

**MINUTES**  
**TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**  
**APRIL 8, 2024 – REGULAR MEETING**

The Board of Commissioners of Transylvania County met in a regular meeting on Monday, April 8, 2024, at 4:00 p.m. in the Multipurpose Chambers at the County Administration Building, located at 101 S. Broad Street, Brevard, North Carolina.

Commissioners present were Emmett Casciato, Larry Chapman, Chairman Jason Chappell, Vice-Chairman Jake Dalton, and Teresa McCall. Also present were County Manager Jaime Laughter, County Attorney Julie Hooten, and Clerk to the Board Trisha Hogan.

Media: Dan DeWitt – *Brevard Newsbeat*  
Jon Rich – *The Transylvania Times*

There were approximately 60 people in the audience.

**CALL TO ORDER**

Chairman Jason Chappell presiding declared a quorum was present and called the meeting to order at 4:02 p.m.

**WELCOME**

Chairman Chappell welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the Commissioners and staff in attendance.

**PUBLIC COMMENT**

*The comments represent the individual speaker's opinion or point of view.*

Alice Wellborn: Ms. Wellborn highlighted the importance of communication and collaboration between the County and the Board of Education, following an encouraging presentation by the Education Capital Work Group on March 4. Both entities received a letter from the County on March 11, signaling a commitment to a collaborative planning process for school improvements. Expressing disappointment, Ms. Wellborn noted the lack of cooperation observed at the March 25 Commissioners' meeting, where the School Board's budget and project management were harshly criticized. Despite the School Board's efforts to address concerns, the Commissioners have not responded, undermining attempts at collaboration. Ms. Wellborn questioned the Commissioners' leadership, criticizing their preemptive attack on the schools before scheduled discussions and presentations. She emphasized the need for effective governance and expressed skepticism toward future claims of collaboration from the Commissioners.

Holly Diaz: Ms. Diaz, a resident of Brevard, returned to her hometown with her family after 15 years away. Both she and her husband are former United States Navy helicopter pilots, passionate about serving their community. However, the lack of reliable childcare in Transylvania County limits their ability to contribute outside the home. Ms. Diaz advocated for full funding of Pre-K programs in county schools. She emphasized the critical role of early education in shaping childhood outcomes and its lasting social and economic impacts. Ms. Diaz highlighted the proven benefits of early childhood education, including improved development, increased future earnings, reduced societal disparities, and enhanced community engagement. She stated that investing in Pre-K education not only benefits individual children but also strengthens the entire community. Additionally, by providing children with a solid educational foundation, we foster lifelong learning and civic

participation, ultimately building a more vibrant society. Ms. Diaz stressed the immediate need for reliable childcare, essential for working parents and vital for the county's economic sustainability. She urged the Commissioners to prioritize funding for Pre-K programs, emphasizing its pivotal role in securing future success for Transylvania County.

Claudia Hawkins: Ms. Hawkins addressed Commissioner Dalton's concerns regarding potential changes in the calculation of ADM by the Republican Superintendent of Public Instruction, which could result in a \$1.5 million loss in state funding for the School System. She urged the Board of Commissioners to take action against this proposal, highlighting the burden it would place on local governments, especially in rural counties like Transylvania County. While not taking a stance on other items in the local funding request for schools, Ms. Hawkins emphasized the importance of retaining and expanding the Pre-K program. She echoed previous sentiments about the program's long-term benefits and urged the Commissioners to prioritize its funding, reframing it as an investment in children's and the country's future. Ms. Hawkins called for a proactive approach to overcoming obstacles such as cost, space, and staffing, urging the Commissioners to adopt a can-do attitude. She suggested that instead of dwelling on past funding methods, the focus should shift to finding solutions for funding going forward. Expressing her willingness to support a tax increase to fund the Pre-K program, Ms. Hawkins highlighted the community's overwhelming support for education, as evidenced by the recent school bond. She stressed that certain investments, like Pre-K education, are worth the financial commitment for the sake of children's education and future success.

### **AGENDA MODIFICATIONS**

There were no agenda modifications from the Commissioners or staff.

**Commissioner Chapman moved to approve the agenda as submitted, seconded by Commissioner Dalton, and unanimously approved.**

### **CONSENT AGENDA**

**Commissioner Chapman moved to approve the Consent Agenda as submitted, seconded by Commissioner Dalton, and unanimously approved.**

The Board of Commissioners approved the following items:

#### APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The Board of Commissioners met in a regular session on Monday, March 25, 2024. The Board approved the minutes as submitted.

