The Avery County Board of Commissioners met in Regular Session on Monday, February 7, 2022 at 3:30 p.m. in the Commissioners Board Room, Avery County Administrative Complex, 175 Linville Street, Newland, NC.

Members Present: Martha Hicks, Chair; Dennis Aldridge; Blake Vance; Wood Hall Young, Jr.

Members Absent: Tim Phillips, Vice-Chair

Call To Order
Chair Hicks called the meeting to order at 3:30 p.m.
Blake Vance led prayer.
Wood Hall Young, Jr. led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Public Comment
There were no public comments.

Amorem Presentation
Representatives from Amorem (formerly Burke Hospice and Palliative Care and Caldwell Hospice and Palliative Care) spoke to the Board about a seven bed patient care facility in Watauga County. The facility would be approximately 9,000 square feet and be located in Watauga County right off Hwy 421. The facility will serve Ashe, Avery, and Watauga Counties. An office for the local Amorem team has just opened at this location; Carol Smith leads this team. Amorem saw a need for inpatient end-of-life care in this area. Amorem applied to the state and the state approved seven beds. This approval was based on the population of the three counties; this is the only facility in this area that the state will license. The representatives stated that they are in the process of raising funds for this facility and are asking the Board to sponsor a room. This can be done over a five year period. The Board thanked the Amorem representatives for their presentation.

Pisgah National Forest Plan – Nicholas Larson
Mr. Larson stated that the original Forest plan was almost 35 years old and was signed in 1987 and had some amendments made to it in 1994 and some smaller amendments since 1994. The Forest Service had spent eight years working on this new revised plan. There are twelve different managing areas in this plan. There are 28,000 acres in Avery County which is about 18% of the counties land base. These include Elk River Falls, Harpers Creek and Lost Cove. This forest plan establishes a vision for how the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests will be managed for the next 20 years and establishes the strategic framework for achieving that vision. All future projects, everything from trail building to tree harvesting and stream restoration, will have to be consistent with the forest plan. The plan includes desired conditions that describe what we want forest resources to be like in the future. The plan also includes a set of maps
that show where plan direction will be applied across the forest. Mr. Larson explained that the final process before implementing the plan in the summer would be to have a 60 day objection period where the documents can be reviewed and members of the public who have been engaged in the revision process have an opportunity to file an objection. The legal notice will be published in the Asheville Citizen Times. The Regional Forester will review objections and work to resolve them. He will issue a written response that may include additional direction for the Forest Supervisor to include in the final plan. The Regional Forester’s written response is the final decision and the Forest Supervisor can then approve the new plan and begin implementation.

Jennifer Barnhardt was introduced as the District Ranger for the Appalachian Ranger District. The Appalachian Ranger District includes Elk River Falls in Avery County and a portion of the Appalachian Trail that includes the overmountain shelter. The shelter has been closed because the structure is no longer safe. Wood Hall Young, Jr. questioned if the plan was to renovate, rebuild or replace the shelter at the head of Roaring Creek. Ms. Barnhardt stated that the shelter would be torn down and it would be more like a pavilion. Mr. Young questioned if there was any plan for safety at the Elk River Falls. Ms. Barnhardt stated that there could be something created but right now it was just signs.

**Toe River Health District – Diane Creek**

Commissioner Young explained that in the recent past there has been quite a bit of turnover in the health department in all three counties. Diane has been working trying to find out why and the main reason is pay. There has not been a pay study done in over 20 years. That is the health district board’s fault. We had the MAPPS company do the pay study and it shows that we are paying $11.00 an hour for someone who is answering the phone, doing paperwork, greeting people, etc. That is unacceptable. We have lost two excellent employees out of the Avery County office. We have also lost several nurses across the district.

Diane Creek stated that she had been here for 5 years and when she came here the employees had not had a raise for a couple of years. We did do a cost of living adjustment in 2017 and 2018 but not one since. We have stayed at status quo until COVID hit and the employees have worked many hours. Right now our nurses start out at $17.00 an hour and we can’t compete because everywhere else pays more money. I would like to have this salary study approved by the Commissioners.

Mr. Barrier stated that this will also give the health director an assistant/human resources person. The whole pay study will cost approximately $164,738 and I would like to make this retroactive to January 1, 2022.

Commissioner Young stated that Avery County has the best health department in the health district and that the environmental health part of the health department turns a profit every year. He also explained that when Home Health was sold the money that was gleaned from that has been divided three ways and there is enough to pay for this increase for the remainder of the year. Mr. Barrier stated that we would use the profit
and the fund balance for this year and then would include in the upcoming budget. Commissioner Aldridge stated that he saw the need from a retainage standpoint. It is a little disturbing that it has gotten to this point and now we are trying to implement everything at one time. The need is there. It is hard when you are working in a multi-jurisdictional situation because you are providing in many ways for things outside of your service area. Money is not going to solve all the problem and there has to be some other way of assuring there is checks and balances and accountability for this. The implementation will constitute a budget amendment this fiscal year nor will it constitute a budget amendment in the upcoming year because we will plan for it but we have to realize this is a substantial budgetary obligation.

