MINUTES OF A
BOARD BUDGET RETREAT
OF THE JACKSON COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
HELD ON
FEBRUARY 17, 2026

The Jackson County Board of Commissioners met in a Board Budget Retreat on February 17, 2026, 10:00 a.m., Room 102A, Burrell Building, Southwestern Community College, 447 College Drive, 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.

Mr. King stated the purpose of the meeting was for staff to listen to the Board's insight regarding priorities for next year. During the development of the budget process, staff would meet with department heads to work through challenges and look at opportunities. EMS and Rescue were present to provide a brief overview for their departments to be taken into consideration during the budget process.

(1) <u>HARRIS REGIONAL HOSPITAL EMS</u>: Matthew Burrell, EMS Operations Manager; Kyle Dowling, Supervisor and Training Officer; and Toby Moore, Supervisor, were present for this item.

Mr. Burrell presented: Harris EMS proposal to add 12-hour peak time ambulance crew:

(a) Purpose: To request approval to add one 12-hour ambulance crew during peak call volume hours to reduce service gaps and maintain reliable emergency medical coverage for county residents.

(b) Key Issue: EMS call data showed consistent peak periods where demand exceeded available resources. During these times:

- All ambulances were frequently committed
- Mutual aid was more frequently required
- On-duty crews experienced increased workload and fatigue

These conditions placed strain on the EMS system and increased risk to patients, personnel and the county.

(c) Emergency medical response was time sensitive. When no units were available:

- High-acuity patients waited longer for care
- Concurrent emergencies stressed the system
- Public confidence and service reliability declined

As call volume continued to trend upward, the current staffing model was no longer sufficient during peak hours.

(d) Proposed solution: Add an additional 12-hour ambulance crew scheduled specifically during peak demand periods.

(e) Proposed coverage:

- Shift length: 12 hours
- Timeframe: [e.g., 0800–2000 or 1000–2200]
- Frequency: Daily
- This unit would be stationed in the Cullowhee area.

(f) Expected benefit:

- Operational improvement:
  - Increased unit availability during peak hours
  - Faster response times for emergency calls
  - Reduced reliance on mutual aid
- Patient and community Impact:
  - Timelier medical intervention
  - Improved patient outcomes
  - More consistent EMS coverage
- Workforce Sustainability:
  - Lower fatigue and burnout
  - Improved employee retention and recruitment

(g) Financial overview:

- Estimated annual cost:
  - Staffing cost (personnel + benefits): $344,923.49
  - Unit cost (through depreciation): $95,840.00
  - Total estimated cost: $440,763.49
- Cost considerations:
  - Decreased mutual aid utilization
  - Lower risk of service failures and liability exposure

(h) Implementation timeline:

- Upon approval:
  - Budget authorization
  - Staffing (hire personnel)
  - Schedule implementation
  - Begin deployment

Estimated time to full implementation: January 1, 2027

(i) Recommendation: Approve the addition of a 12-hour peak time ambulance crew to address documented service gaps, protect public safety and maintain reliable EMS coverage for county residents.

General discussions were held.

Informational item.

(2) **<u>GLENVILLE-CASHIERS RESCUE SQUAD</u>**: Nate Turner, Board Chair; Jeffrey Stewart, Squad Chief; and Jeremy Stewart, EMS Director, were present for this item.

Mr. Turner presented:

(a) FY25-26 Budget Request:

- Additional $23,875 per month for payrate adjustment
- New Quick Response Vehicle (QRV) $90,000
- Inflation adjustment to overall budget support

(b) Payrate analysis and comparisons:

- 16 full-time paramedic positions:
  - Median tenure five years
  - Starting pay $19.20 per hour
  - Two open positions
- Regional EMS agency pay:
  - Harris, Swain, EBCI, Henderson, Macon, Transylvania
  - Average posted starting pay $25.05 per hour
  - If Buncombe was included $26.10

- Requested starting payrate increase to $25.20 per hour
    - $6.00 per hour increase

(c) Pay increase analysis for Medic Crew of 16:

- Added base pay cost $210,240
- Vacation $27,648
- Sick time $11,520
- Overtime $14,717
- Additional incremental $22,451
- Total needed for pay increase $286,575 annually / $23,875 monthly

(d) QRV usage:

- Supervisory level response
- 3rd call response/standby
- Wilderness and inclement weather patient access
- Towing and rescue equipment to back country operations

General discussions were held.
Informational item.