#### ST. PHILIP'S GRANT FOR SENIOR MEDICAL TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

The County currently utilizes Brevard City Cab as a third-party subcontractor to provide travel services outside the Brevard-to-Rosman travelshed. To enhance these services, the County acquired two new replacement vans in the past year: an ADA-compliant 22 ft. lift-assisted van and an additional ADA-compliant lift-assisted mini-van. These additions aim to bolster transportation options for individuals requiring services beyond the Brevard-to-Rosman area.

While demand response services remain available for individuals over 65 seeking transportation for medical or personal appointments, a fee of \$5 per trip is required for destinations outside the Brevard-to-Rosman travelshed. For trips to Henderson or Buncombe County, the fee increases to \$20 per trip. Over the past fiscal year, Transylvania County seniors have collectively spent over \$5,000 out of pocket on these transportation expenses.

Recognizing the financial strain this places on seniors with limited budgets, the County aims to alleviate some of the burden by offering to cover medical transportation costs. With the introduction of the new TIMs Minivan, the County plans to pilot a service to serve remote seniors currently relying on City Cab services. By transitioning these rides to County ADA-compliant services and offering vouchers through the Silver Squirrels Seniors Voucher Service, the County aims to reduce costs while ensuring seniors have access to essential medical transportation. In support of this initiative, the Board approved the acceptance of \$5,000 in grant funding to further support senior medical transportation services.

**PROCLAMATION - NATIONAL LIBRARY WEEK**

Libraries connect our communities and enrich our lives in ways we may not realize. From book groups to lending sports equipment to providing a safe after-school hangout space and so much more, libraries support us wherever we find ourselves on the roadmap through life's journey. The Board of Commissioners commended the Library staff and volunteers for the services they provide to the community and many others. The Board approved Proclamation #06-2024 Proclaiming the Week of April 23-29, 2024, as National Library Week.

**Proclamation #06-2024  
National Library Week**

**WHEREAS**, libraries offer the opportunity for everyone to connect with others, learn new skills, and pursue their passions, no matter where they are on life's journey; and

**WHEREAS**, libraries have long served as trusted institutions, striving to ensure equitable access to information and services for all members of the community; and

**WHEREAS**, libraries adapt to the ever-changing needs of their communities, developing and expanding collections, programs, and services that are as diverse as the populations they serve; and

**WHEREAS**, libraries are accessible and inclusive places that promote a sense of local connection, advancing understanding, civic engagement, and shared community goals; and

**WHEREAS**, libraries play a pivotal role in economic development by providing resources and support for job seekers, entrepreneurs, and small businesses, thus contributing to local prosperity and growth; and

**WHEREAS**, libraries are treasured institutions that preserve our collective heritage and knowledge, safeguarding both physical and digital resources for present and future generations; and

**WHEREAS**, libraries are an essential public good and fundamental institutions in democratic societies, working to improve society, protect the right to education and literacy, and promote the free exchange of information and ideas for all; and

**WHEREAS**, libraries, librarians, and library workers are joining library supporters and advocates across the nation to celebrate National Library Week;

**NOW, THEREFORE**, be it resolved that the Board of Commissioners of Transylvania County proclaims National Library Week, April 7-13, 2024. During this week, we encourage all residents to visit their library and celebrate the adventures and opportunities they unlock for us every day. Ready, Set, Library!

This the 8<sup>th</sup> day of April 2024.

S://Jason R. Chappell, Chairman

Transylvania County Board of Commissioners

PROCLAMATION - OLDER AMERICANS MONTH

Each year the Council on Aging and/or the Department of Social Services' Adult Services Division request that the Board of Commissioners approve a proclamation declaring May as Older Americans Month to recognize the many contributions of our senior citizens. Historically, Older Americans Month has been a time to acknowledge the contributions of past and current older persons to our country, in particular those who defended our country. Older Americans Month is celebrated across the country through ceremonies, events, fairs, and other such activities. The Board approved Proclamation #07-2024 Proclaiming May as Older Americans Month.

