

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION – August 17, 2026**

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in regular session on Monday, August 17, 2026, in the Commissioners' Board Room, 69 N. Main Street, Marion, NC.

Members Present

Chairman, Tony Brown; Trisha Garner; David Walker

Members Absent

Vice-Chair Greene; Patrick Ellis

Others Present

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Madalyn Robinson, Clerk to the Board; Fred Coats, County Attorney; Tammy Wylie, Tax Assessor; Anna Lee, Human Resources Director; Sarah Brewer, Human Services Director; Jason Hollifield, Transit Director;

Call to Order

Chairman Brown called the meeting to order at 11:37 am. Commissioner Walker led the group in prayer and Commissioner Garner led the pledge of allegiance.

Property Tax Exemption Appeal

Ms. Wylie presented the property tax exemption appeal to the Board. Mt. Calvary Freewill Baptist purchased property adjacent to their church grounds in 2024. The church was sent a bill in 2025, which was paid. They have asked for an exemption to be granted for 2026 and future years. Ms. Wylie noted that due to the church missing the deadline to apply, the only parties that could approve the application with a good cause letter are the Commissioners. It is the County's position that there was sufficient time for the application to be submitted, given that the property was purchased in March of 2024. Ms. Wylie noted that the church has previously submitted a timely, successful application for another parcel it owns. Ms. Wylie concluded that the County does not consider that the taxpayer has shown "good cause" for an untimely application and does not recommend that the application be accepted for the 2026 tax year.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the application request because it was a one-time occurrence, seconded by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

Human Resources Proposed Policy Updates

Human Resources Director Anna Lee gave an operational update and discussed several policies that are recommended for evaluation/improvement. The basis for these policy recommendations is annual policy manual review, operational and departmental experiences, benchmarking with surrounding counties, recruitment and retention trends, and employment law best practices.

Personnel policy update recommendations include:

- Leave Without Pay *Section 7.11* (Revisions): Clarifies approval process and accountability.
 - The revision protects both employees and the County by promoting fairness consistently and appropriately, and allowing flexibility for legitimate circumstances.
- Paid Family Leave *Section 7.05* (Revisions): Requires 1-year service and runs concurrently with FMLA
 - From an HR perspective, this helps prevent situations where a newly hired employee becomes eligible for a significant paid leave benefit before establishing regular employment with the County.
- Sick Leave Transfer *Section 8.08* (New): Six-month waiting period before transferred leave may be used
 - This recommendation supports supervisors by ensuring that new employees establish satisfactory attendance during their initial employment period before relying on balances from other Counties.
- Dress Code Policy *Section 6.07* (Revisions): Reflect evolving workplace standards
 - A simplified policy is easier to interpret and enforce consistently across departments. From a recruitment and retention standpoint, modernizing expectations also helps ensure our workplace remains competitive with neighboring employers.
- Wellness Affidavit *Section 8.07* (Revisions): Extend wellness affidavit deadline to June 30th from May 30th
 - Recommendations to extend the deadline are based on provider availability and allowing more time for employees to submit.
- Vehicle/Fleet Policy *Section 6.04* (Revisions): Expanding on current vehicle use policy

- The policy establishes clear expectations for who may operate County vehicles and qualifications as included in the current policy. For supervisors, it provides clear guidance and consistent standards when addressing vehicle-related issues.

Ms. Lee noted that while these recommendations may appear administrative on the surface, they all have a common purpose: to create policies that are easier for employees to understand and easier for supervisors to administer. Ms. Lee led into the recruitment and retention information.

Government Job Recruitment Data:

- Ms. Lee presented the Neogov dashboard and noted that since implementation, there have been 88,280 views to McDowell County. This is significantly different than the views received from solely posting on the HR portal, as has been done in the past.
- The system helps screen applicants for the minimum criteria and find the most qualified candidates.

Current Retention Data (FY 2025-2026 snapshot):

- Workforce activity: 170 employees hired, 128 employees separated, with a net growth of 42 employees
- Separation trends: 68% of all separations were voluntary resignations (87 of 128). Retirements accounted for 8 employees. Involuntary separations (discharged/fired with cause) totaled 10 employees, representing less than 8% of all separations.

Why Retention Matters:

- Recruiting remains highly active. The majority of turnover is voluntary, highlighting the importance of employee retention initiatives.
- Continued investment in competitive benefits and clear personnel policies helps reduce avoidable turnover and improve organizational stability.
- These statistics provide a strong foundation for discussing: proposed personnel policy updates, future longevity enhancements, additional retention-focused benefit recommendations, and continued investment in McDowell County's workforce.

County Benefit Comparison:

- McDowell remains competitive in many areas but falls behind neighboring counties in longevity incentives and certain retention benefits.
- Ms. Lee mentioned future board consideration requests for longevity. Currently, longevity begins at 10 years of consecutive service. Ms. Lee suggested potential discussion surrounding earlier eligibility, improved percentages, a graduated schedule, and recognition of career employees. The reason being that many surrounding counties begin longevity earlier than McDowell County, making them more competitive for experienced employees.

- Why this matters:
 - Our workforce has changed: nearly 71% of McDowell County's workforce has fewer than 10 years of service, meaning the majority of employees receive no longevity recognition under the current policy. Only 29% of employees are eligible for longevity, despite many employees being in the critical years where retention is most important. Most eligible employees receive the lowest tier of the 112 employees receiving longevity: 44 employees (39%) receive the minimum 1.5% benefit. Only 11 employees (10%) have reached the maximum 4.5% benefit.

