

MEETING MINUTES
WATAUGA COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2025

The Watauga County Board of Commissioners held a regular meeting on Tuesday, September 16, 2025, at 5:30 P.M. in the Commissioners' Board Room located in the Watauga County Administration Building in Boone, North Carolina.

1. CALL REGULAR MEETING TO ORDER

Chairman Eggers called the meeting to order at 5:30 P.M. The following were present:

PRESENT: Braxton Eggers, Chairman
 Todd Castle, Vice-Chairman
 Emily Greene, Commissioner
 Tim Hodges, Commissioner
 Ronnie Marsh, Commissioner
 Andrea Miller, County Attorney
 Deron Geouque, County Manager
 Katie Hancock, Clerk to the Board

Commissioner Marsh offered a prayer and Commissioner Hodges led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Chairman Eggers recognized that September 27, 2025 would mark the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Helene. He reflected on the resilience of the community and the progress made in recovery efforts, while noting that work still remains. Chairman Eggers emphasized the "power of community, not the power of the storm" in highlighting the County's strength and perseverance.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Chairman Eggers presented the September 2, 2025, regular and closed session meeting minutes.

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to approve the September 2, 2025, regular meeting minutes as presented.

VOTE: Aye – 5
 Nay – 0

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to approve the September 2, 2025, closed session minutes as presented.

VOTE: Aye – 5
 Nay – 0

3. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Chairman Eggers called for additions or corrections to the September 16, 2025, agenda; there were none.

Commissioner Greene, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to approve the September 16, 2025, agenda.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

4. PUBLIC COMMENT

- **Shawn Hodge**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain, stated that their community is made up of kind and giving people. She noted that when the Stewart Simmons Volunteer Fire Department requested a lot for the tower, the community provided one. Ms. Hodge questioned who would, in turn, help their community.
- **Julianne Shamburg**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain, stated that many residents have been unable to attend Board meetings and, as a result, she started an online petition which currently has 201 signatures. She expressed concerns that falling ice could damage the water tower and that the tower could make the neighborhood less desirable. Ms. Shamburg noted that it is a 15-mile drive up to the tower and encouraged Board members to visit the site to see the scale of the structure.
- **Bill Shamburg**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain, thanked Chairman Braxton Eggers, County Manager Deron Geouque, and Emergency Services Director Will Holt. He informed the Board that he placed a temporary wind monitor at his house, where readings frequently reach 30 miles per hour with gusts up to 50 miles per hour. Mr. Shamburg expressed concern about his property given the tower's proximity.
- **Don Farese**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain, presented the Board with an aerial image of the tower site including a digital rendering of the proposed tower, to provide a visual of its appearance when completed. He also noted that three homes are located within the setback and fall zone area.
- **Sharon Graffagnino**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain, stated that she retired to the area from Durham, NC, fulfilling a long-term goal of moving there. She expressed her opposition to the construction of the tower.
- **Carmelo Graffagnino**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain, stated that it had been his dream to move to the community. He expressed concern that the proposed 180-foot tower would cause aesthetic harm to the area. While acknowledging the need for a tower, based on his experience with past fires and Hurricanes Fran and Floyd, he noted that current winds already rattle his house and expressed concern about the tower's impact. Mr. Graffagnino urged the Board to consider equity and fairness and to select a safer, less obtrusive location.

- **Susan Chaney**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain and a local real estate agent, stated that the neighborhood is gated not to keep others out but to protect the community. She noted that home values are directly tied to the area’s view and aesthetics.
- **Jill Williams**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain, stated that she had reviewed the 325-page Watauga County Planning and Development Ordinance. She noted that even if a tower meets the basic requirements, it may not be “right.” Ms. Williams also pointed out that, according to the ordinance, the fall zone extends to the property line rather than just the housing structure, meaning additional properties fall within the fall zone.
- **David Smith**, a resident of Powder Horn Mountain and member of the Stewart Simmons Volunteer Fire Department, expressed support for the construction of the tower. He explained that the tower is designed to collapse within itself and stated that, as a result, he does not share the concerns of those opposed, who repeatedly reference the fall zone as a danger.

