

**MINUTES OF A PUBLIC HEARING
OF THE JACKSON COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
HELD ON
JANUARY 29, 2018**

The Jackson County Board of Commissioners held a Public Hearing on January 29, 2018, at 5:00 p.m., Justice & Administration Building, Room A201, 401 Grindstaff Cove Road, Sylva, North Carolina.

Present: Brian McMahan, Chairman
Charles Elders, Vice Chair
Boyce Deitz, Commissioner
Mickey Luker, Commissioner
Ron Mau, Commissioner

Heather C. Baker, County Attorney
Angela M. Winchester, Clerk to Board

Absent: Don Adams, County Manager

Chairman McMahan called the public hearing to order and stated the purpose was to receive public input for consideration of consolidation of the Health Department and the Department of Social Services.

PUBLIC COMMENTS:

(a) Jennifer Abshire, DSS Director, stated that out of the 100 counties in North Carolina, only 32 counties had consolidated. Each of the Commissioners had put time and energy into finding out about the consolidation process and what might be best for Jackson County and she thanked them for their efforts. It was evident from all of the research about consolidation that it was not a money saving option for the county. In the previous two consolidation meetings, it was shared that some of the main reasons for consolidation were to increase accountability and communication with the County Manager, possibly save on back office staff and to allow for synergy.

Speaking for herself, she could attest to how important accountability was to her and her department. This was something that she talked with her leadership staff about regularly and it was part of their mission statement. She asked that before they went down the more expensive route of consolidation that they look at some ideas that might achieve their goals by implementing some simple changes. She shared some ideas that could easily be put into place. The first was for her and Shelley Carraway, Health Director, to have regularly scheduled meeting with the County Manager so that he could be kept up to speed on the positive outcomes and challenges each department faced. The County Manager and the Board's input could be shared on ways to improve their departments and services they provided. Secondly, was for a Commissioner to sit on each of their boards. They had not had a Commissioner on the DSS Board in some time. This would give the Commissioners a better understanding and insight on the inter-workings of each department and the vast liability, risks and challenges associated with the work they did. Thirdly, was for the leadership teams of Social Services and Public Health to continue meeting on a regular basis and see how they could work together to meet the needs of their clients, identify gaps in service and develop better strategies to address the needs of the community.

In closing, she knew the Board wanted the best for Jackson County, just as they did and they would not make the decision lightly. She asked them to remember that they had two departments that worked well together and were responsive to the county leadership and public and they both had engaging and effective boards. She asked that they not consolidate at that time, but work towards reaching their goals in other ways.

(b) Carol Ann Cope, a Jackson County retiree. She spent her entire career at the Department of Social Services and felt extremely knowledgeable about what was needed in that department. She worked in child protective services, working with the most vulnerable population of children of abuse and neglect. They had excellent legal representation throughout all those years. If they were to consolidate both boards she was concerned about liability for everyone. The learning curve for the DSS board members was very steep and they were subject to lawsuits. These were two of the biggest agencies with two of the largest programs.

Also, they were not co-located and she assumed that they were not going to be co-located. They would not be saving taxpayer money for the county by making a move to consolidate and she did not see what the point was.

(c) Jerry DeWeese, Health Board Member, stated that he had the opportunity to speak to each Commissioner individually and he could tell that their minds were made up and this was going to happen. There was really nothing they could say at that point to change it. He hoped before they consolidated that they gave the two departments the tools they needed to be successful. From the research he had done, they would have to co-locate. They could move the school board to the Smoky Mountain Center, tear down the board of education building and build a new facility to co-locate. They could then take the current Health Department building down to allow for adequate parking. Then, the board of education would end up in the current DSS building and be located near the high school and bus garage. After all of this was done, then they could talk about consolidation.

(d) Delos Monteith, Social Services Board Chair, stated that several months ago the Commissioners initiated a study to examine various scenarios regarding the consolidation of the Health Department, the Department of Social Services and their respective boards. He commended the Commissioners for initiating the study as he understood the goal was to determine if the county and the residents would benefit from some form of consolidation. He had not heard any compelling evidence that would suggest that consolidation was needed for the benefit of the county.

Also, when he was appointed to the Social Services Board, he made a serious effort to gain an in depth understanding of the programs administered by this agency, the history and meet the staff. He was not unique in this regard, other board members made the same effort. He was sure this was also true of board members of the Health Department. In the event of consolidation, the learning curve would be double for board members.

While both departments shared some clients, their programs were vastly different and the board members would be challenged to develop the same level of in depth knowledge they have had with the respective agencies. At the time, they had two well running departments with excellent leadership and committed employees. He would suggest that consolidation was not in the best interest of either agency or the citizens of the county.

(e) Shelley Carraway, Health Director, stated that she applauded the Board for looking into consolidation options. In the consolidation discussion, it was the belief that since DSS and the Health Department shared some of the some of the same clients, that consolidation would improve services for those clients. While they did share some of the same clients, it was for very different professional services. The thing that would truly help the experience of the clients and possibly some savings in the administration functions would be co-location, but that did not seem to be an option in the near future.

