MINUTES – MARCH 16, 2020

The Caswell County Board of Commissioners met in emergency session at the Caswell County Historic Courthouse in Yanceyville, North Carolina at 1:00 p.m. on Monday, March 16, 2020. Members present: Rick McVey, Chairman, David Owen, Vice Chairman, Sterling Carter, and Steve Oestreicher. Absent: William E. Carter, Nathaniel Hall and Jeremiah Jefferies. Also present: Bryan Miller, County Manager. Paula P. Seamster, Clerk to the Board, recorded the minutes.

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman McVey called the emergency meeting to order.

Chairman McVey stated that the Board of Commissioners meeting scheduled for tonight has been cancelled.

COVID-19

Chairman McVey turned to meeting over to Mr. Miller and Ms. Jennifer Eastwood, Health Director.

Health Department

Ms. Jennifer Eastwood updated the Board and the citizens present on the COVID-19 global pandemic. She stated that the virus is a novel strain of a cluster of viruses that has been around for a while. Ms. Eastwood stated that this virus started in China and has spread globally. She stated that currently in the United States 1694 has tested positive with 41 deaths and in North Carolina there are 33 positives and no deaths yet. Ms. Eastwood stated that Caswell County has tested one individual that came back negative and the Health Department provided this testing and she anticipates testing one more individual today. She stated that the county has a few travelers that are being monitored and are self-quarantined. Ms. Eastwood stated that this disease can make anyone sick and it is not based on one race or ethnicity. She stated that older adults or people of any age with underlying health conditions such as diabetes, lung disease or heart disease are at a greater risk for a severe illness with this virus. Ms. Eastwood urged everyone to use reliable resources such as the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services and the CDC. She stated that some of things that individuals can do is to wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and to get under the fingernails. Ms. Eastwood stated that if water is not available use at least a 60% alcohol based hand sanitizer but washing of the hands is the best practice. She added that you need to try to avoid touching your face especially the eyes, nose and mouth. Ms. Eastwood stated that this virus is a droplet virus and it gets into the body through the eyes, nose and mouth. She stated that everyone should practice respiratory etiquette by coughing or sneezing into the crook of the elbow or into a tissue and then throw that tissue away. Ms. Eastwood stated that the important thing is to stay at home if you are sick and if a person is in the high risk categories she recommended that they stay at home as well. She stated that on Saturday the Governor issued an executive order that closed schools K-12 across the state and in addition the Governor banned assemblies of 100 people or more and since that time the CDC has made a recommendation that this be dropped to 50 people or more. Ms. Eastwood stated that everyone needs to practice social distances of 6 feet or more from each other. She added that when it refers to 50 people it refers to 50 people in the same room and not in a building. Ms. Eastwood stated that the Health Department is exercising its high consequence pathogens concept of operations plan right now and it has had a lot of help from different partners and she asked them to give an update of what they are doing in their departments. Ms. Eastwood stated that the Health Department has set up an area for testing in case the volume increases and that area is outside of the Health Department so sick people will not be coming inside the health department. She added that as the volume increases they will being screens these patients before they come in. Ms. Eastwood stated that the Health Department is scheduling well appointments in the morning and sick appointments in the afternoon to help prevent individuals from crossing paths. She stated that the Maintenance Department is cleaning the medical facility. Ms. Eastwood stated that she met with department heads at the beginning of the month and provided them with guidance and added that many of them have hung signs in their office that gives a list of the preventative measures that have been discussed. She added that they were also advised to discuss essential functions in county government such as which staff may be able to work from home as well as setting up a program for cleaning high touch areas such as handicap buttons, door knobs, handrails, etc. Ms. Eastwood stated that Maintenance has provided hand sanitizers for all the departments. She stated that Mr. Barry Lynch opened the Emergency Operations Center so key members are there and will be there throughout the duration as long as they need to be there and this allows everyone to communicate with each other without having to find each other.