5. REQUEST FOR PERMANENT PLACEMENT OF PURPLE PANTRY

Ms. Mary McKinney, Founder of Just Love and Purple Pantries, requested approval for the permanent placement of a Purple Pantry in the green space at the Watauga County Government Center. Purple Pantries provide free resources such as drug test strips, naloxone, recovery support information, family support materials, and grief resources. The site previously hosted temporary Pantries and Purple Mailboxes during International Overdose Events in 2022–2024.

Ms. McKinney noted that resources are obtained through local donations funded by Watauga County’s Opioid Settlement, and volunteers regularly check the Pantries, with high-traffic sites monitored daily.

Commissioner Marsh expressed appreciation for Ms. McKinney’s efforts to provide emergency resources and prevent overdose deaths.

Commissioner Hodges, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to approve the permanent placement of a Purple Pantry in the green space at the Watauga County Government Center and directed staff to coordinate with Ms. McKinney to determine the best location.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

6. NCDOT PROJECT R-2615 – US-321/US-421 WIDENING

Ms. Martha Register, Transportation Planning Group Manager for WGI Engineering, presented information on NCDOT Project No. R-2615, which proposes widening US-321/US-421 from the junction near Vilas to the NC-105 Bypass (SR 1107) west of Boone. The 3.5-mile project would expand the existing two-lane highway to four lanes with a median, improve intersections with dedicated turn lanes, and evaluate traffic signals. The project, originally initiated in 2018 and recently restarted, is included in the 2026–2035 State Transportation Improvement Program with funding for preliminary engineering only. The projected cost is \$156,200,000.

Commissioner Marsh expressed concern about the project timeline, noting that waiting 15 years for completion is unreasonable given the county's continued growth. He highlighted the difficulties of commuting from western Watauga County during peak hours (7:30–8:30 AM and 5:00–6:00 PM) and stated that traffic congestion will worsen by 2040.

Ms. Register explained that traffic volumes and accident data had been analyzed and that the project team is seeking community input. Comments may be submitted through the link provided in her presentation (<https://www.ncdot.gov/news/public-meetings/Pages/R-2615-2022-10-12.aspx>). David Graham, Transportation Planner for the High Country Council of Governments, joined Ms. Register in the presentation, noting that community and Board input are critical for advancing the project.

The Board and community members were encouraged to provide input via the project website. No action was required.

7. PROJECT ON AGING MATTERS

A. Appropriation of State Funds for Senior Centers

The Project on Aging requested approval to accept \$14,628 in State Senior Center General Purpose funding for the L.E. Harrill and Western Watauga Community Centers, with a combined local match of \$4,876 already budgeted in FY26. Funds may be used for equipment, supplies, programming, and operations.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to accept the Senior Center General Purpose funding as presented.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

B. Allocation of Providing Elders Additional Sustenance (PEAS) Funds

The Project on Aging is eligible to receive \$16,545 in PEAS supplemental funding from the NC Division of Aging and Adult Services to support high-risk older adults through additional meals or supplemental groceries. No local match is required, and funds must be spent by September 30, 2026.

Commissioner Greene, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to accept \$16,545 in PEAS supplemental funding and incorporate the funds into the FY 26 budget.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

8. PARKS AND RECREATION MATTERS

A. Land and Water Conservation Grant

Watauga County Parks & Recreation requested approval to submit a Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) grant application to support the rebuild and reconstruction of Old Cove Creek Park, including repairs from Hurricane Helene. Senior Planner Kelly Coffey, High Country Council of Governments, assisted with the proposal. The grant requires endorsements from the Recreation Commission and Cove Creek Preservation Association, letters of community support, and a public input meeting that was held on September 11, 2025. Commissioner Marsh inquired about the likelihood of receiving the grant; Mr. Coffey noted the application is scored on a point system and that Watauga County should score well, though competition is unknown. The grant deadline is November 1, 2025.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to approve the submission of the LWCF grant application.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

B. Playground Grants

Parks & Recreation requested approval to apply for the Game Time Playground Grant and the Play & Park Spark Fund to enhance the Old Cove Creek Park playground with inclusive play features. The Game Time grant offers up to 100% matching funds depending on project size (applications due October 17, 2025), while the Play & Park Spark Fund provides 50/50 matching funds with no cap (applications due October 31, 2025). Director Keron Poteat noted that if FEMA and grant funding were both awarded, the grant funds would be declined.