**Proclamation #07-2024  
Older Americans Month**

**Whereas**, May is Older Americans Month, a time for us to recognize and honor Transylvania County's older adults and their immense influence on every facet of American society; and

**Whereas**, through their wealth of life experience and wisdom, older adults guide our younger generations and carry forward abundant cultural and historical knowledge; and

**Whereas**, older Americans improve our communities through intergenerational relationships, community service, civic engagement, and many other activities; and

**Whereas**, communities benefit when people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds have the opportunity to participate and live independently; and

**Whereas**, Transylvania County must ensure that older Americans have the resources and support needed to stay involved in their communities — reflecting our commitment to inclusivity and connectedness; and

**Now, therefore**, the Board of Commissioners of Transylvania County does hereby proclaim May 2024 as Older Americans Month. This year's theme, "Powered by Connection," emphasizes the profound impact of meaningful interactions and social connection on the well-being and health of older adults in our community.

The Board of Commissioners of Transylvania County calls upon all residents to join us in recognizing the contributions of our older citizens and promoting programs and activities that foster connection, inclusion, and support for older adults.

This the 8<sup>th</sup> day of April 2024.

S://Jason R. Chappell, Chairman  
Transylvania County Board of Commissioners

**PRESENTATIONS/RECOGNITIONS**

TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY SCHOOLS FY 2025 BUDGET

Transylvania County Schools Superintendent Dr. Lisa Fletcher presented the FY 2025 Budget request for Transylvania County Schools.

**Positive Statistics**

Dr. Fletcher highlighted the School System's achievements, attributing them to the support from the Board of Commissioners:

- Serving 3,334 students from Pre-K to 12<sup>th</sup> grade
- Largest employer in Transylvania County
- Ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the State for best teachers and 15<sup>th</sup> for being one of the best places to teach in NC
- 6<sup>th</sup> highest district for student CTE credential attainment in the State
- Every traditional school met or exceeded growth last year
- Completion of all capital items funded in FY 2023-24 by June 30, 2024, or in progress

**Proposed State Budget Highlights**

- Teachers: Local operational expenses fund several teachers, with beginning teachers' salary at \$41,000 (up from \$39,000) and raises based on location in the pay scale
- Assistant Principals: Salary follows teacher salary schedule
- Principals: Increase in salary schedule
- Non-Certified Staff: 3% raise across the board
- Benefit Rates: Retirement at 24.04% (down from 25.02%) and medical at \$8,095 (up from \$7,557)

**Small County Money Breakdown**

The School System receives small school funds from the State due to its enrollment of less than 3,300 students in K-12.

<b>FY24 Funding</b>		<b>FY25 Funding</b>
\$1,535,900.00	Salaries	\$1,535,941.00
\$12,300.00	Operations	\$12,259.00
\$1,548,200.00	Total	\$1,548,200.00

Dr. Fletcher clarified a misunderstanding regarding Pre-K enrollment inclusion in ADM, emphasizing it only affects principal pay based on building student numbers, not small school funding. The School System allocates 99% of small school funds for salaries, with the remainder for operations.

**Local Fund 2 Request**

- Cover 3% local salary increase to align with State mandates
- Provide funding to accommodate benefit rate changes
- Support the impact of the increase to teachers, assistant principals, and principals
- Combined total: \$529,910

<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>Retirement %</b>	<b>Health Insurance</b>
2025	24.04	\$8,095.00
2024	25.02	\$7,557.00
2023	24.50	\$7,397.00
2022	22.89	\$7,019.00
2021	21.68	\$6,316.00
2020	19.70	\$6,306.00
2019	18.86	\$6,104.00
2018	17.13	\$5,869.00
2017	16.33	\$5,659.00
2016	15.32	\$5,471.00

- Currently, two counselor positions are currently funded by ESSER at \$165,163.90
- An additional three additional counselors are needed, costing \$247,745.85
- The chart below shows the illustrates ratios with ESSER tutors

Transylvania County Schools Data collected 2023-24				
School	Number of Counselors	Number of Students	Counselor to Student Ratio:	Above or Below Avg. ASCA Recommended Ratio
PFES	1	465	1:465	Above by 215
BHS	2	771	1:385.5	Above by 135.5
RES	1	340	1:340	Above by 90
TCH/RMS	1	328	1:328	Above by 78
BES	2	545	1:272.5	Above by 22.5
RHS	1	251	1:251	Above by 1
BMS	2	491	1:245.5	Below by 4.5
DRS	1	61	1:61	Below by 189
Crisis Counselor	1	The Crisis Counselor serves all 9 schools as needed.		
The ASCA recommends that schools maintain a ratio of 250 students per school counselor, and that school counselors spend at least 80 percent of their time working directly with or indirectly for students.				