Motion by Blake Vance to table this until the Board begins budget deliberations.

Commissioner Vance stated that this is going to obligate us to a recurring expense.

Motion seconded by Dennis Aldridge.

Commissioner Aldridge stated that he seconded the motion to hear further discussion.

Commissioner Young stated that he knows the problems that the health district has with hiring employees much less with retaining employees and that the health district had been looking for an environmental health specialist in Yancey County for over a year.

Commissioner Vance stated that he was not against this and understood the need but that he felt it needed more consideration.

Chair Hicks advised that she thought that this was something we need to face right now before we lost more people in the health department. The money is there. Commissioner Aldridge said that he could see these points and could also see Commissioner Vance’s points.

VOTE: Martha Hicks; Dennis Aldridge; Wood Hall Young, Jr. Nay; Blake Vance Yea. Vote fails 3 to 1.

Motion by Wood Hall Young, Jr. to approve the pay study for the Toe River Health District and make it retroactive to January 1, 2022. Seconded by Blake Vance. Motion unanimous with those in attendance (4-0).

Commissioner Vance stated that he had his opinion but the Board had another opinion and he supported and respected what the Board said and that is why he seconded the motion.

Tax Administrator Report – Bruce Daniels

Tax Collections
The Tax Collections for the month of January 2022 is $3,127,214.34.
Motion by Blake Vance and second by Wood Hall Young, Jr. to approve the Tax Collections Report as presented. Motion unanimously approved with those in attendance (4-0).

There were no releases.

Mr. Daniels stated that sales numbers are slightly down from last January. There are 76 sales at 89% compared to last year’s sales of 83 sales at 103%. The market is unpredictable.

Mr. Daniels presented the outstanding tax balance for advertisement. This amount is $1,343,297.75. We are at 94% collection which is slightly higher than last year.

Motion by Wood Hall Young, Jr. and second by Blake Vance to approve the outstanding tax balance and advertise the outstanding taxes. Motion unanimously approved with those in attendance (4-0).

Resolution to Award Retired Sheriff Kevin Frye’s Sidearm & Badge
WHEREAS, North Carolina General Statutes Section 20-187.2 authorizes the Avery County Board of Commissioners to award the sidearm and badge to a retiring member of the Sheriff’s Office at the time of their retirement, provided that such individual meets the qualifications of NCGS Section 20-187.2(a) and NCGS Section 14-402; and

WHEREAS, the Avery County Sheriff’s Office has in its possession one sidearm being a Glock .40 caliber pistol, Model 23, Serial Number BAEC255 and badge for Retired Sheriff Kevin Frye; and

WHEREAS, the County deems these items to be surplus property.

NOW, THEREFORE, the Avery County Board of Commissioners meeting at its regular meeting on 7 February 2022 hereby RESOLVES that the sidearm being a Glock .40 caliber pistol, Model 23, Serial Number BAEC255 is surplus and shall be awarded to Kevin Frye for due consideration, such sum being the amount of $1.00;

And be it yet further RESOLVED that the Badge for Kevin Frye is hereby declared surplus and shall be awarded to Kevin Frye pursuant to NCGS Section 20-187.2.

Motion by Wood Hall Young, Jr. and second by Blake Vance to adopt the Resolution to Award Retired Sheriff Kevin Frye’s Sidearm and Badge. Motion unanimously approved with those in attendance (4-0).

County Manager Updates – Phillip Barrier, Jr.
Covid Update
The Covid numbers for the month of January are lower than November 2020. We are seeing a decrease. Testing is six days a week. Vaccines are still available at the health department and other places in the county.
Broadband Update
There are 350 million dollars in the Great Grant program. I have let our interested providers know how to get the applications which opened up February 1. There is concern about limited resources because of so many organizations going after broadband.

Mission Statement for Avery County Economic Development Advisory Committee
The Mission Statement was approved by the Economic Development Advisory Committee and the Committee is asking for Board approval for the mission statement which is as follows:

The Mission of the Avery County Economic Development Advisory Committee is to encourage and support the retention and expansion of existing businesses within the county area, support local infrastructure projects, work to attract new business opportunities to increase the local tax base and improve the quality of life for residents.

Motion by Blake Vance and second by Dennis Aldridge to approve the Mission Statement for the Avery County Economic Development Advisory Committee. Motion unanimously approved with those in attendance (4-0).

Finance Officer Report – Caleb Hogan

Budget Amendment
The Transportation Department has received an insurance reimbursement for damage done to one of the transportation vans.