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to approve the submission of the Game Time Playground Grant and Play & Park Spark Fund applications for Old Cove Creek Park.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

C. Out-of-State Travel Request

Parks & Recreation Director Keron Poteat requested approval to serve as Competition Director for the 2025 Special Olympics North America Tennis & Pickleball Championships in Hilton Head, SC, on October 14–19, 2025. She noted that all expenses will be covered by Special Olympics North America and that the request requires no County funds, only approval of her time.

Commissioner Hodges, seconded by Commissioner Greene, moved to approve the out-of-state travel request for Ms. Keron Poteat.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

9. EMERGENCY SERVICES MATTERS

A. Hazard Mitigation Grant Program Projects

Emergency Services Director Will Holt explained the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), which supports recovery from Hurricane Helene by funding demolition of eligible structures, transferring the parcels to the County, and applying deed restrictions to prevent future development in the floodplain. He noted the program comes at no direct cost to the County, aside from potential long-term maintenance of the parcels.

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to approve the submission of the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) application.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

B. Emergency Watershed Protection Projects

Emergency Services Director Will Holt presented the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program, which provides funding to stabilize waterways impacted by Hurricane Helene. The program covers 100% of eligible construction costs and up to 10% of engineering and administration costs. This application represents the first of several expected for Board review.

Commissioner Marsh asked if the program would address stagnant water concerns. Director Holt explained that while EWP focuses on stabilization, the Soil and Water Conservation has programs that may assist with those issues. He added that these programs are wrapping up, but it may still be worthwhile for residents with concerns to contact them.

Commissioner Hodges, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to approve the submission of the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) application as presented.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

C. Carolina Recording Systems Projects

Emergency Services Director Will Holt reviewed the proposed renewal of the maintenance contract with Carolina Recording Systems in the amount of \$29,078.70. He explained that the agreement covers the recorders used at the County's Primary and Backup 911 Centers, which are critical to emergency communications. Funds are available in the Emergency Services budget for this purpose.

Commissioner Greene, seconded by Vice Chairman Castle, moved to approve the renewal of the maintenance contract with Carolina Recording Systems in the amount of \$29,078.70.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

D. Priority Dispatch Renewal

Emergency Services Director Will Holt presented the annual renewal of the Priority Dispatch software license at a cost of \$22,417.52. The software is used to process Fire, EMS, and Law Enforcement calls using standardized questions that prioritize emergency responses. While medical emergency questions are required by the State, this specific vendor is not mandated. The renewal is fully funded by 911 surcharge funds.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to approve the renewal of the Priority Dispatch software license in the amount of \$22,417.52.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

10. SANITATION SITE REPAIR FUNDING REQUEST

Sanitation Director Chris Marriott explained that the scrap metal storage pad has deteriorated, creating unsafe conditions for staff and the public. Staff solicited three quotes and recommended PCM Construction, Inc. of Jonesville, NC, as the lowest responsive bidder at \$47,700. PCM has previously completed work for the County with good results. Funding is available in the FY2026 Landfill Operations budget.

Commissioner Marsh asked about the project timeline. Mr. Marriott indicated he plans to complete the repairs this fall, before winter, and that temporary storage will be set up while work is underway.

Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Marsh, moved to approve PCM Construction, Inc. of Jonesville, NC to complete the repairs to the scrap metal storage pad at a cost of \$47,700.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

11. TAX MATTERS

A. Monthly Collections Report

Mr. Tyler Rash, Tax Administrator, presented the August 2025 Monthly Collections Report. There were no tax releases for the month. Commissioner Marsh asked about the mailing schedule for tax bills, and Mr. Rash indicated they would be mailed on Thursday. He also noted that \$127,000 in pre-payments had already been received. Copies are attached for reference (see *Attachment A*).

The report was presented for informational purposes only, and no Board action was required.

12. MISCELLANEOUS ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

A. Use of Commissioners' Board Room for Election Official Access

Staff informed the Board that the Commissioners' Board Room will be needed for Election Official Access Only on the following dates, which may conflict with regularly scheduled Board meetings:

- **October 21, 2025 and November 4, 2025** – Municipal Elections
- **February 17, 2026 and March 3, 2026** – 2026 Primary
- **October 20, 2026 and November 3, 2026** – 2026 General Election

During these periods, locks are changed and voting equipment is stored in the Board Room. The Community Room at the Watauga County Recreation Center has been tentatively reserved for all listed dates.