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts statewide received ESSER funding, with a deadline to utilize the funds by September. In response to the tragic deaths of three students at Brevard High School, Transylvania County Schools took proactive measures, adding two counselors to support students affected by isolation and lack of social interaction during the pandemic. Although initially funded by grants, the counselors' efforts resulted in a decrease in suicide attempts and assessments. Recognizing the importance of continued proactive support, the School System sought County funding to sustain these two counselor positions.

Dr. Fletcher emphasized the multifaceted role of counselors beyond student counseling, including classroom involvement and assistance with college guidance and class scheduling. While most schools meet recommended counselor-to-student ratios, two schools fall short. To ensure all schools have sufficient counseling support, Dr. Fletcher requested County funding for an additional three counselors, totaling \$247,745.

- A dropout prevention specialist currently funded by ESSER at \$90,878
- Since the 2021-22 school year, Transylvania County Schools (TCS) has employed a Dropout Prevention Specialist, leading to a notable decrease in chronic absenteeism rates
- Brevard High School boasts the lowest traditional dropout rate in North Carolina, demonstrating the effectiveness of these efforts
- The recent initiation of truancy court underscores the necessity of addressing chronic absenteeism
- The School System requests County funding to sustain the position at \$90,878

Dr. Fletcher expressed gratitude for the County's provision of school resource officers (SROs) for every school and three school nurses. However, she noted that whenever the County increases salaries and benefits, resulting in an increase in the school's funding, the School System faces losses elsewhere due to the requirement to disburse 10% of all funding to charter schools, as school funding follows the student.

- Request for \$500,000 to cover miscellaneous increases for utilities, SROs, school nurses, copier costs, insurance, legal

- A 4% cost of living adjustment is proposed to reimburse the County for raises provided to SROs and School Nurses
- The School System has experienced overall expense increases, including legal, insurance, utilities, and copiers, alongside rising costs for basic supplies like paper. The requested \$500,000 above covers these increases.
- An increase in charter school payments, based on the rise in local funding amounts to \$361,577
- As the Fund 2 request increases, charter schools will receive 10% of that request. This item ensures that charter schools will receive the additional funds needed without cuts to public school programs.
- Over \$800,000 has been paid to charter schools this year, with year-end estimates reaching \$1.4 million

When the School System received ESSER funding, they expanded with two Pre-K classrooms, recognizing the critical importance of early childhood education. Dr. Fletcher highlighted the County's own preschool classroom as evidence of the Commissioners' awareness of its significance. However, she noted that North Carolina's reimbursement rate of \$580 per child falls short, prompting the School System to charge \$600 to make it more accessible for parents. Despite this, no district in North Carolina can be self-funded based on the State's reimbursement rate.

Currently, the School System serves 102 children across six classrooms, with 159 on a waiting list. Dr. Fletcher presented a two-part request: first, County funding for the existing six classrooms to avoid dipping into their fund balance, and second, funding for three additional classrooms to accommodate all 159 students. With nine classrooms, they could reorganize students and teacher assistants to reduce overall costs. Dr. Fletcher emphasized that even with just four classes, the School System still faces financial losses due to the State's reimbursement rate.

- Addition of three Pre-K classrooms needed to serve all children next year: \$319,490.07.
- Retaining two Pre-K classrooms previously included in the budget: \$270,000.
- North Carolina Pre-K's reimbursement rate of \$580 per child renders self-funding impossible for any Pre-K program operated by a school district.
- Currently, six classrooms serve 102 students, with 159 students projected for next year, requiring the addition of three more classrooms to meet demand.

### **Total Local Fund 2 Request – Summary**

Dr. Fletcher acknowledged that while the School System is just one of many entities funded by the County, it is the largest employer. She clarified that they are not asking the Board of Commissioners to raise taxes to fund their requests but rather to present their needs, allowing the Board to determine what the County can afford.

The additional funding request covers the following:

- 3% local salary increase to align with State mandates
- Support for benefit rate changes
- Funding to mitigate the impact of increases for teachers, assistant principals, and principals, totaling \$529,910
- Two counselor positions currently funded by ESSER, costing \$165,163.90
- Three additional counselors, amounting to \$247,745.85
- Dropout prevention specialist currently funded by ESSER, totaling \$90,878
- Miscellaneous increases (utilities, SROs, school nurses, copier costs, insurance, legal, etc.) amounting to \$500,000
- Additional three Pre-K classrooms needed to serve all children next year, costing \$319,490.07

- Retaining two Pre-K classrooms previously included in the budget, totaling \$270,000
- Increase in charter school payments based on an increase in local funding, totaling \$361,577

The requested increase represents a 19% rise in funding for the School System. Dr. Fletcher highlighted that the average increase across the State is 15%, as all school districts are losing their ESSER funding.

