

**June 6, 2018**

A Special Meeting regarding FY 2018-19 Proposed Budget of the Bladen County Board of Commissioners was held on Wednesday, June 6, 2018 at 4:00 pm in the Commissioner's Room on the lower level of the Courthouse, 106 East Broad Street, Elizabethtown, NC.

Members present were:

Ray Britt, Chairman  
Michael Cogdell, Vice Chairman  
Charles R. Peterson  
Daniel Dowless  
Arthur Bullock  
Dr. Ophelia Munn-Goins  
David Gooden

Excused: Ashley Trivette  
Russell Priest

**ITEM 1. Call to Order:**

Chairman Britt called the meeting to order at 4:02pm.

Chairman Britt provided an invocation. County Manager Greg Martin led the Pledge of Allegiance.

**ITEM 2. Fiscal Year 2018-19 Proposed Budget Information and Discussion:**

Chairman Britt recognized Bladen County Schools Superintendent Dr. Robert Taylor to address the Board. Dr. Taylor also introduced Finance Officer Sharon Penny, Assistant Superintendent Tanya Head, and Public Information Officer Valerie Newton.

Dr. Taylor expressed appreciation to the Board for ongoing financial support. He referenced proposed FY 2018-19 budget memorandum which indicated that \$251,503 which was withheld from the FY 2017-18 budget, would be included in the proposed FY 2018-19 budget, along with an overall 2% increase (\$134,211). He stated that if the \$251,503 was deducted from the proposed budget, teacher positions would likely need to be reduced. He stated that with enrollment numbers decreasing, state funding is also being reduced. Also, class size legislation has created challenges for K-3.

Dr. Taylor indicated that realigning students to East Arcadia allowed the Board of Education to retain four (4) teacher positions. The closing of Booker T. Washington School generated some savings, but not as much as originally predicted due to class size legislation.

Class-size legislation requires no more than 20 students on average in each K-3 classroom, with a maximum of 23 students in each K-3 classroom. Dr. Taylor indicated that with the new class-size legislation, teacher positions could not be reduced as earlier predicted.

Dr. Taylor indicated that he and Finance Officer Sharon Penny had revisited the budget and included a 2% salary increase instead of a 5% increase included in the budget message.

Dr. Taylor indicated that a transfer in the amount of approximately \$780,000 was planned. However, after speaking with Finance Officer Sharon Penny, the transfer will likely be approximately \$450,000.

Chairman Britt inquired regarding the number of teacher positions located at Booker T. Washington. Dr. Taylor indicated that there are approximately 13 certified teaching positions, not including teacher assistants. Dr. Taylor indicated that each of the teaching positions would be reassigned to other locations, with the exception of one (1) teacher who has gained employment in a neighboring county. Dr. Taylor indicated that even with reassigning BTW teaching positions to other locations, there will need to be seven (7) certified teaching positions eliminated.

Commissioner Munn-Goins inquired if the seven positions to be eliminated were in addition to the fourteen (14) positions reported in the Bladen County Schools

**June 6, 2018**

FY 2018-19 Budget message. Dr. Taylor indicated that the fourteen positions included teacher assistants and loss of positions through attrition. The budget message indicated that twelve (12) certified teaching positions would be eliminated. Dr. Taylor stated that only seven (7) certified teaching positions would be eliminated. Finance Officer Sharon Penny shared that state allotments are not yet available. She stated that it does appear that seven (7) positions would not be state funded based on Bladen County School enrollment. Other BTW support staff have been reassigned to other locations as well.

Dr. Taylor indicated that Assistant Superintendent Dr. Tanya Head has announced her retirement. He indicated that vacancy would not be filled, as those duties will be reassigned. Also, the state has reduced funding for the central office by \$100,000.

Finance Officer Sharon Penny stated that the Early College data manager position will be funded by a separate program. Local funds would not be used to fund that position.

Commissioner Munn-Goins inquired regarding positions that local funds would provide. Dr. Taylor reminded the Board that the fund balance was accessed to provide funding for operations of Bladen County Schools. He stated that in order to make up budget shortfalls, elimination of positions and requesting additional financial support of the County Commissioners are the only options available. He also stated that in the past, teaching positions may have been reduced without actually losing teachers, as vacant positions may have been eliminated. Also, K-6 teachers cannot be reassigned to high school teaching positions based on required licensure. He stated that there are teaching position vacancies at the high school level which need to be filled, even with reducing the number of K-6 teaching positions.