EMS

Mr. Barry Lynch stated that the Emergency Operation Center was opened this morning and the hours of operation will be from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. right now but as things change hours can be extended. He stated that last Thursday afternoon around 5:00 the partnership with 911 and some guidance from State OEMS a program was implemented to screen callers prior to EMS responding. Mr. Lynch stated that when a call comes in depending on the complaint the communicators will start to ask specific questions about travel and close contact and EMS will be the only response and the fire departments and first responders will not be dispatched at that time. He added that Communications will contact EMS directly and not over the air to the public. Mr. Lynch stated that Jason Watlington as well as other individuals is currently working in conjunction with the medical director to put in a plan in place where EMS can evaluate people at home and tell them whether they should stay at home or to go to a medical facility.

School System

Dr. Sandra Carter stated since the Governor’s announcement on Saturday there have been multiple telephone conferences as well as a conference with the principals and admin at the Central office on Sunday with the State Superintendent to receive guidelines. She stated that there were a lot of questions about what the school closings meant for staff and they received clarity on that and they are constantly receiving updates. Dr. Carter stated that there were directions from the state level to look into preparing virtual learning opportunities, distance learning opportunities if this continues for more than 2 weeks. She stated that teachers are finalizing packets that will be sent home for the students and teachers are being trained for virtual online learning for students who have access to broadband and online services and duplicate materials for those that do not have access to internet. Dr. Carter stated that a survey is being sent out to staff to find out what hurdles that staff will encounter such as child care and they are looking into child feeding sites for at risk students but there needs to be staff to do these kinds of things. She added that the Board of Education approved free child care for all of school staff for grades K-5 and locations at the elementary schools will be looked into for these child care facilities and this is only during the time that staff is at work. Dr. Carter stated that at 10:00 today the Food Service department had a statewide webinar for food service and delivery.

Commissioner Oestreicher stated that he had read that for a lot of children the only full meal they get during the day is the one they get at school and asked if this was different from what Dr. Carter discussed. Dr. Carter responded that this is the same thing and added that the School has a summer feeding program and this is going to be extended for this issue. She stated that there will be satellite sites set up as well as remote sites temporarily for this purpose and she added that it would be at least a major meal and a snack to carry home.

Policies and Procedures

Ms. Eastwood stated that the other priority is the county employees and there have been a lot of discussions in the EOC about how to take care of the county employees and one recommendation is to allow teleworking. She added that several counties have reduced their staff to 50% during this time and she turned this conversation over to Mr. Miller.

Mr. Miller stated that he put a copy of a Teleworking policy each of the commissioner’s seats and added that this policy was used as a sample policy by the UNC School of Government as a policy that would work in a lot of jurisdictions. He added that this policy was designed by the Town of Apex and he went through the policy and made the necessary changes as well as a few slight modifications to make it work in the current system. Mr. Miller stated that later on he would be asking the Board to approve this policy to allow the non-essential personnel to telework or work from home. He stated that there is an additional policy in the county’s previous personnel policy on sick leave advancement and he is going to ask the Board to reinstate the sick leave advancement as well as vacation advancement or based on guidance from President Trump at 3:30 to follow the directive by federal and state government. Mr. Miller read Section 17. Sick Leave Advancement “Under extenuating circumstances, an employee may be advanced up to twelve days of sick leave. Such advancement of leave will be made only with the approval of the County Manager or department head. If an employee leaves the County’s employment before the advanced sick leave is earned, an equivalent amount of time shall be deducted from the employee’s final paycheck. Sick leave in excess of twelve days a year must be approved by the Board of Commissioners.” He also recommending to the Board to close the Senior Center and the Public Library to the public and he also asked to provide childcare to county employees in the Library for the next 2 weeks. Mr. Miller reiterated what the Chairman mentioned at the beginning of the meeting the cancellation of the Board’s meeting tonight.

Commissioner Oestreicher asked if any thought has been given to combining the county with the school system on childcare rather than setting up a separate operation at the Library. Mr. Miller responded no, it has not been discussed but he is trying to be mindful of the CDC’s recommendation of 50 people or more. He added that he plans to do the same thing as the school system and send out a survey to see how many employees would use something like this and depending on the numbers they may be combined. Commissioner Oestreicher asked that the county manager do this because it only makes sense.