Motion by Blake Vance and second by Wood Hall Young, Jr. to adopt a Budget Amendment in the amount of $2,734.04 with a debit of $2,734.04 to Auto Supplies (106300.3100) and a credit of $2,734.04 to Insurance Reimbursements (103340.0000). Motion unanimously approved with those in attendance (4-0).

Budget Amendment
The Department of Social Services has received an allocation of $18,292.00 from the state and an additional $102,438.00 from pandemic LIEAP (Low Income Energy Assistance Program).

Motion by Wood Hall Young, Jr. and second by Blake Vance to adopt the Budget Amendment in the amount of $120,730.00 with a debit of $120,730.00 to LIEAP (106800.6095) and a credit of $120,730.00 to County Welfare (103634.0000). Motion unanimously approved with those in attendance (4-0).

Budget Amendment
The Department of Senior Services has received money from the Senior’s Health Insurance Information Program to purchase a dedicated laptop and monitor system.
Motion by Wood Hall Young, Jr. and second by Dennis Aldridge to adopt the Budget Amendment in the amount of $3,700.00 with a debit of $3,700.00 to Capital Outlay (105960.7400) and a credit of $3,700.00 to Senior Services—State Grant (103671.0000). Motion unanimously approved with those in attendance (4-0).

Budget Amendment
Western Youth Network’s Avery Mentoring program discovered that they had missed an invoice for April 2021. In order to pay them their full allotment a budget amendment will need to be done.

Commissioner Young stated that we just paid another late invoice from JCPC last month. I question the fact if they are not sending the invoices for their money do they really need it.

Motion by Dennis Aldridge and second by Blake Vance to adopt the Budget Amendment in the amount of $1,362.30 with a debit of $1,362.30 to JUV SVS-Home Sch. Coord-Mentoring (107000.6130) and a credit of $1,362.30 to Fund Balance—Appropriated (103990.0000). Motion unanimously approved with those in attendance (4-0).

Budget Amendment
E911 is requesting funds to purchase PSAware dispatching software. This will aid E911, Fire, EMS, and Law Enforcement in dispatching calls.

Motion by Blake Vance and second by Wood Hall Young, Jr. to adopt a Budget Amendment in the amount of $9,500.00 with a debit of $9,500.00 to Maintenance Contracts (226600.1540) and a credit of $9,500.00 to Emergency Tel. System Fund Bal. Appropriated (223990.0000). Motion unanimously approved with those in attendance (4-0).

Budget Amendment
The Department of Solid Waste has had a bucket break on their loader. They have found a replacement but need additional funds to make the purchase.

Motion by Wood Hall Young, Jr. and second by Blake Vance to adopt a Budget Amendment in the amount of $4,500.00 with a debit of $4,500.00 to Repairs/Maintenance (105800.1510) and a credit of $4,500.00 to Available for Appropriations (107000.6000). Motion unanimously approved with those in attendance (4-0).

Budget Amendment
The Department of Solid Waste has looked into purchasing boots for the collection site attendants. A budget amendment would need to be done to make the funds available to purchase the boots.
Motion by Blake Vance and second by Wood Hall Young, Jr. to adopt a Budget Amendment in the amount of $3,325.00 with a debit of $3,325.00 to Uniforms (105800.3600) and a credit of $3,325.00 to Available for Appropriations (107000.6000). Motion passes 3 to 1 (Hicks, Young, Vance Yea; Aldridge Nay) Commissioner Aldridge stated that there are other departments that we do not provide boots for.

**County Attorney Report – Michelle Poore**
Nothing to report at this time.

**Closed Session**
Motion by Wood Hall Young, Jr. and second by Blake Vance to go into a time of Closed Session regarding Personnel NCGS 143-318.11 (a) (6) at 5:32 p.m. Motion unanimously approved with those in attendance (4-0). Invitees are the Board, County Manager, Clerk, and County Attorney.

Chair Hicks declared the meeting to be back in session after a time of Closed Session. During Closed Session, no action was taken.

**Approval of Minutes**
Motion by Wood Hall Young, Jr. and second by Blake Vance to approve the November 29, 2021 Joint Meeting with the Board of Education and January 3, 2022 Regular Meeting. Motion unanimously approved with those in attendance (4-0).

**Agenda Consent Items**
Adopted by Consensus of the Board.

**Upcoming Meetings**
The next Regular meeting will be March 7, 2022 at 3:30 p.m.

**Adjourn**
Motion by Wood Hall Young, Jr. and second by Blake Vance to adjourn this meeting at 5:47 p.m. Motion unanimously approved with those in attendance (4-0).

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Martha Hicks, Chair
Avery County Board of Commissioners

ATTEST: __________________________
Cindy Turbyfill, Clerk