(3) <u>GENERAL COUNTY INFORMATION</u>: Ms. Fox presented the following general information:

(a) Mandated County Service Areas:

- General Government:
    - Election Administration
    - Deed Registration
    - Tax Assessment and Collections
    - Courts Maintenance
    - Medical Examiner
- Community and Environmental Services:
    - Code Enforcement / Inspections
    - Solid Waste Management
    - Water Quality
    - Environmental Health and Safety Inspections
- Human Services:
    - Social Services
    - Public Health
    - Child Welfare
    - Behavioral Health
- Public Safety:
    - Emergency Management
    - Fire Protection
    - Ambulance Service
    - Law Enforcement
    - Detention

(b) Discretionary County Services:

- Community and Environmental Services:
    - Parks
    - Open space
    - GIS
    - Libraries
    - Animal Control, Shelter

- Human Services:
    - Cooperative Extension
    - Housing Affordability
    - Homeless Prevention
    - Veterans Services

(c) Role of the Public:

- Elect Board of Commissioners as its representative for leading the county.
- Gain an understanding of the County Manager's Budget recommendations presented in the annual budget.
- Attend public hearings or submit public comments to voice support or disagreement with recommendations contained within the proposed budget.

(d) Role of Board of Commissioners:

- Represent their constituents.
- Establish county policy and set the property tax rate.
- Evaluate the budget recommendation of the County Manager.
- Hold a public hearing to provide residents an opportunity to speak on the proposed budget.
- Hold budget work sessions to discuss the recommendations contained within the budget proposal and may request the County Manager make modifications.
- Approve modifications to the budget through the year.

(e) Role of County Departments:

- Complete operational plans to communicate service needs and priorities.
- Request funding for the upcoming fiscal year to support delivery of services to the community for specific program areas.
- Department budget requests support county priorities.

(f) Role of the County Manager:

- Establish countywide priorities for budget development.
- Understand Board of Commissioner priorities and actions required to accomplish them.
- Outline major new initiatives.
- Evaluate requests from departments; prepare evaluations and analysis to finalize the budget recommendation.
- Make formal budget recommendation to the Board of Commissioners.
- Communicate the impact of any major tax or fee increase on residents and businesses.

Informational item.

(4) FINANCIAL REVIEW: Ms. Fox presented:

(a) How the county budget was funded:

- General Fund:
    - Property tax
    - Sales tax
    - Charges, license, permits
    - Line items
    - Personnel
    - Mandated services and contracts
- Capital and Debt:
    - Taxes: property, mandated sales tax
    - Bonds and other financing
    - Intergovernmental
    - Land
    - Debt payments
    - Construction renovations

(b) Analysis of Revenue: Revenues Per Capita in 2025:

- Other tax: 22
- Sales tax: 545
- Sales and services:164
- Intergovernmental:269
- Debt proceeds: 0
- Other miscellaneous: 245

(c) Expenditures by function for Fiscal Year 2025:

- Education 16.72%
- Debt Service 4.94%
- Human Services 19.96%
- General Government 14.47%
- Public Safety 25.68%
- Other 18.23%

(d) Analysis of Available Fund Balance: General Fund:

	2020	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**	**2025**
Jackson County	33.83	37.93	37.37	48.86	49.11	36.30
Group	34.97	42.37	44.93	55.15	53.21	
State	34.45	43.40	44.56	47.51	46.70	

(e) Analysis of Property Tax: Collection Rate percentage:

	2021	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**	**2025**
Jackson County	98.83	98.98	99.26	99.14	99.21
Group	98.29	98.36	98.57	98.31	
State	99.09	99.18	99.32	99.27	

(f) Outstanding Debt as of July 1, 2025:

Date Incurred	**DOLP**	**Interest Rate**	**Purpose**	**Amount**
10/25/2012	10/25/2027	2.79%	SMH Gym, Fine Arts, BR Locker Room	$1,000,000.09
3/22/2017	3/30/2032	0%	School Improvements-QZAB	$3,600,000.00
01/30/2019	02/01/2039	3.81%	SCC Health Sciences Building	$6,500,000.00
06/16/2022	06/01/2037	3.228%	Indoor Pool Facility	$14,664,000.00
		New Debt	County and School Projects	$27,000,000.00
				$52,764,000.09

General discussions were held.

Informational item.