Another thought that was expressed was that ideas could not be shared across departments due to the structures. She shared multiple examples of the great communication and collaboration that they already had without consolidation and in spite of not being co-located. The departments communicated often and well coming up with innovative ideas to help their clients receive appropriate services.

As to the topic that consolidation would provide a direct line of communication from the Health Department and DSS to the County Manager, she suggested that several things could be put into place that could help with communication with the County Manager. She had already discussed with the County Manager regarding presenting an orientation of the Health Department to the Board. This could arm the Board with more knowledge when people in the community came to them.

A final thought she wanted to share was the concern about the loss of the two experienced boards and the magnitude of the charge of the new consolidated board. Having to understand and make decisions for two very complex departments, with very high liability issues, was daunting and it took time, commitment and understanding. Their board meetings were already lengthy and required knowledge of what they did and how they did it. To ask these same dedicated folks to join in the new board and come to that same understanding of the DSS was asking a lot. If consolidation did go forward, it would be a big learning curve for them all and in the near future they would have challenges. No matter what the decision, they would always look for ways to improve. She asked that they take into consideration that in Jackson County, they could accomplish those goals without consolidation.

(f) Jenifer Montsinger of Webster stated that she spoke at the work session on November 14th and she continued to firmly believe that the Departments of Health and Social Services operated under the direction of strong, well informed, forward thinking boards. In her opinion, nothing of value would be achieved by consolidating these agencies and their boards. The plan of consolidation being proposed would bring significant and unwarranted operational changes. What was in place was a governing board for each agency with the power to hire the director and make policy based on the law of the state. As she understood it, they were proposing to remove the authority of the boards by changing their status from governing to advisory. By altering the status, they would undermine the ability of the agencies themselves to set policies and implement procedures based on client and community needs. Making this change was not progressive and she encouraged them to give it due consideration.

(g) Stephen Anfinson of Whittier stated that he served as a volunteer guardian ad litem. His comments were based on information from the news media and his 40+ years of experience in human services. The proposal to merge the two departments was apparently the result of a change in the composition of the Board of County Commissioners with two new members running on a platform of exploring this option and making data driven decisions. He did not know if they had considered the additional expense of adding a new position with support staff and exploring the idea of a new building. He requested they postpone a decision.

(h) Mary Holliday stated that she was the contract attorney for the Department of Social Services and had been in that role since 2000. The idea of combing these two different departments would result in a board that would have incredible, broad ranging responsibilities. There had been a move by the general assembly to form regional Departments of Social Services in the state. She understood that it went to an appropriations committee and stalled. She did not know if there were plans to reintroduce the bill. If they did embark in the direction of consolidation, they may have to de-consolidate, which would result in a loss of resources in the county.

(i) Randall Moss stated that he worked with the Department of Social Services and he had four questions:

- What would be the true benefit, not speculated, considering they were housed in separate locations?
- Did anyone have clear or decisive knowledge on how this consolidation would benefit or negatively impact the employees of the Health Department of the Department of Social Services?
- Would this consolidation cost the taxpayers of Jackson County even more tax dollars with the actual cost of consolidation? A cost that would include new or updated buildings or facilities, salaries and benefits.
- Was reducing the amount of volunteer service by those that serve on both boards and were willing to donate hours of time annually really the best way of keeping Jackson County residents actively involved with the county?

Regardless of the decision made by the Commissioners, the employees of these two departments would continue to provide dedicated service to the citizens of the county.

(j) Bob Cochran, former DSS Director, stated that the first meeting of the Jackson County Social Services was held in 1937. The law governing Social Services, originally called Public Welfare, was designed specifically to protect and insulate the provision of services from undue personal or political influence. He was very concerned that a change to the structure could result in the ability of County Commissioners, through their pressure on the County Manager, not only now, but in future years to come, to exercise political or personal influence on the human services organizations. The organizations should be guided solely by their mission, the law and by professional standards. These organizations provided essential services that protected, strengthened and improved lives in the county. Decisions regarding personnel selection or promotions, decisions regarding the provision of services of who received benefits or how strongly laws or standards were applied in certain situations or to certain people. Such decisions should be guided strictly by the law and by professional standards needed to be made without regard to politics or individual personalities.

If the Board's interest was greater collaboration, enhanced services and increased efficiency of these organizations, this could be pursued in numerous ways. He hoped and recommended that they work with the two directors and develop strategies to pursue their goals. He urged them to try the least invasive and destructive avenues first before dismantling structures that had worked well with excellent overall results for over 80 years. His guess was that the people of the county were less interested in the structure of these boards and organizations than they were with the quality, timeliness, the partiality and professionalism of the services of which they provided.

(k) Adam Bigelow of Cullowhee stated that they had heard a lot of really great input from members of the community, Department of Social Services and the Health Department. He requested that they table the item or vote "no".

There being no further public comments, Commissioner Elders moved that the public hearing be adjourned. Commissioner Mau seconded the Motion. Motion carried.

Attest:

Approved:

Angela M. Winchester, Clerk

Brian Thomas McMahan, Chairman