Commissioner Greene, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to hold all six meetings in the Watauga County Recreation Center's Community Room.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

B. Boards and Commissions

Nursing Home Community Advisory Committee

The Board considered the reappointment of Ms. Barbara Hunsucker to the Watauga County Nursing Home Community Advisory Committee for a three-year term. Her current term expires on September 20, 2025, and she has expressed a desire to continue serving. The reappointment request was submitted by Stevie Welborn, Regional Long-Term Care Ombudsman with the High Country Council of Governments.

Commissioner Marsh, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, moved to waive the first reading and reappoint Ms. Barbara Hunsucker to the Watauga County Nursing Home Community Advisory Committee for a three-year term.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

Announcements

County Manager Geouque informed the Board of an upcoming event for their awareness:

- **Blue Ridge Energy’s Community Leaders Council Dinner** – September 30, 6:00 PM, at Jefferson Landing in Jefferson, NC

He noted that no Board business will be discussed at this event.

13. COMMISSIONER COMMENTS

Chairman Eggers spoke about the Renew North Carolina program, a state-led disaster recovery effort funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The program assists low-to-moderate income homeowners, including seniors, families with children, and disabled households, impacted by Hurricane Helene in 29 counties, including Watauga. More information about qualifications and the application process is available at renewnc.org.

14. CLOSED SESSION

County Manager Deron Geouque informed the Board that there would be no discussion of attorney-client privileged matters [G.S. § 143-318.11(a)(3)] or land acquisition matters [G.S. § 143-318.11(a)(5)] as originally noted on the agenda.

At 6:53 PM, Vice-Chairman Castle, seconded by Commissioner Hodges, made a motion to enter Closed Session pursuant to G.S. § 143-318.11(a)(1) to discuss personnel matters.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

At 7:33 P.M., Chairman Eggers, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to return to Open Session.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

15. POSSIBLE ACTION AFTER CLOSED SESSION

No action was taken.

16. ADJOURN

At 7:34 PM, Chairman Eggers, seconded by Vice-Chairman Castle, moved to adjourn the meeting.

VOTE: Aye – 5
Nay – 0

Braxton Eggers, Chairman

ATTEST: Katie Hancock, Clerk to the Board



ATTACHMENT A
TAX MONTHLY
COLLECTIONS REPORT

Monthly Collections Report

Watauga County

Bank deposits of the following amounts have been made and credited to the account of Watauga County. The reported totals do not include small shortages and overages reported to the Watauga County Finance Officer

Monthly Report August 2025

	<u>Current Month</u> <u>Collections</u>	<u>Current FY</u> <u>Collections</u>	<u>Current FY</u> <u>Percentage</u>	<u>Previous FY</u> <u>Percentage</u>
<u>General County</u>				
Taxes 2025	0.00	0.00		
Prior Year Taxes	53,994.93	0.00		
Solid Waste User Fees	5,269.86	0.00		
 Total County Funds	 \$59,264.79	 \$0.00		
<u>Fire Districts</u>				
Foscoe Fire	1,290.64	0.00		
Boone Fire	1,277.38	0.00		
Fall Creek Service Dist.	25.30	0.00		
Beaver Dam Fire	239.96	0.00		
Stewart Simmons Fire	486.52	0.00		
Zionville Fire	224.67	0.00		
Cove Creek Fire	258.89	0.00		
Shawneechaw Fire	125.83	0.00		
Meat Camp Fire	1,397.10	0.00		
Deep Gap Fire	228.83	0.00		
Todd Fire	19.60	0.00		
Blowing Rock Fire	456.73	0.00		
M.C. Creston Fire	108.00	0.00		
Foscoe Service District	227.33	0.00		
Beech Mtn. Service Dist.	2.35	0.00		
Cove Creek Service Dist.	0.00	0.00		
Shawneechaw Service Dist	63.86	0.00		
 Total Fire Districts	 6,432.99	 -		
<u>Towns</u>				
Boone	6,594.05	0.00		
Municipal Services	428.56	0.00		
 Total Town Taxes	 \$7,022.61	 \$0.00		
 Total Amount Collected	 \$72,720.39	 \$0.00		

Regina Houck Tax Collections Director

Lyle Rash Tax Administrator