

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA  
MCDOWELL COUNTY  
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS  
REGULAR SESSION – March 9, 2026**

**Assembly**

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in regular session on Monday, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2026, in the Commissioners' Board Room, 69 N. Main Street, Marion, NC.

**Members Present**

Chairman, Tony Brown; Vice-Chair, Lynn Greene; Patrick Ellis, Trisha Garner, and David Walker

**Members Absent**

None

**Others Present**

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Madalyn Robinson, Clerk to the Board; Fred Coats, County Attorney; Will Kehler, Emergency Services Director; Adrienne Rivera Jones, Emergency Services Deputy Director; Fred Pearson, Reappraisal Manager; Danny Hampton, Freedom Life Executive Director

**Call to Order**

Chairman Brown called the meeting to order at 5:00 pm. Commissioner Walker led the group in prayer. Commissioner Ellis led the Pledge of Allegiance.

**Approval of Minutes**

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the February 9<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Regular Session Minutes, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

**Approval of Agenda**

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to approve the agenda, seconded by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

**Freedom Life Grant Proposal**

Danny Hampton, Freedom Life Executive Director, presented the Freedom Life grant proposal. Freedom Life has requested that the County act as a sponsor and fiscal agent for US Department of Justice *Second Chance Act Addressing the Needs of Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*. This \$750,000 grant would be used to assist Children of incarcerated parents, especially those who are involved in the foster care system. Staff have met with the Freedom Life team and feel that the grant could be successfully administered in partnership with the organization.

Freedom Life would like to pursue family reunification services and the grant request would make this possible. Freedom Life is requesting approval for the grant, in partnership with the County, to form a Family Care Council within McDowell County. The Family Care Council would include DSS, child services, the school board, employees from the school system, and agencies that provide support to children. This would provide a sophisticated support system for children with incarcerated parents. McDowell County ranks third in the state for the number of children in foster care due to incarcerated parents. Due to this, Mr. Hampton believes this program would be valuable in the community.

Freedom Life will need to create a new division that is a child services division, and open a new office in a new location with staff. This grant would make that possible. Freedom Life is planning to work with JCPC and various children's programs in the area to fill in any gaps where services might not be provided. Each child would have a case manager working specifically with the child and family to track services that are being provided. They plan to continue working with the family upon the release of the parents and work through DSS plans for the family. Freedom Life looks out for the needs of the child first, but when possible, moves towards reunification. Freedom Life's goal is for reunification when possible, reducing recidivism, and approving quality of care for children and adults.

The County would be the applicant and fiscal agent of the grant, providing oversight and performance reporting, while Freedom Life would be the subrecipient and direct service provider. The grant is due March 30<sup>th</sup>, and the final submission on April 6<sup>th</sup>.

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to authorize the grant application, seconded by Commissioner Walker.

Chairman Brown asked if there was any discussion. Vice-Chair Greene asked for the time frame for the grant and if there would be a need to reapply after the three-year timeframe. Mr. Hampton noted that they would be informed of the award on the last day of September, with the official award date of October 1<sup>st</sup>. The grant would run from October through the September fiscal year and is not a re-application grant. Freedom Life is working to become Medicaid billable and will be working on sustainability funding streams during those three years to continue to fund the services they wish to provide.

Chairman Brown thanked Mr. Hampton for the presentation and the work that Freedom Life does, and was honored to endorse this. Commissioner Walker expressed

his appreciation for the services provided by Freedom Life and the lives they change in our community. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

### **Special Award Presentation**

Emergency Services Director Will Kehler recognized John Reese as a recipient of the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, awarded by Governor Josh Stein. The Order of the Long Leaf Pine is awarded to persons for exemplary service to the state of North Carolina and their communities that is above and beyond the call of duty and which has made a significant impact in strengthening North Carolina. Mr. Kehler recognized Mr. John Reese and his wife, Janet.

Mr. Reese served a long and distinguished career with the North Carolina Forest Service, beginning in 1974, where he served full-time as a County Ranger in McDowell until 2009. Since he retired from the State in 2009, he has assisted as a part-time crew leader for the Forest Service. Mr. Reese has volunteered for the Marion Fire Department for 22 years and has served on the City of Marion's Tree Committee for 39 years. In 2019, Mr. Reese joined McDowell County Emergency Services as a member of the incident management team as the planning section chief. Mr. Reese has devoted his life to serving the people of North Carolina through forestry, fire protection, and emergency management. Mr. Kehler presented the Order of the Long Leaf Pine to Mr. Reese and thanked him for his dedication.