Commissioner S. Carter asked “Mr. Chairman, we will be continuing Meals on Wheels correct?” Mr. Miller responded that this is correct and added that the Senior Center has formulated a plan to provide meals on wheels as well as to those that participate in the congregate meals and wish to receive meals on wheels instead of the congregate meals and these meals will be delivered most likely one day a week with 5 to 7 frozen meals instead of one daily meal.

State of Emergency

Mr. Miller asked Mr. Lynch and Ms. Eastwood to talk about the State of Emergency. He added that he is asking the Board to implement a State of Emergency at the meeting today and the Chairman has the authorization to execute and sign the State of Emergency.

Mr. Lynch stated that in Section 3of the State of Emergency the county has the ability to put certain restrictions in if needed such as evacuation, curfew, restricted access, business operations, alcohol sales and transportation, dangerous weapons and substances, and other for specific guidelines. He added that the county can put limits on public gatherings to 50 people or more. Mr. Lynch recommended that everything be removed except for the limits on public gatherings unless Ms. Eastwood suggests otherwise.

Ms. Eastwood stated that the county should try to prevent, as much as possible, the spread of this virus. She added that the areas that were affected the most were because they did not put measures in place early enough to prevent that community spread. Ms. Eastwood stated that the county can wait for the governor to do an executive order or the Board can do it.

Commissioner Oestreicher asked if there were proposals on specific pieces to the state of emergency declaration because he would like to see those detailed out before deciding on it. He added that he appreciated the verbal but he would like to see it in writing. Mr. Miller responded that he did not want to put together the declaration before the Board heard what needed to be discussed. He added that his recommendation is to limit the restrictions as outlined by the CDC. Commissioner Oestreicher asked if this would be in addition to. Mr. Miller responded that the CDC limits public gatherings of over 50 people for 8 weeks but he did not know if the 8 weeks would be necessary. He asked Mr. Lynch how long the declaration would be in effect.

Mr. Lynch stated that according to the county’s ordinance the declaration would stay in effect for 10 to 14 days or a specific date can be put on the declaration.

Mr. Miller stated that based on what the School System had decided his recommendation would be that the state of emergency would run through midnight of March 29, 2020. He added that later on he, Mr. Lynch, Ms. Eastwood and Mr. Vernon Massengill could look at more data and make a difference recommendation.

Mr. Lynch suggested that the declaration be through April 6, 2020 because it is easier to take out than to extend. Mr. Miller responded that he agreed with Mr. Lynch’s recommendation.

Mr. Miller stated that there is a lot of moving parts to this and the Emergency Operations Center is up and running. He added that a good job has been done so far and he would continue to update the Board as necessary.

Ms. Eastwood stated that this is a rapidly changing situation and the things that are said right now may be different later on. She added that the Health Department is pushing out information to other providers as far as testing and different clinical guidance.

Fire Marshal

Mr. Miller asked the fire marshal, Vernon Massengill, to discuss some items as well.

Mr. Vernon Massengill stated that he wants to protect the volunteer fire departments and it has been put into place that the fire departments will not be responding to certain calls and this may change but right now he is going by Mr. Lynch’s leadership on this.

Cooperative Extension

Mr. Travis Hoesli, Cooperative Extension Director, stated that he was informed this morning from NC State to put in social distancing protocols so he is working to modify the schedules of the employees and all of the agents will be working from home but will still have office hours. He added that office will be open and to follow the counties guidelines if they were stricter than NC State’s protocols. Mr. Hoesli stated that farm visits will still be done and they will try to do this through digital meetings if possible but if not actual visits will be done.

911

Mr. Kenneth Everett, 911 Director, stated that Mr. Lynch covered 911’s screening policy that was implemented on Thursday and added that he has ‘knocked out’ about 5 or 6 as of this morning. He added that 911 Center has been closed down except for the Emergency Operations Center. Mr. Everett stated that this was the best way to keep his group healthy.