(5) CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS: Mr. King provided project updates:

Project	Budget	Remaining Budget	Progress
Whittier-Qualla Park	$2,256,663.09	$384,148.83	83%
Canada Fire Department and Community Center	$132,328.00	$49,486.00	62%
Administration Building	$20,375,000.00	$19,832,638.50	3%
Justice Center	$0.00	$0.00	0%
Fair Ground	$3,621,000.00	$2,660,529.78	27%
Dillsboro River Park	$0.00	$0.00	0%
Greenway Project	$5,093,770.80	$1,084,410.70	79%
Fairview Elementary	$4,125,000.00	$4,087,850.00	1%
Blue Ridge School	$18,000,000.00	$17,935,824.84	0%
Middle School	$60,000,000.00	$53,489,264.14	11%
SMHS Athletic Facilities	$2,500,000.00	$2,488,464.41	0%
Webster Childcare Center			
Project SHIFT: Former T&S Hardwoods Site			
Bus Garage	$0.00	$0.00	0%
Detention Facility	$0.00	$0.00	0%
Department on Aging	$550,000.00	$51,855.47	91%
Cashiers/Glenville Recreation	$1,144,826.00	$1,031,231.04	10%
Center for Domestic Peace	$5,468,279.00	$909,320.11	83%
18 TOTAL PROJECTS	**$123,266,836.89**	**104,005,404.82**	**28%**

General discussions were held.
Informational item.

At 11:56 a.m., the Board recessed for a lunch break.

At 12:25 p.m., Chairman Letson called the meeting back to order.

(6) BUDGET DRIVERS: Mr. Fox presented:
(a) Ad Valorem Tax:

Source	Amount
Ad Valorem Taxable Value	$18,994,565,291
Motor Vehicle Taxes	$616,505,180
Total Value	**$219,611,070,471**

- Total ad valorem tax rate currently $0.31 per $100
- Collection rate @ 99.21%
- 1 cent on tax rate = $1,945,614

(b) Ad Valorem Tax and Sales Tax New Year Projections:

Source	Projected Increase	Amount
Ad Valorem Tax	$718,356,565 increase in value	$2,209,313
Motor Vehicle Tax	$35,479,585 increase in value	$109,096
Sales Tax	4% Increase	$1,030,218
	Total New Capacity Projected	**$3,348,627**

(c) Payroll projections for FY 2026-2027:

- The Career Path Salary Program was currently up to date
- Projection for a one step increase for the career path: $706,882
- Steps 1-9 = 3.15%; Step 10 = 3.00%; Steps 11-30 = 1.50%
- 2% Cost of Living Increase: $609,459
- Total increase for salary and benefits: $1,615,809
- Overall averages: Step increase with 2% COLA 3.50%
- Cost of living last year 2.6%; mid-year 2.2%; estimated at year end 2%

(d) Health Insurance:

- Mark III Brokerage did a cost analysis and recommendation on the Health Insurance Coverage for the new year renewal effective July 1, 2026.
- Rate action projection of 5.3%
- Current monthly rate $1,269
- New monthly rate $1,336
- Current annual cost: $15,231
- New annual cost: $16,038
- New year projected increase: $376,012

(e) Funding Capacity and Budget Driver Summary:

Source	Amount
Ad Valorem Tax	$2,209,313
Motor Vehicle Taxes	$109,096
Sales Tax	$1,030,218
Total	**$3,348,627**

Driver	Amount
Payroll	$1,615,809
Health Insurance	$376,012
Total	**$1,991,821**

- Additional capacity available: $1,356,806

(f) Additional Funding Sources Fund Balance:

Driver	Amount
FY 2025 Total Fund Balance	$51,729,424
Reserved by FBP 25%	($22,788,300)
Stabilization by State	($7,762,229)
Other assigned/committed	($5,754,106)
Available for Funding	**$15,424,789**

General discussions were held.

Informational item.

(7) GENERAL DISCUSSIONS AND OTHER PRIORITIES: Chairman Letson asked if the recommendation to departments would be to maintain, plus cost of living and steps?

Mr. King stated at that time, they had done what they could as far as projects. They were looking to maintain at that point and that would be the direction for departments.

Ms. Fox stated they would also maintain the vehicle level as current year for the departments.

General discussions were held.

Mr. King stated a new project would be the Webster Village, which the Board appropriated 1.5M and received a grant for $2.4M for infrastructure. They were working with TWSA on possible solutions.

General discussions were held.

Mr. King stated they were also looking at the Cashiers area working with the Health Foundation on possible partnerships.

General discussions were held.

Mr. King stated that as far as what they heard from EMS and Rescue, they would try to prioritize their requests and would try to accommodate them as best they could. They did not know the fire department requests at that time.

Chairman Letson stated this was a stabilization year for people and they needed to keep that in mind.

Informational item.

There being no further business, Commissioner Hooper moved to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Jennings seconded the Motion. Motion carried and the meeting adjourned at 1:23 p.m.

Attest: Approved:

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Angela M. Winchester, Clerk to Board Mark A. Letson, Chairman