The Board thanked Mr. Reese for his dedication, for what he has done for the community, and for the service he's provided to the County.

### **Helene Recovery Updates**

Emergency Services Deputy Director Adrienne Rivera Jones gave an update on Helene Recovery. Operation priorities remain the same, focusing on debris management, private roads and bridges, housing, and hazard mitigation.

#### **Debris Management:**

- Nearly 1.5 million cubic yards of debris has been removed from waterways, roadways, and private property under the PPDR program since operations began in late 2024.
- The North Carolina State Mission Assigned Recovery Task (SMART) Program is a coordinated, state-led initiative to assist counties with disaster debris removal after federally declared disasters.
- Current Projects in McDowell County:
  - Private Property Debris Removal (77)
  - Waterway Debris Points (149)

#### **Private Road & Bridge Program:**

- This program is managed by NC Emergency Management

- Projects Include:
  - Private road and bridge replacement or repair
  - Partial reimbursement for repairs performed by the homeowner. (Deadline to apply was 2/28/26)
- 304 projects identified in McDowell County
  - 11 projects completed
  - 2 Construction in progress
  - 3 Design Complete

#### Emergency Housing Repairs & Rebuilds

- VOAD coordination meeting is held biweekly at the EOC. Led by Jerry Lewis and Victoria Geurink.
  - 536 completed projects
  - 29 Pending Cases
  - 19 Full Rebuild
  - 9 in progress

#### Hazard Mitigation Program

- Acquisition: 49 (27 in Batch 1)
- Elevation: 17 Feasibility Studies ongoing
- Generator Projects: 17
- Landslide: 14

#### FEMA Reimbursement Update

- Total of 16 Applications (County Govt)
- 9 have been obligated, totaling \$2,147,907.15

#### Priorities for the Next 30 Days:

- Debris Operations
  - Coordination with NCEM on SMART Program
  - Remaining Projects - PPDR & Waterways
- VOAD Coordination
  - Continue supporting VOAD operations.
- Hazard Mitigation
- FEMA Reimbursement Applications (16)
- Continue to implement long-term recovery strategies.
- Annual Hurricane / Flash Flood Exercise May 13, 2026

Commissioner Walker asked if VOAD is a standing committee, and Ms. Jones stated that they are and continues to meet monthly with Emergency Services. The Board thanked Ms. Jones for her report.

## **2027 Property Reappraisal Update**

Mr. Wooten introduced Mr. Pearson and added that the process of choosing a firm began in 2024 for a full measured list survey for every parcel listed. This can be a time-consuming process. Since 2019, the County has been on a four-year reevaluation cycle along with 51 other counties in North Carolina. Vice-Chair Greene asked how long it has been since every parcel in the County was looked at and Mr. Wooten stated that they are not aware of any instance where every parcel has been visited.

Fred Pearson, Reappraisal Manager, gave an update on the status of the 2027 Property Reappraisal. Mr. Pearson noted that they've visited approximately 20,000 parcels out of the 33,000 parcels in McDowell. They have four people working in the field on this, one project manager, and two employees ready to begin the data entry process. On the evaluation side, they've pulled the 2025 and January/February 2026 sales (approximately 760). They'll be able to estimate increases that the County will be looking at in the near future based on 2025 and 2026 sales. On commercial and industrial properties, they'll be sending out income and expense letters to owners. For gated properties, they'll be sending out site visit letters. Mr. Pearson asked if the Board had any questions and they did not.

## **Water System Project Updates**

### **Nebo**

- The East End Project began on August 4. This project is scheduled to be completed in April 2026. Some sections of the work are completed and certified.
- Nebo Phases 2 A & B are complete except for the installation of a new master meter in front of The Attic.
- The small extension project near Exit 90 is more or less ready to bid with one more procedural hurdle (the environmental review) needing to be completed. There is no scheduled start or end date at this time.
- Phase 3 (Randolph Road) will start construction within the next month or so. The complicating factor is that the contractor working on the East End was also the successful bidder on this project, so they will need to work to coordinate the work on two projects at once.
- The master meter on US 70 has been moved to the location immediately west of the Beaman Road intersection. There is ongoing discussion with the City regarding the transfer of these customers and the operation of this section of the pre-existing water line.
- A grant/small loan combination was received for the extension of a line from the end of Randolph Road over to Fairview Road, terminating at NC 226 South at the City's system. This project would also fund the construction of a water storage tank.