DSS

Ms. Dianne Moorefield, DSS Director, stated that DSS is looking at issues related to social workers having to go out into the field and added that because it is mandated they have to respond to adult protective services and child protective services reports. She stated that the office is having discussions about putting safety measures in place.

Sheriff

Sheriff Tony Durden stated that access is limited to the Sheriff’s Office. He added that they are postponing fingerprinting for a time period. Sheriff Durden stated that the Sheriff’s Office is answering all calls by telephone if possible. He added that they have concerns about the inmate population. Sheriff Durden stated that best practices are being put into place to make sure that the deputies take care of themselves.

Commissioner S. Carter asked “Mr. Chairman, Sheriff with the courts reducing their schedule is that going to impact our inmate capacity, are we okay in that regard?” The Sheriff responded that be believed there are 28 inmates from this county but most of the inmates come from statewide and federal services so there is about 80 inmates. He stated that they are trying to be mindful and to look for signs and to get the inmates to the health department if anyone shows signs.

Mr. Miller stated that he was in a meeting with the court system Friday and they are taking proactive measures or at least being mindful of the inmate population and working through procedure to reduce the size. Sheriff Durden responded that the court system was giving out pleas this morning. He added that they are limiting access to the lobby of the sheriff’s office however business still needs to be conducted while still keeping the public safe.

State of Emergency

Mr. Miller asked for guidance on the State of Emergency. He asked the Board if it would like to include the provision of restricting gatherings of 50 or more people.

Commissioner S. Carter stated “Yes.”

Commissioner Owen stated that he is going to vote for this whether the 50 or more people is in it or not but it goes beyond what the state has ordered and it will affect a lot of churches in Caswell County. He added that he hopes that churches understand this.

Commissioner Owen moved to approve the State of Emergency and to include the provision of limiting mass gatherings of 50 or more people.

Commissioner S. Carter stated “Mr. Chairman I would just add to the discussion there that we should probably add the CDC’s social distancing recommendation also in that as well as any other pertinent information that could be given for the citizen’s information. I saw an example of a similar declaration from Durham County that prefaced the declaration with a lot of good information and I have a copy that I can hand to you all to consider possibly prefacing some of that language.

Commissioner Oestreicher seconded the motion.

Commissioner Oestreicher asked if the flexible work scheduling policy was going to be included in the declaration. He stated that he was hesitant to enact the policy carte blanche for a long period of time but he was not hesitant to it being done part time as part of the state of emergency. Mr. Miller responded that any policies that the county has are open for discussion at any point in time. Commissioner Oestreicher stated that this did not satisfy his concerns. Mr. Lynch responded that the state of emergency does not have anything to do with work force; it has to do with the general public and the population and limiting the spread through the general public. Commissioner Oestreicher thanked Mr. Lynch.

Commissioner S. Carter asked “Mr. Chairman, just a question, are we going to take Mr. Lynch’s recommendation of April 6th for that conclusion date or are we going to leave it indefinite or back to March 29th which the manager recommended?” Mr. Miller responded that he yielded to Mr. Lynch’s recommendation. Commissioner S. Carter continued “Forgive me.”

Commissioner Owen stated that he was fine with that. Commissioner S. Carter responded “Just clarifying April 6th.” Commissioner Oestreicher agreed.

Mr. Lynch stated that if things quiet down the state of emergency can be rescinded.

Commissioner Owen moved, seconded by Commissioner Oestreicher to approve the State of Emergency and to include the provision of limiting mass gatherings of 50 or more people and this declaration would last until April 6, 2020. The motion carried unanimously.

Mr. Lynch asked what time does the state of emergency take effect. Chairman McVey responded that it would take effect at 1:00 p.m. today.

Telework Policy

Mr. Miller stated that the next thing he would like for the Board to look at is the Telework Policy. He added that the policy is a recommendation from the School of Government on best practices for teleworking. Mr. Miller stated that along with the policy there is an agreement that if an employee was put on long term teleworking 6 weeks or more the employee and the department head would have to go through the teleworking application so each party would know the expectations. He added that he did not think this would be necessary but he wanted to include it. Mr. Miller asked for approval of the telework policy to be able to follow the CDC’s suggested protocols.