Commissioner Cogdell inquired regarding the declining average daily membership (ADM) and the increases in appropriations to Bladen County Schools. He voiced his concerns regarding a "breaking point" between a declining enrollment and budget requirements to serve students. Commissioner Cogdell inquired regarding a consolidation plan. Dr. Taylor indicated that a former plan was no longer an option based on community response. There was no community support for closing schools in order to provide a consolidation plan. He stated that approximately seven years ago, there were around 1,440 high school students. That number is about the same this year (1,400). He shared that the elementary and primary enrollment fluctuated in the same seven years.

Dr. Taylor confirmed that Emereau Charter School would be increasing their enrollment by approximately 180 for the upcoming school year. Fifty (50) are kindergarteners who have never been enrolled in Bladen County Schools.

Dr. Taylor reminded the Board of a potential K-8 school facility construction project in the Tar Heel area which would replace Tar Heel, Plainview and possibly Dublin as well, closing three (3) aging facilities. He also briefly discussed a possible K-8 school facility construction project to serve students in the East Arcadia and Clarkton areas. Dr. Taylor stated that an estimated cost to fund a construction project K-8 students could possibly be \$25,000,000 for each facility.

Chairman Britt provided an update regarding conversations with various legislators regarding rural counties being allowed to use charter school construction standards, which would reduce the expense to the County.

Discussion ensued regarding consolidation options, quality of education in newer facilities, creating efficiencies for support staff and media specialists, opportunities to enhance advance placement offerings, and additional electives.

Commissioner Gooden asked about School Resource Officers (SRO). Dr. Taylor indicated that the schools do not have resources to add more officers. Sheriff McVicker stated that there are seven (7) SRO positions in the FY 2018-19 proposed budget.

Commissioner Bullock inquired regarding what impact paying off the debt service for the current high schools. The debt is scheduled to be retired in 2021. Mr. Martin indicated that the payment for FY 2018-19 is scheduled to be approximately \$1.7 million and will reduce over the upcoming years until the debt is retired. He stated that a floor of \$1.75 million will be included in each budget to be able to set aside an amount each year for a potential capital construction

**June 6, 2018**

project once the current debt is retired. Mr. Martin stated that \$900,000 of the debt payment will be funded by Article 44 sales tax revenue earmarked for education capital expenditures, with the County funding approximately \$750,000 to meet the debt obligation.

Commissioner Cogdell asked Dr. Taylor to address an impression of the Central office being “top heavy”. Chairman Britt voiced his concern regarding making tough choices from a business standpoint, being mindful of the obligation to Bladen County tax payers.

Dr. Taylor provided an overview of reductions in the Central office, by not filling vacancies, or retiring staff. Finance Officer Sharon Penny provided an overview of the numerous cuts which the State has implemented over a number of years, including staff development and utility allotments. She stated that the proposed 9% reduction for central office expense is an arbitrary number, and is not attached to specific positions. State requirements by General Assembly and Department of Public Instruction still have to be funded.

Dr. Taylor stated that he feels confident in saying that the Board of Education and Board of Commissioners all want the same thing which is quality education for Bladen County children.

Mrs. Penny stated that charter schools affect Bladen County Schools in ways that most people are not aware. She shared that charter schools receive a portion of each allotment coming to Bladen County, whether or not the charter school offers that program.

Commissioner Peterson voiced concern regarding increasing funding for schools when enrollment continues to decrease. He stated that a sales tax referendum could be designed to increase education funding, but efforts have not been successful in the past. He indicated that property tax payers should not be asked to fund additional education expense simply because the state has calculated allotments based on enrollment.

Dr. Taylor indicated that he understood that local dollars cannot replace state cuts. He reminded the Commissioners that when capital outlay funds were used to cover current expenses, the Board received criticism for using capital outlay in that fashion. He committed to provide, at the very least, an education to Bladen County students.

Discussion ensued regarding consolidation, how much input Commissioners should have in the process, and a possible ¼% to ½% sales tax referendum. A tax referendum, if successful, could provide additional revenue which could be used for education. Commissioner Munn-Goins stated that if the Board of Education would provide information regarding specifics of a capital project (where, design, for what grades), she would support a sales tax referendum. Commissioner Peterson reminded the Board that a sales tax referendum had failed five times, three of which were specifically for education.