### **Providence Area/West Marion Elementary Area**

- The engineer has provided the 90% plans to staff for review. The State Historic Preservation Office has directed that a historic site evaluation be completed for this project. This will take 2-3 months.

- Additional funds have been received under the State Revolving Fund program through NC DEQ Division of Water Infrastructure. That application was in the amount of \$3,538,500. A small portion of the funding is a 20-year loan, with the majority being a principal forgiveness loan with 0% interest.

#### Asset Inventory and Assessment Project

- The Asset Inventory and Assessment Project is now underway. The first steps involve doing a complete inventory of the County's water assets and updating the mapping. The GIS mapping process is nearing completion.

#### Partnership Grant

NCDEQ has provided the County \$100,000 to develop post-Helene partnerships with Marion, Old Fort, and the County. A kickoff meeting was held in January with the Town, City, and County staff and elected officials. Next steps will involve more focused discussions on collaborative best practices.

#### Water Connection Grant

The North Carolina Community Foundation awarded a \$100,000 grant to connect low-income households in the Nebo area to the water system. The grant will pay for the plumbing work and connection costs, except for the customer deposit.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the receipt of the grant and the parameters for potential customers as presented, seconded by Commissioner Garner. By a 5-0 vote, the motion passed.

Commissioner Walker made a motion for staff to bring information at a later date regarding the need for future water expansion off of Apache and Arrowhead roads, seconded by Commissioner Ellis. By a 5-0 vote, the motion passed.

#### Asset Management Updates

Mr. Wooten gave updates on ongoing projects.

Services Building HVAC: The Board has previously been briefed about a plan to replace the original 1976 HVAC system for the Services Building and has authorized contracting with a mechanical contractor who is finalizing system specifications for the new chiller. The bidding documents will include an option to just replace the chiller with an alternate to also include mechanical dampers to control airflow in the office spaces.

Main DSS Building: An engineer has prepared plans for the replacement of the retaining wall in the rear parking lot. An alternative to keeping and reinforcing the existing wall was explored, but found to be impractical due to the complexity.

Transfer Station: Now that the new floor is in use at the transfer station, attention has shifted to improving the area around the scale house. Work is underway to run data cabling to the scale house so that the new set of scales can be activated. The remainder of a state grant will be used to improve the drainage of the area, which should help with the condition of the access road. Future work will include the construction of a new scale house between the scales. This will hopefully be finished by the summer.

Security Upgrades: New security glass has been ordered for both the Register of Deeds and Elections offices. The installation has been delayed since the vendor is having a difficult time sourcing the aluminum for the window frames.

Budgetary Impact:

The Services Building HVAC is being paid for with a state appropriation. The DSS retaining wall will be paid for using a federal appropriation related to the American Rescue Plan Act. The transfer station work will be paid for using a state grant. The security upgrades are being paid for using County funds.

Commissioner Walker expressed his gratitude to the board and Mr. Wooten for searching for alternative sources of funding rather than County funding.

**Helene Recovery Grant Process Update**

Mr. Wooten covered the Helene Recovery Grant Process Update. The Board will see the USDA emergency watershed program in the upcoming months. EWP is designed to help properties adjacent to waterways where there is an imminent threat to life or property (examples include a DOT bridge, houses, or farm structures). The next step will be selecting an engineer and Mr. Wooten will bring this before the Board for endorsement. The funding will include a combination of federal and state funding. The County has applied for a program called StRAP. (stream restoration program) last week. The County is seeking a maximum grant of over 1.5 million for the designated area of Mill Creek. This area is identified as a high-impact area for the County, and the focus would be on removing any leftover debris and restoration.

Mr. Wooten moved on to facilities. Projects are being discussed that would be funded by the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery program. Projects include a new 911 Center and a small expansion to the Old Fort Senior Center for future emergency sheltering purposes. Staff have also spoken with the grant writer about utilizing the funding for a new animal shelter. They are speaking with the state about the possibility.