#### **Fund 4 – Capital**

Dr. Fletcher emphasized the importance of transparency regarding the use of sales tax revenue by providing the Board of Commissioners with an annual list of items, including furniture, athletic equipment, and student laptops, as well as larger projects like boilers and paving. She reassured the Board that all capital projects approved for the current year will either be completed or are in progress, with a few requiring budget amendments due to their high cost.

Acknowledging the frustration stemming from past communication lapses, Dr. Fletcher emphasized the need to move forward positively. Monthly meetings with the County Manager to review capital projects are already underway, and she proposed quarterly presentations to the Board to update on fund usage and project completion, fostering greater transparency for both the Board and the public.

Dr. Fletcher reiterated her support for collaboration between the two Boards, emphasizing that putting students first is paramount as they represent the future. She expressed gratitude to the County Commissioners for prioritizing students despite funding challenges, highlighting the importance of continued collaboration for the benefit of all students.

- Sales Tax List:
  - Includes items generated by Axias
  - Projects deemed feasible for implementation this year by the School System
  - Requesting a drawdown of Education Capital Fund to commence projects from July 1, as bond funds will not be available until October
- The list encompasses various needs:
  - Recurring items such as furniture and equipment
  - Laptops for students
  - Larger projects like boilers and paving
- Projects are prioritized and numbered accordingly
- Total request: \$3,072,422

Dr. Fletcher expressed gratitude to the Board of Commissioners for the opportunity to present the School System's budget. School staff accompanied her to answer specific Board questions regarding the budget submittal.

#### **Discussion**

Commissioner Chapman inquired about the percentage increase in their capital request. Dr. Fletcher clarified that it remains consistent with the previous request, while operations see a 19% increase.

Commissioner McCall sought clarification on whether the capital request solely covers projects from the Axias list. Dr. Fletcher explained that it also includes recurring costs like athletic equipment and furniture, with those items totaling approximately \$1 million.

Commissioner McCall confirmed no additional capital projects beyond those from the Axias list are included. Dr. Fletcher noted that some requested projects may necessitate budget amendments to defer to future years.



Commissioner McCall expressed difficulty in understanding the format of the request. She clarified that the School System aims to utilize sales tax for critical projects identified on the Axias list, seeking approval from the two Boards. Dr. Fletcher mentioned that this recommendation has already been made as part of phase one, allowing for project commencement in July rather than waiting for bond funding in October.

Commissioner McCall reiterated her concern, questioning whether it is the responsibility of the Work Group to identify projects for approval by both Boards. The Manager noted that during the Work Group's session with Axias, they could consider existing projects alongside new ones. Funding decisions for capital requests, whether from sales tax or bonds, lie with the County Commissioners. The Manager's recommended budget may differ from the School System's request, subject to adjustments from the Work Group's deliberations.

Commissioner Chapman echoed fears regarding the exhaustion of ESSER funds, which now contribute significantly to the increase. He highlighted concerns raised during public comments about the substantial 19% increase, indicating it could necessitate a tax increase of four to five cents for operations. The Manager emphasized limited options, noting property tax as the primary funding source unless services like the Sheriff's Office or Health Department are cut.

Commissioner McCall recalled discussions about using ESSER funds for staffing increases, questioning whether they were informed about the funds' eventual depletion. The Manager confirmed these discussions occurred, highlighting concerns about a fiscal cliff upon fund expiration. It was understood that added staff positions would be temporary, with plans to transition them using attrition into fully funded positions, as communicated by the previous superintendent.

Commissioner Casciato queried that if the Board of Education received a 15% increase, what would be cut from the 19% requested? Dr. Fletcher noted she would need to discuss with her Board and reiterated her role in presenting the School System's needs to the Board of Commissioners.

Commissioner McCall recalled the Board of Education's discussion on Pre-K, highlighting concerns about space constraints and staffing challenges. She expressed confusion regarding the funding request for three additional classrooms if there is no available space. Dr. Fletcher clarified that if funding is approved, they would explore options to rearrange classrooms and recruit staff. She emphasized that staffing issues are not unique to Pre-K but extend across all K-12 positions.