Strategic Consideration:

- As the County continues to recruit and retain employees in an increasingly competitive labor market, the board may wish to evaluate whether longevity should begin earlier in an employee's career, additional recognition should be provided before the 10-year mark, or the existing longevity schedule remains competitive with neighboring counties.
- These data illustrate that while McDowell County has a long-standing longevity program, the current structure primarily rewards long-tenured employees and provides no retention incentive for more than two-thirds of the current workforce.
- Key takeaway: Of McDowell County's 383 full-time employees, only 112 (29%) currently receive longevity pay, while 271 employees (71%) receive no longevity benefit because they have not yet reached 10 years of service. This highlights an opportunity for future policy discussions focused on retaining employees during the first decade of employment, when turnover is typically highest.

Ms. Lee added that these policy recommendations are intended to provide clear guidance and improve consistency across departments. Ms. Lee thanked the Board for taking the time to hear the first reading and added that if they have any questions, please let her know. Ms. Lee mentioned that HR is currently working on several employee recognition initiatives that will be taking place over the coming months, and extended the invitation to the Board, as they have dates for events. The Board thanked Ms. Lee for her presentation.

Human Services Update

Human Services Director Sarah Brewer gave the human services update to the Board. Ms. Brewer asked if there were any questions about the MOU data, and there was not.

Human Services Updates:

Staffing / Vacancy Update:

- Children's Services/ CPS: Only one position open for a permanency planning worker.
- Economic Services: A stipend from the state was given to all 100 Counties. The stipend will be used to support three IMC positions to help with the implementation of HR1. Extra employees will aid in processing recertifications for Medicaid applications. There are four vacancies in Economic Services, including the three new positions with funding provided from the state.

Food and Nutrition Program:

- Along with the implementation of HR1, McDowell County will receive A penalty (fee) if errors are made in processing FNS cases. This fee is statewide if the state goes above a 6% error rate. This penalty will also apply if a County goes above the error rate. Since October of 2025, McDowell has had a 0% error rate; however, the state is at a 6.49% error rate, leaving the state at risk of receiving the penalty. Discussion is ongoing to fix this.
- They have added another supervisor to the unit and added a part-time CQI (Continuous Quality Improvement) position to economic services.
- They are actively conducting peer-to-peer reviews for every case as mandated by DHHS.

Ms. Brewer asked if the Board had any questions about this data. Mr. Wooten added that the impact from the state's high error rate is roughly \$75,000 a year for McDowell County even though our error rate is 0%. The state is imposing that fee by withholding sales tax revenue across counties in North Carolina. This issue will continue to be monitored by staff.

Ms. Brewer recognized the Child Support Awareness staff for Child Support Awareness Month. Ms. Brewer added that the employees do a phenomenal job at what they do. They've served 1,238 people since August, carrying a caseload of over 100 people. Ms. Brewer meets monthly with the supervisor from the state and rarely have any corrections or adjustments to the work they do. Ms. Brewer recognized the employees and requested that the proclamation for Child Support Awareness Month be approved.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the Child Support Awareness Month proclamation, seconded by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.

CHILD SUPPORT AWARENESS MONTH PROCLAMATION

WHEREAS, children are entitled to financial support from their parents, and North Carolina continues to improve its efforts in child support collections; and

WHEREAS, North Carolina Child Support Services, in partnership with McDowell County Child Support Services, is dedicated to serving the families and children of McDowell County; and

WHEREAS, in State Fiscal Year 2025-2026, nearly \$649 million was collected statewide, providing support for more than 288,000 North Carolina children, many of whom reside in McDowell County; and

WHEREAS, children who do not receive adequate financial and emotional support from their parents may experience greater difficulty in becoming happy, healthy, and productive adults; and

WHEREAS, many concerned and dedicated judges, district attorneys, clerks of court, sheriff's office personnel, and child support professionals throughout McDowell County work to establish and enforce child support orders for our county's children, one of our community's most vital resources;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT PROCLAIMED, that the McDowell County Board of Commissioners does hereby proclaim August 2026 as "CHILD SUPPORT AWARENESS MONTH" in McDowell County and commends its observance to all residents.

NCACC Legislative Goals

Mr. Wooten discussed the legislative goals mentioned last week. The NC Association of County Commissioners has asked that legislative goals for the 2027 legislative session be submitted in the upcoming weeks. One prominent issue the Board has identified is increasing the income limit for elderly and disabled property tax exemptions. The Board has also discussed increased state funding for schools and additional revenue options. Staff recommends that you have one goal of expanded tax relief, specifically focused on assisting low-income seniors; a second goal pertaining to increase per-pupil funding for the school system; and suggested goal three be additional revenue options such as implementing the additional sales tax via a resolution instead of a referendum.

Commissioner Walker requested adding that the school system have control over setting their local calendar. Commissioner Garner asked if there were guidelines for what can be requested. Mr. Wooten added that they generally prefer items that aren't single-County issues.

Commissioner Garner asked if parents being AFL's for their adult handicapped children is a healthcare issue or legislative issue. Commissioner Garner was curious if this is something that needs to be tackled with local legislation or something the Commissioners could help with. Mr. Wooten stated that if the other two Commissioners were agreeable to including the language, he requested discussions surrounding framing what to say since other items included have had ongoing communication.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the three presented and the two additions, seconded by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed

Administrative Items

Mr. Wooten had no administrative items at this point for presentation. Chairman Brown highlighted that Mr. Kehler has been given the Deputy County Manager position, working primarily in Building Inspections. The Board added that they're proud to have Mr. Kehler working in that capacity and that, throughout his years with the County, he has continued to do an excellent job. Chairman Brown added that Mr. Kehler would be a valuable asset to the County in this position as he closes out his career.

Adjournment

Commissioner Walker made a motion to adjourn at 12:19 pm, seconded by Commissioner Garner. By a vote of 3-0, the motion passed.