Commissioner Oestreicher stated that his comment was still the same that he did not have an issue with doing it on a temporary basis, added that the full board is not present, that it should be viewed as an emergency situation and to take the time to reconsider this as a permanent policy at a future date when all of the Board is present. Mr. Miller responded that this policy could be implemented through the end of the state of emergency. Commissioner Oestreicher stated that this was his thinking.

Commissioner Oestreicher moved to implement the Flexible Work Scheduling Policy on an interim basis until the end of the state of emergency and later reconsider it as a permanent policy.

Mr. Miller asked that this be followed through the CDC’s recommended timeframe. He added that the CDC is recommending 8 weeks and the state of emergency is for less.

Commissioner Oestreicher moved, seconded by Commissioner Owen to implement the Flexible Work Scheduling Policy on an interim basis following the CDC’s recommended timeframe and later to reconsider it as a permanent policy.

Commissioner S. Carter stated “I can’t vote for a policy that we haven’t read. I just wanted to say that.”

Upon a vote of the motion, the motion carried by a vote of three to one with Commissioner S. Carter voting no.

Sick Leave and Vacation Advancement

Mr. Miller asked the Board to approve the reinstatement of the Sick Leave Advancement with the addition of Vacation Advancement and the same guidelines can be followed that Commissioner Oestreicher spoke about in his last motion or the county could follow the directive from federal and state authorities when it pertains to vacation leave and sick leave when employees are not present at work. He added that it is his understanding that more will be heard about this today at 3:30.

Commissioner Owen asked the county manager if this was the policy he read earlier. Mr. Miller responded yes and read it again “Under extenuating circumstances, an employee may be advanced up to twelve days of sick leave. Such advancement of leave will be made only with the approval of the County Manager or department head. If an employee leaves the County’s employment before the advanced sick leave is earned, an equivalent amount of time shall be deducted from the employee’s final paycheck. Sick leave in excess of twelve days a year must be approved by the Board of Commissioners.” He added that this should read 96 hours instead of 12 days because the working day for the sheriff’s office is 12 hours and not 8 hours.

Mr. Lynch stated that he did not think the Sheriff’s Department and EMS would be included in that because they are essential personnel.

Ms. Eastwood stated that she has employees that do not carry a sick or vacation hours and if they are sick she can’t have them in the office.

Commissioner Owen moved, seconded by Commissioner Oestreicher to reinstate the former Sick Leave Advancement Policy and add Vacation Advancement not to exceed 96 hours through the CDC recommended time period. The motion carried unanimously.

Closing of County Departments

Mr. Miller stated that the Senior Center and the Library will be closing to the public and are working through providing child care for county employees that may be essential or need to be at work.

Commissioner Owen asked if the fees would be suspended due to the closing of the Library. Mr. Miller responded yes the fines will be suspended due to the fact that books cannot be returned during the closure of the Library.

Commissioner S. Carter moved, seconded by Commissioner Owen to close the Senior Center and the Public Library as well as provide child care for all county employees and to suspend fines due to the closure of the library during the duration of the CDC’s recommendation. The motion carried unanimously.

Mr. Miller stated that this was all that he had at this time.

Commissioner S. Carter asked “Mr. Chairman, I did want to ask about another county department, Parks and Rec, if the manager could update us on that?” Mr. Miller responded that Parks and Rec programming has already been suspended due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Commissioner S. Carter continued “So what about the employees that are there?” Mr. Miller responded that the employees are still reporting to work doing there normal duties, cleaning, etc.

Commissioner Oestreicher stated that he knew that the county manager had met with the Town of Yanceyville many times on various aspects of this and he asked the Mayor of Milton if there was anything that the county could do to help Milton. Mayor Patricia Williams responded that what is put into place by the county would also apply to Milton.