Commissioner McCall inquired about the employment status of SROs and school nurses. The Manager informed her that they are County employees under the County's salary schedule. The County contracts with the School System, Blue Ridge Community College, and Brevard Academy for their salaries and benefits, with the remaining expenses covered by the County. Some State funds support the school nurse program, and previously, federal funds offset SRO costs, with the rest from the current expense budget appropriated by the Board of Commissioners. Each year, the Board approves funding for salary increases and benefits, which the Manager confirmed is sufficient to cover contract increases. Dr. Fletcher noted that when funding increases, the School System must allocate 10% to charter schools.

Commissioner McCall acknowledged the importance of childcare and Pre-K but expressed concern about relying solely on the government for solutions, especially when the problem was generated through decisions that would knowingly cause a financial burden once the ESSER funding expired. She stressed the importance of sound business practices.

Commissioner McCall highlighted concerns regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' mental health and well-being, emphasizing the challenges they faced due to school closures and the absence of traditional events like graduation and prom. She expressed disappointment that the Transylvania County Schools declined external training opportunities, including QPR (Question, Persuade, and Refer) for suicide

prevention and Mental Health First Aid, opting instead for internal training. Dr. Fletcher acknowledged discussions about implementing Mental Health First Aid training but cited budgetary constraints. Commissioner McCall suggested using the School System's fund balance for such training, given its one-time cost. She also noted alternative counseling programs available in neighboring counties that could be explored.

Commissioner McCall voiced concerns about the sustainability of adding counselor positions without adequate funding plans, stressing the potential impact on taxpayers. She emphasized the Board of Commissioners' commitment to addressing student needs while balancing fiscal responsibility, refuting suggestions that the Board neglects children's welfare. She underscored her longstanding advocacy for children, particularly those with disabilities.

Commissioner Chapman noted the School System's recent growth in its fund balance and asked about its current total. Dr. Fletcher deferred to the school's Finance Director, Gaby Juba, for an update. Ms. Juba confirmed that as per the latest audit report, the School System's fund balance stands at slightly over \$2 million in Fund 2.

Commissioner McCall recalled that two years ago, the Board of Education approached the Board of Commissioners in late spring with a request for additional funding. Initially, the Board of Commissioners earmarked \$104,000 in contingency while awaiting passage of the State's budget. However, the Board of Education claimed they could not cover salaries without this County allocation. Despite some dissent, the Board of Commissioners allocated the funds to ensure payroll. However, a few months later, it was revealed that the School System had transferred \$1 million to its fund balance, raising questions about the necessity of the earlier \$104,000 allocation.

Ms. Juba clarified that the request was not due to payroll concerns but rather to cover the difference in the SRO and school nurse salary increases that had not been included in the new contract. The Manager interjected, disputing Ms. Juba's statement and stating the request was indeed to cover benefits that at the time had not been approved by the State. The request was not related to SRO contracts or school nurses, and she could provide the documentation from that particular meeting if necessary.

Chairman Chappell expressed gratitude to Dr. Fletcher for her presentation and willingness to provide quarterly updates to the Board of Commissioners, requesting her to coordinate with the Manager for scheduling. He then turned to specific inquiries regarding Pre-K. He asked about the total per-student cost for Pre-K in Transylvania County. Dr. Fletcher indicated that school staff would calculate these figures after the meeting. Currently, parents are charged \$600, supplemented by \$580 from the State.

Additionally, Chairman Chappell sought information on the number of out-of-county Pre-K students. Dr. Fletcher committed to providing the information after the meeting. With 159 students on the Pre-K waiting list, Chairman Chappell stressed the importance of having this information. He acknowledged that the County Commissioners are statutorily mandated to fund K-12 education, but not Pre-K, despite the \$580 per student from the State falling short of covering the School System's costs.

Chairman Chappell expressed significant concerns regarding the use of non-recurring funds to cover salaries. He cited the Commissioners' standard procedure of questioning County departments on whether grant funds are to be used for personnel and if so, that acceptance of grant funds comes with the understanding that the positions will be eliminated once the grant funding expires.

Chairman Chappell then requested further details on eligible spending requirements for the ESSER funds. Dr. Fletcher clarified that the funds were intended to address learning loss due to the pandemic. The School System spent \$2 million on air handlers to improve air quality which was deemed an eligible expense.

