

(c) Goals:

- Advance resilient development and resilient open space strategies appropriate for future growth of the region.
- Protect the natural and beneficial functions of watersheds.
- Conserve and sustain landscape integrity, ecologically sensitive areas, working lands and farms and natural vistas to protect agricultural resources and natural beauty.
- Promote economic growth across the community and for the farmer and the community by embracing conservation and farmland preservation.
- Empower communities and educate people to be stewards of the land and to embrace Southern Appalachian natural and cultural heritage.

(d) Inventory and Assessment:

- Data inventory to guide analysis and recommendations
- Ordinance review
- Suitability data used in the assessment
- Projected farmland loss

(e) Stakeholder and Public Engagement:

- Two events held
- Public survey

(f) Priorities and Best Practices:

- Conservation priorities: The planning process identified five core priorities:
 - Safeguard water resources
 - Direct growth away from sensitive areas
 - Preserve farmland and working forests
 - Connect landscapes and communities
 - Promote stewardship and outdoor economy

- Best Practices: The plan outlined practical best management practices tailored to three key audiences:
 - County leaders and planners
 - Developers and builders
 - Private landowners
- (g) Recommendations:
 - Promote responsible development
 - Protect and enhance farmland
 - Establish a headwaters stewardship council
 - Strengthen and enforce land use ordinances
 - Invest in connectivity and outdoor recreation
 - Implement priority conservation projects

General discussions were held.

Informational item.

(3) GREEN ENERGY PARK REPORT: Morgan Kennedy, Program Manager, presented: Green Energy Park: The Jackson County Green Energy Park (JCGEP) was the only facility in the world that operated an arts program from reclaimed landfill gas.

- (a) Glassblowing:
 - Rental use, limited classes
 - Internationally and nationally acclaimed glass artists based at JCGEP
- (b) Blacksmithing:
 - Rental use, limited classes
 - Nationally acclaimed blacksmiths based at JCGEP
- (c) Foundry Metal Casting:
 - Rental use
 - Regional university use
- (d) Ceramics-Wood Salt Kilns:
 - Salt and Anagama wood kilns
 - Rental use
 - Regional university use
- (e) Rebrand:
 - Dillsboro Creative Arts Center
 - Creating art and community through sustainability
 - Change, rebrand, promote, grow
- (f) Park focal areas:
 - Environmental stewardship
 - Maker's space arts and crafts facility
 - Educational offerings and regional educational program support
 - Community arts events/programming
 - Develop and promote in ways to enrich and expand the organization
- (g) Community arts events/programming:
 - Rework events programming to continue to support K-12, county organizations, community colleges and nonprofits, but restructure to cover costs and make a profit
 - Promote program and paying clients
 - Seek funding options/partnerships to help cover the pro-bono programming
- (h) Mobile glass and blacksmithing units: 12-15 conducted annually, K-12, cc, WCU, etc.

- (i) Community events/programming Youth Arts Festival. Look to move to town or Monteith Park in the future for better community access
- (j) Classes: ceramics, metals, glass, folklife
- (k) Grassroots arts programs subgrant for community and nonprofit organizations
- (l) Name change: Dillsboro Creative Arts Center:
 - Expand regional and national recognition
 - Hybrid nonprofit, outside funding support

General discussions were held.

Informational item.

(4) COOPERATIVE EXTENSION REPORT: Rob Hawk, Extension Director, presented:

- (a) Programming:
 - Swain Soil and Water Field Day
 - Heritage Christian Academy Nature Study
 - Jackson Summer Day Camp
 - Leopold Education Project
 - Pond Management Technical Assistance
 - Forestry Management Technical Assistance
 - Wildlife Nuisance Technical Assistance
 - Tree Seedling Give Away
 - Veterans Day
 - Arbor Day Celebration
- (b) Community Development:
 - District 4 Conservation Planning Steering Committee
 - Farmland Preservation Board
 - WCU Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning
 - NC RC&D Board
- (c) Senior Center:
 - A Matter of Balance
 - Living Healthy with Chronic Disease
- (d) Programs:
 - Sylva Farmers Market Donation Station
 - 4-H Embryology
 - 4-H Summer Camp Programs
- (e) County:
 - Local Food Coordinator
 - Healthy Carolinians Coalition
 - Guest Lecturer at WCU
- (f) Livestock Meetings and Workshops
 - Jackson, Macon, Swain Cattlemen's Association
 - Annual Farm Tour to Georgia
- (g) Youth Livestock Programming:
 - In 2024, 14 members attended six showmanship clinics, three fairs, livestock shows, project record books
 - In 2025, 6 members participated in the lamb project, visited five farms, attended six showmanship clinic, fairs and livestock shows
 - In 2025, 4-H Livestock Judging Team had 10 practices, would attend State 4-H Livestock Judging Competition in Raleigh

(h) Outreach and Cross Programming:

- Monthly radio spots
- Monthly news articles
- Social media posts
- Quarterly livestock newsletter
- Cattlemen's Association
- Face to face contacts, technical assistance, correspondence, farm visits, phone calls, emails, etc.
- School enrichment
- Summer camps

(i) 4-H Youth Development:

- Three clubs, a total of 40 youth enrolled
- Three schools, 2nd graders for Embryology
- Enrichment and curriculum to three community partner-led day camps
- 6/10 schools
- Three of the Shooting Sports youth join the national NC4-H Team
- 550+ youth and 600+ residents reached with clubs, outreach and school enrichment

(j) Programming/Group Educational Activity:

- Garden Life Series
- Free Pesticide pickup day
- Pesticide license
- Landscape Contractor Course: Macon, Jackson, Haywood
- Tomato grafting
- Outreach Consumer
- Outreach Commercial

General discussions were held.

Informational item.

(5) PUBLIC SAFETY: Mr. King stated this item was about creating service districts in the county. In North Carolina, service districts could be created for fire, rescue and ambulance. He wanted to discuss creating one district for all three services. He had been working with Mr. Kubis and they had a resolution for the first step. Public meetings would also have to be held.

He provided information about the new projected tax rate:

(a) General fund:

- Public Safety 6.48
- General 25.25
- Total Tax 31.73

(b) Fire Tax Fund

- Cashiers new tax rate:
 - General 31.73
 - New Fire Tax rate 1.25
 - Total 32.98
- Highlands fire tax rate: 0.0150

The county would provide the same amount of funding for the services.

General discussions were held.

Commissioner Bryson stated he had heard from some citizens that were worried the departments would lose funding.

Mr. King stated he met with all the fire chiefs and shared with them the commitment from the county to continue providing for the needs of the departments.

Commissioner Bryson stated several of the people were near retirement. Would that affect their retirement?

Mr. King stated, unfortunately, it would. Once they do the fire service district, there would be no coordinators paid by the county. They would be paid by the fire department in the future. They proposed to offer first priority on any other county job they would want to transition to.

Commissioner Smith stated this would affect homeowner's insurance rates for citizens in a positive way.

Mr. King stated the numbers provided were as of that day and could change based on the budget requests from the departments.

General discussions were held.

Informational item.

(6) OTHER BUSINESS: None.

There being no further business, Commissioner Bryson moved to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Smith seconded the Motion. Motion carried and the meeting adjourned at 11:01 p.m.

Attest:

Approved:

Angela M. Winchester, Clerk to Board

Mark A. Letson, Chairman