

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
SPECIAL MEETING – May 14, 2026**

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in special session on Wednesday, May 14th, 2026, at the Universal Backup 911 Center, Marion, NC.

Members Present

Chairman Tony Brown; Commissioner Patrick Ellis; Commissioner Trisha Garner

Members Absent

Commissioner Lynn Greene; Commissioner David Walker

Others Present

Ashley R. Wooten, County Manager; Alison Bell, Finance Director; William Kehler Emergency Services Director; Adrienne Rivera Jones, Emergency Services Deputy Director; Amberlie Buff, 911 Manager

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 p.m. After a brief welcome and prayer, Chief Joe Washburn welcomed everyone and gave an overview of Fire Commission activities.

Commission Overview

Chief Washburn highlighted several ongoing and new initiatives. Small projects include bullet proof vests — six for each department at \$70,000 each — and the foam cache, which was replenished at a cost of \$37,000. The Fire Commission grant provides three departments with \$5,000 each per year. A new project involves a communications bulk battery purchase for Viper radios.

Department Reports

Ashford–North Cove

Firefighter Gavin Wood of Ashford–North Cove reported that it has 19 volunteers, 5 full-time staff, and 7 part-time staff, with 21 certified firefighters. The department reported 342 calls for service. The training grounds are well-used and appreciated. Land acquisition is located away from water.

Crooked Creek

Representatives of Crooked Creek were unable to attend the meeting.

Dysartsville

Chief Nick Washburn with Dysartsville reported 6,116 medical calls and 312 additional medical calls, with 720 fire calls. Call volume is the same as the prior period. The department has two paid staff working 7-day shifts and 47 volunteers. The department hopes to go to 24/7 coverage this summer. A new engine is on order at \$900,000. The department bought a used Marion FD truck. A new substation LZ pad has been poured on new property. MAMA will have a fly-in soon. Plans include a community playground and a walking track. The department would love to have water nearby to achieve a Class 5 rating.

Glenwood

Chief Ronald Morgan of Glenwood reported 890 calls, a 27% call volume increase, 54 fires, and 418 medical calls. The department has 39 members and 32 volunteers, with no full-time staff currently. Six part-time staff provide coverage three days a week. The department has 3 engines and 1 tanker and is replacing the primary engine to achieve a Class 5 rating. Four new EMTs have been added. Helene grant funds were used for a boat. A substation is planned in the Vein Mountain area on the 221 side. The department has upgraded cardiac monitors and is working toward a Class 5 rating.

Hankins

Firefighter Larry Lukasik of Hankins reported 213 calls, with 90 medical. The department is undergoing a Class 9 inspection. It has 19 volunteers and two paid staff working 12-hour shifts. He also noted that an addition is being planned for the station to add bedrooms.

Marion

Chief Corey Presnell of Marion reported 2,088 total calls — 1,114 city calls and 734 district calls — with increased medical calls. The department has 15 full-time employees and 12 shift employees, with 4 per 24-hour shift. Firehouse Sub and OSFM grants have been received. Automatic aid response has decreased for structure fires. The department is conducting a second station needs assessment.

Nebo

Assistant Chief Rodney Roland noted a new engine has been ordered with delivery expected August 2027. Lake James Marina has a lift available 24/7. The department used a Helene grant to buy a side-by-side and to upgrade the air system,

achieving 75% hydration. Call volume was 457 in 2021 and grew to 800 calls in 2025. Future plans include looking for a substation near I-40. A 1-cent tax increase has been requested. The department is also seeking turnout gear and airpacks.

Old Fort

Chief Ron Richardson was unable to attend due to a family emergency.

P.G.

Chief Neil Settlemyre of Pleasant Gardens has four full-time staff and part-time staff, with two people on 24/7 coverage 90% of the time, and 31 volunteers. The average volunteer age is over 40. The department reported 732 calls in the prior year — 358 fire and 335 medical — and 279 calls through 2026 to date, including 146 medical and 133 fire, putting the department on pace for 800 calls. A new air tank compressor was purchased using a Helene grant. A new brush truck has been obtained. A Greenlee substation location is being sought.

Sugar Hill

Chief Washburn of Sugar Hill reported 800 calls in 2025, with 65% being medical. The department has 30 volunteers on the roster. Eighty percent of volunteers have 20 or more years of service. The department has 3 full-time staff, 6 part-time staff, and 4 engines. Future considerations include whether an older vehicle can be refurbished. The goal is to have a second person on shift. A 2027 re-rating is planned. A drone was discussed, but was not successful in recent grants. The department wants water access.

Woodlawn

Chief Keith Stockton of Woodlawn expressed a need for fire hydrants or other water points. The department has 24 firefighters and 6 part-time staff providing Monday–Friday 8-hour coverage and Saturday–Sunday 12-hour shifts. Call volume was 460 calls in 2025 and 380 calls in 2026. A new tanker was purchased to replace a 30-year-old truck. The department needs a new station as there is no space. Re-rating is scheduled for May 28th, with hopes for a Class 5 rating. Over half of the department's members are over 40. The department is running low on funds.

Rescue

Chief Brian Gentry of the Rescue Squad reported 2,524 calls in 2025 and 1,024 calls in 2026, with 75% medical calls. The department received a \$50,000 recovery grant and has acquired new hydraulic tools and a new drone, now having 3 total. Staffing includes 9 full-time employees, 13 part-timers, and 18 volunteers.

NC Forest Service

The NC Forest Service is experiencing a vacancy in the forester position. They have a stable roster of volunteers and expressed appreciation for departments assisting them during the staff shortage.

Emergency Services Update

Mr. Kehler provided an update on county and intergovernmental operations. In 2026, the 911 system has handled 32,000 total calls to date, and EMS has responded to 4,850 calls. Staffing at the 911 Center remains stable. The system processed 800,000 radio transmissions in 2025. Mr. Kehler noted that river gauges will be installed in every fire district by the end of 2026, and that Starlink units will be provided to every fire department, with additional units to be added over time. The EMS Blood program continues in partnership with UNC Health, and the popular Trails and Coffee program is returning. On the reimbursement front, Mr. Kehler reported that FEMA reimbursement for both Hurricane Helene and Winter Storm Fern has gone well. He closed by thanking everyone for their partnership and extending special thanks to Mr. Washburn for his leadership.

Closing Remarks

Mr. Brown thanked everyone for showing up and working well together.

Mr. Ellis thanked everyone for working to take care of their community. He expressed pride in the partnership and acknowledged the cost of doing what the departments do. He expressed amazement at the training level and noted the significant savings for homeowners resulting from reduced fire ratings. He also appreciated the departments going into schools and helping to save lives.

Ms. Garner noted that Hurricane Helene may have helped bring everyone together. She expressed pride in McDowell's quality of care and said she is enjoying touring stations to see and learn what is going on.

Mr. Wooten spoke about property tax legislation and thanked everyone, including Mr. Kehler, for their service.

Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 7:45 p.m.

Tony G. Brown, Chairman

Ashley R. Wooten, County Manager/Deputy Clerk to the Board