Chairman Chappell also inquired about the State's evaluation tools for assessing the success of the use of ESSER funds. Dr. Fletcher cited a local report indicating that hiring counselors using ESSER funds was successful, but she had not seen a statewide report.

Commissioner Chapman emphasized the need to understand why students are opting for alternative education methods, such as charter schools or homeschooling, citing alarming truancy rates. He stressed the importance of addressing these issues to mitigate the impact of insufficient state funding, urging the School System to survey families who have left the traditional school system for other methods. Additionally, he highlighted the significance of enhancing school performance ratings in the proposed budget, with a focus on prioritizing student education.

Dr. Fletcher reported that all schools in Transylvania County either met or exceeded growth expectations. She mentioned a legislative proposal to increase the weight of growth in overall school ratings from 20% to 50%, emphasizing its importance in demonstrating student learning.

Chairman Chappell referenced Dr. Fletcher's earlier remarks regarding small school funding, noting that 99% of it has been allocated to salaries. He inquired whether these positions were new or previously funded from other sources. Dr. Fletcher clarified that the School System had not added any positions, indicating that the funded positions were existing ones.

Chairman Chappell further clarified that these positions previously funded were now covered by the small school funding and asked about the current allocation of the prior funding. Ms. Juba explained that due to state-mandated raises and increased benefits, the School System required an additional \$750,000 from the County. To compensate for not receiving funding from the County, some locally funded positions were shifted into the small school funding pool.

Commissioner McCall questioned if the County had reduced funding for local positions or benefits. The Manager confirmed no reduction, with Ms. Juba explaining that the School System typically receives \$200,000 to \$300,000 annually, insufficient to cover mandated raises and benefits increases. Commissioner McCall requested a further investigation by the Manager, which she agreed to pursue.

Chairman Chappell revisited the budget presentation on Pre-K, noting a significant deficit in operating the program. He queried whether the School System had used the fund balance to cover the shortfall since 2018. Dr. Fletcher confirmed this, stating they drew down their fund balance each year to offset the deficit.

Commissioner McCall inquired about the annual drawdown, estimating it at \$400,000 to \$500,000. Dr. Fletcher stated it was \$470,000 once two additional classrooms were added in 2021, though prior to that, it was lower.

Chairman Chappell asked about the deficit in the initial four classrooms. Dr. Fletcher affirmed, citing the State's reimbursement rate as insufficient to cover costs.

Chairman Chappell questioned Dr. Fletcher regarding the Pre-K rates compared to private sector charges. She mentioned private care charging \$1,100 to \$1,500, while the School System charged parents \$600, aiming to keep rates affordable.

Commissioner McCall asked the County Manager about Transylvania County's ranking in funding per student statewide. The Manager stated it ranked 5<sup>th</sup> out of 100 counties, maintaining this position for the last decade.

Returning to prior discussions on counselors, Commissioner McCall noted a program no longer offered due to a lack of referrals from the School System to the Juvenile Crime Prevention Council. Dr. Fletcher clarified

student involvement in JCPC programs from court referrals. Commissioner McCall emphasized the availability of services for students.

Commissioner McCall sought statistics on students' mental health needs pre-pandemic. Dr. Fletcher committed to providing information if available. Commissioner McCall expressed uncertainty about hiring additional counselors based solely on pandemic-related struggles.

Commissioner McCall emphasized the importance of clarity in budget presentations, noting format changes this year that have caused confusion in matching numbers. She suggested including additional details in project lists presented to the County Commissioners, such as the fiscal year of approval, initial and revised budgets, and start and completion dates, to provide a comprehensive overview. Dr. Fletcher discussed the capital list's alignment with Axias' ratings, explaining that the Board of Education cross-referenced its own needs with Axias' list to ensure all projects were accounted for.

Commissioner Dalton sought clarification on funding for three additional Pre-K classrooms, understanding that the School System's request covers the difference between State funding and the remaining balance to achieve budget neutrality. Dr. Fletcher confirmed this, indicating it would bring funding to a break-even point.

Commissioner Chapman urged the media to accurately convey the challenges faced by the Board of Commissioners, emphasizing a 19% increase request from the Board of Education, which translates to a four-percent tax hike. He assumed the Board of Education's support for the increase, given their budget proposal. Despite economic factors beyond their control, such as rising inflation and costs, the Commissioners prioritize the well-being of the county's citizens, who ultimately bear the financial burden. He stressed the need to assess what the citizens can feasibly absorb, considering the significant increase. Dr. Fletcher noted North Carolina's unique lack of taxing authority, placing the responsibility on the County.