Commissioner S. Carter asked “Mr. Chairman, I have two other well ones a question the other is a concern. The first question would be for Ms. Eastwood, what are we seeing as far as information goes regarding how long the virus stays on surfaces, clothes, etc.?” Ms. Eastwood responded that the latest information that she had read is it can lay on the surface from 2 to 9 days depending on the surface. Commissioner S. Carter continued “Depending on whatever it is?” Ms. Eastwood responded yes and added that the CDC does have information on this and it can be found on their website. Commissioner S. Carter continued “And the other thing and I guess this would be for the manager and for Ms. Eastwood and I brought this up again two months ago, just want to make sure that all of our county buildings are being properly sanitized and disinfected. Not just the door knobs and whatnot but when we are talking about most surfaces this thing could stay on for 2 to 9 days that is a big concern of mine and I am wondering if we could find additional help, custodial help, to help in accomplishing that after hours if need be to move forward and be very…?” Ms. Eastwood responded that for the Health Department it is not just a onetime clean because the clinic really needs to be cleaned daily.” Commissioner S. Carter continued “Right, right.” Ms. Eastwood responded that this is something that she had planned to bring before the Board for her next year’s budget. She added that when she walked in the Health Department this morning maintenance had been there and it smelled clean and sanitized, she did not know the plan moving forward but maintenance did a great job today. Ms. Eastwood stated that after hours would be a great time to clean since there are no patients during this time. Commissioner S. Carter stated “And you said in your response schedule you were having sick patients coming in the afternoon’s right?” Ms. Eastwood responded that this is correct. Commissioner S. Carter continued “Yeah that would definitely be a key there. So I guess to Mr. Miller do we have any plans to do something like that?” Mr. Miller responded no because of budgetary concerns; the county does not have the funding to do that but if the Board would like to give the funding to do this and identify the buildings with the most concern the county can do that. He added that he understands Ms. Eastwood’s point but if the Board is talking about county buildings it is all of them. Ms. Eastwood responded that the recommendation from the CDC is high touch areas and that is what needs to be focused on such as door knobs, handicap buttons, etc. Commissioner S. Carter stated “So I guess I would bring my concern to the Board as a whole that I think that is something budget wise we should consider. I think it is going to increase as far as the need obviously and we’ve only got limited staffing at this time.” Chairman McVey responded that the Board can take a look at that.

Commissioner Oestreicher stated that it was his understanding that hand sanitizer does nothing for this virus. Ms. Eastwood responded that the hand sanitizer needs to be at least 60% alcohol based. Commissioner Oestreicher stated that this had been revised. Ms. Eastwood responded that this has been the CDC’s guidelines all along but washing the hands is always the best practice. She added that when using hand sanitizer it needs to be rubbed in until it dries. Commissioner Oestreicher asked what sanitizing products worked best. Ms. Eastwood responded that it states on the back of the label if it covers the coronavirus but any cleaning wipes, Clorox wipes or soap and water.

Commissioner S. Carter asked “Mr. Chairman, sorry I keep bugging you, with our current schedule of zoning community meetings are we interested in postponing those because we currently still have them all on the schedule?” Mr. Miller responded absolutely and that he has already directed the clerk to assist me in cancelling the meeting this week in Pelham. Commissioner S. Carter continued “So we are just going to handle those each coming week or?” Mr. Miller responded that these will be handled administratively. Commissioner S. Carter continued “And then we have the meeting on the 31st the public hearing held in this building, do you have an update on that?” Mr. Miller responded that he received word from DEQ shortly before this meeting that they plan to cancel that meeting through a press release later but the decision was made to cancel that meeting. Commissioner Oestreicher asked if the DEQ meeting would be cancelled or rescheduled. Mr. Miller responded that the meeting will be rescheduled and the public comment period will be extended as well.

ADJOURNMENT

At 2:04 p.m. Commissioner Owen moved, seconded by Commissioner Oestreicher to adjourn. The motion carried unanimously.

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Paula P. Seamster Rick McVey

Clerk to the Board Chairman

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