Regarding contracted assistance, much of the preliminary assistance for the CDBG-DR work is coming from the Foothills Regional Commission and a third-party contractor named Rostan. Foothills has prepared the attached MOU that would allow the County to work with Rostan on developing the application and administering the project at no County cost (the admin costs would be paid for with grant funds).

Vice-Chair Greene asked for confirmation that the grants do not require a match from the County, and Mr. Wooten stated that they did not. Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the Memorandum of Understanding with Foothills Regional Commission for the CDBG-GR Work, seconded by Vice-Chair Greene. By a 5-0 vote, the motion passed.

## **Budget Update and Approvals**

Mr. Wooten presented the budget amendments to the Board for approval.

GF 34: Transfers between line items and appropriates collections and grant revenues in Emergency Services

GF 35: Appropriates revenue in the Sheriff's Office

GF 36: Appropriate revenue at DSS

GF 37: Appropriate revenue in Transit

GF 38: Appropriate revenue in the Senior Center

GF 39: Allocates estimated property tax collections for the fire and rescue districts

GF 40: Appropriates grant revenue and fund balance in the 911 Fund.

Vice-Chair Greene made a motion to approve the budget items as presented, with a second from Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

## **Administrative Items for Review and Approval**

Mr. Wooten presented the Administrative Items for review and approval by the Board. The Finance Department has asked for the write-off of the non-collectible EMS bills in the attachment that total \$35,316.17. There are Nebo Water leak waivers for \$100, \$67.72, \$34.72, \$31.76, \$19.21, \$60.00, and \$31.76.

Mr. Wooten presented the Inspections Fee Waiver. An applicant applied for a permit last spring to rebuild a structure on his property. Staff initially quoted a permit cost of \$285, which was paid. Only recently was it discovered that he was given the wrong permit amount to pay, which should have been a total of \$525. The applicant has requested a waiver of the \$240 due to the staff error. Vice-Chair Greene made a motion to grant the waiver due to an error on the County's part, which was seconded by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passed.

Mr. Wooten presented the Baldwin Avenue Building Lease. McDowell Tech has sent over a lease for the Baldwin Avenue Building that would be the home for Cooperative Extension and the Soil & Water District. The lease would be at no cost, but the maintenance would be the County's responsibility, which is the same as the current situation, since the County funds the Maintenance of College-owned buildings.

Mr. Wooten presented the request for a donation of a generator. The County has a surplus generator that is being proposed for donation to Grace Baptist Church on

Shady Lane. As part of the donation, the church would agree to operate an emergency shelter.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the donation of the generator pending the written agreement to operate as an emergency shelter, along with the other items that were presented for approval. By a motion of 5-0, the motion passed.

**RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING DONATION OF PERSONAL PROPERTY TO NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION**

*WHEREAS, the County of McDowell desires to donate one natural gas-powered generator to Grace Baptist Church for the purposes of providing backup power for an emergency shelter site; and*

*WHEREAS, G.S. 160A-279 permits the Board of Commissioners to donate personal property to nonprofit organizations that carry out a public purpose; and*

*WHEREAS, records of all donated property will be maintained by the County.*

*NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of Commissioners of McDowell County that:*

*The County of McDowell is authorized to donate*

- Model: G25F1S*
- Serial Number: D6725K/001 and 092811/01*
- Frame: LFB 1014S*
- WDG: M*

*to Grace Baptist Church after the required 10-day public day notice.*

*Adopted this day, the 9th of March, 2026.*

**Property Tax Releases, Refunds, and Discoveries**

Mr. Wooten presented the property tax releases, refunds, and discoveries for approval.

Releases Over \$100:	\$3,242.19
Releases Under \$100:	\$157.76
Refunds:	\$932.34
Motor Vehicle Refunds:	\$956.08
Discoveries:	\$0

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the releases as presented, and it was seconded by Vice-Chair Greene. By a vote of 5-0, the motion passes.

**Citizen Comment**

Ronnie Burgin regarding the re-evaluation contract, Toby Bramblett regarding the YMCA, and Gail Manis regarding the re-evaluation of property tax.

**Commissioner and Staff Reports:**

None

**Adjournment**

Commissioner Ellis made a motion to adjourn at 6:29 p.m., with a second by Vice-Chair Greene. By a 5-0 vote, the motion passed.

Attest:

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Madalyn Robinson  
Clerk to the Board

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Tony Brown  
Chair