Chairman Chappell inquired about the administration of Pre-K programs, particularly concerning private pay determinations. Dr. Fletcher explained it is income-based.

Chairman Chappell also asked about the number of locally funded positions. Dr. Fletcher reported 69 positions, comprising 27 teachers, five teacher assistants, five administrators, two with the MCJROTC program, three assistant principals, two instructional support staff, three technology positions, and 22 office support staff, including bookkeepers and data managers across all schools and departments.

Chairman Chappell clarified that 99% of the small school funding is allocated to cover the disparity in locally funded positions. Dr. Fletcher confirmed this, specifying that it pertains to salaries and benefits.

No further discussion ensued.

## **NEW BUSINESS**

### MANAGER'S REPORT

The Manager reported the following:

- The Board of Commissioners seeks to appoint a representative to the Land of Sky Regional Council's Board of Delegates to ensure minority interests are represented in regional planning and development. Interested individuals should submit a statement outlining their interest and qualifications to the Clerk to the Board by April 30.

- April 14-20 marks National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week, dedicated to honoring those who respond to emergency calls, dispatch resources, and provide life-saving aid in Transylvania County. We commend the dedicated Telecommunicators at our 911 Center!
- The Mary C. Jenkins Community and Cultural Center is hosting a poetry contest for National Poetry Month, open to all ages. Participants stand a chance to win \$100 with poems centered on this year's theme: kindness. Entries are accepted via email or mail/drop-off at MCJCCC until April 30.
- Last year, the NC Association of County Commissioners launched a video series highlighting county functions and illustrating the responsibilities, processes, and hard-working people that make county governments operate in North Carolina. Episode 5 highlights the vital role of Public Health Departments, featuring our own Transylvania County Public Health Department. We extend our appreciation to Director Elaine Russell and her team. Additionally, April 1-7 was National Public Health Week, recognizing the efforts of those safeguarding our community's health and well-being.

### PUBLIC COMMENT

Alice Wellborn: Ms. Wellborn addressed the Commissioners, asserting her right as a citizen to speak before the Board. Drawing from her experience as a public official during the pandemic school closures in 2020, she emphasized the mutual obligation between public servants and citizens, stating that Commissioners work for the taxpayers and should therefore listen to their concerns. Ms. Wellborn expressed her disapproval of disrespectful behavior from Commissioners during public meetings and suggested open dialogue as equals outside of formal settings. Quoting the Board's code of ethics, she urged Commissioners to consistently demonstrate respect and honor diverse opinions, emphasizing responsiveness to constituent needs as a fundamental standard of governance.

David Trowbridge: Mr. Trowbridge shared information about an upcoming local fundraiser, inviting citizens to support the Ghost Wrestling Challenge scheduled for Saturday, April 13<sup>th</sup>. The event, benefiting the Ghost Wrestling Club and high school wrestling programs, features competitions for students in grades K-5 and middle school/high school students.

### COMMISSIONERS' COMMENTS

Commissioner Chapman reported a successful session with Veterans Affairs representatives from Winston-Salem, addressing a variety of concerns from local veterans regarding benefits, retirements, disabilities, and more. It was well-attended and beneficial to the community. Master Sergeant Frank Pearsall from the local veterans' services is available to address any further questions.

Next, he reported that on April 24, the County will be hosting the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners District meeting for this area, which includes Transylvania, Henderson, Buncombe, and Madison Counties. All commissioners and their key staff are invited for an informative session by the NCACC staff where they will provide legislative updates from Raleigh.

Lastly, he highlighted the upcoming Memorial Day service on May 27 at the courthouse. Starting at 10:00 a.m., the city street in front of the courthouse will be closed to traffic, ensuring a solemn and respectful ceremony. He reminded everyone that Memorial Day is about honoring those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom. He closed by saying it is crucial to bring children to this event to help them understand the significance of this day and the sacrifices made by veterans.

**ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business to come before the Board, **Commissioner Dalton moved to adjourn the meeting at 5:40 p.m., seconded by Commissioner Chapman and unanimously carried.**

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Jason R. Chappell, Chairman  
Transylvania County Board of Commissioners

ATTEST:

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Trisha M. Hogan, Clerk to the Board