Commissioner Peterson voiced concern regarding substitute teacher expenses. Commissioner Cogdell reiterated his concern regarding consolidation. Dr. Taylor indicated that closing BTW was the first phase of the consolidation process. He reminded the Board of a grant opportunity for new construction. The deadline for submitting applications for the first round of grant awards has been set for September 2018, for a total of \$38 million in grant funding. The second round of grant awards will be in 2019, for an additional total of \$70 million. He voiced his concern that should the county not be awarded grant funds from the state, that the current debt must be retired before considering another construction project. The debt is scheduled to be retired in 2021.

In closing, Dr. Taylor wishes to provide a quality education for each child in Bladen County.

Chairman Britt briefly recessed the meeting at 5:32pm.

Chairman Britt reconvened the meeting at 5:40pm.

Emergency Services Director Bradley Kinlaw and Captain Jeff Singletary presented a request for an additional Information Technology (IT) position to provide radio maintenance for Bladen County first responders, as well as providing support to IT System Administrator Jeff Kulp who is assigned to the

**June 6, 2018**

Sheriff's Office. In the past, Captain Singletary, who is scheduled to retire effective November 1, 2018, has been providing maintenance for 600 radios. Radio maintenance would also include monthly preventative maintenance visits to the Viper tower locations throughout the county. Mr. Kinlaw stated that Captain Singletary has been available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, should there be any issues to be addressed. Captain Singletary provided an overview of responsibilities involved as radio technician.

Commissioner Dowless exited the meeting at 5:50pm.

Captain Singletary provided a job description for System Administrator for information. He stated that if a new IT/Radio Technician position were approved and funded, that would assist in streamlining tasks within the Sheriff's Office. Commissioner Munn-Goins inquired regarding a part-time position which had been requested for the Sheriff's Office. A part-time maintenance position was approved and funded during the detention and law enforcement center construction phase, due to the technology and intercommunication of the various systems which provide heat, air, water, communications, internet, and electronic gates. Mr. Kulp has been responsible for maintaining and providing support related to video systems, in-car camera systems, 911 center, and staff computers. Commissioner Cogdell inquired if a job description and salary range had been developed or researched for the proposed full-time position. The proposed position would be under Information Technology (IT) budget, but assigned to the Sheriff's Office.

Commissioner Bullock was recognized to address the Board. He voiced concern regarding back injuries and potential lost time for Emergency Medical Services (EMS) employees. He requested that two (2) power-lift stretchers be included in the budget. Mr. Kinlaw provided information that effective July 1, 2018, any new ambulance units are required to include power-lift stretchers and a new locking system for the stretchers. He stated that there are two (2) new ambulance units included in the proposed FY 2018-19, but the power-lift stretchers have experienced a price increase, which will result in a \$5,000 shortfall for the purchases.

Mr. Martin stated that there are two (2) power-lift stretchers included in the proposed FY 2018-19 budget, at an estimated cost of approximately \$15,000. Mr. Kinlaw confirmed that the capital purchase line item would require an additional appropriation for the purchases.

The Board asked Clerk to the Board Maria Edwards to poll the absent Board members regarding a potential Special Meeting date of Monday, June 25; Tuesday, June 26; or Wednesday, June 27; at 4:00pm.

Commissioner Munn-Goins presented information regarding a repair project for the Bladen Community College (BCC) East Arcadia campus building in the amount of \$14,910. Mr. Martin stated that in the past the practice would be that the County would increase an appropriation to BCC in order to fund the needed repairs. He stated that BCC had requested funds during the budget process for FY 2017-18, but there was no financial support to complete the project. The request was not included in BCC's request for FY 2018-19. However, Commissioner Munn-Goins stated that Dr. Findt indicated his willingness to provide support for the repair project.

Mr. Martin provided information regarding a request received from Tobermory Fire District to increase its tax rate from \$.025 to \$.05 per \$100 valuation. Concerns were voiced regarding if the Tobermory tax payers have been notified of the requested fire district tax increase.

Mr. Martin provided information regarding an upcoming Chemours information session scheduled for Tuesday, June 12, 2018, to be held at the Faith Tabernacle Church, 3744 NC 20 East, St. Pauls. The meeting is scheduled to begin at

**June 6, 2018**

6:00pm. Chairman Britt encouraged Board members to attend the information session.

Upon a motion by Commissioner Peterson, seconded by Commissioner Munn-Goins, the meeting was unanimously adjourned at 6:23pm.

ATTEST:

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Maria C. Edwards, Clerk to the Board

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Ray Britt, Chairman