

The Graham County Board of Commissioners met Tuesday, November 17, 2015 at 5:00 p.m. in the Graham County Community Building located at 196 Knight Street Robbinsville, NC for their monthly workshop session. All board members was present.

1. Chairman Eller called the workshop session to order.
2. Chairman Eller asks Judge Bill Coward to speak. Judge Coward stated that he is the Resident Superior Court Judge for Judicial District 30A for the five west counties and he was here with Judge Walker whom is the District Court Judge for the seven far west counties and our 30th District Attorney Ashley Welch. Judge Coward stated that the three combined are all responsible in cooperative efforts to hold effective administration of justice, fair trials and to ensure that the courtroom functioned as it should. Judge Coward stated that Judge Bradley Letts, Senior Superior Court Judge for Judicial District 30B wrote him a letter with a description of his experience at our courthouse / courtroom. Judge Coward stated that our courthouse is in need of attention and he realizes that it would cost ten million dollars to build a new facility and he is not asking that of this board but there is a concern. Judge Coward stated that if someone is denied justice or a fair trial then the blame is placed on the judges and it is his job to ensure that everyone receives a fair trial. Judge Coward stated that he did not want to wait until Tammy Holloway was injured by a crazy person or any staff due to our low security. Judge Coward stated that times are different since the courthouse was built in 1942 and these issues was not a problem but now we must address the concerns and he did not want someone's blood on his hands. Judge Coward stated that he wanted to keep an open dialogue with the Board of Commissioners and would assist in trying to find monies to get started but someone has to step up to the plate and again he realizes that our tax base is very low due to the federal government owning 80% of our lands. Judge Coward stated that he didn't want to appear hard headed but the needs have to be met and he is willing to work with the board to figure out a plan. Judge Coward asks Judge Walker to speak.
3. Judge Rick Walker stated that he is the Chief District Court Judge for the 30th District and he thanked the board for meeting with them. Judge Walker stated that he is here in the county several times a month and he loves our courthouse but it is not modern anymore. Judge Walker stated that he did read Judge Letts letter and what he is saying is true. Judge Walker stated that the jury room is too small and you can hear what is being said from the outside and this is a concern when he is trying to deliver a fair trial. Judge Walker stated that in his courts the courtroom is standing room only and this is a security concern and things could go wrong quickly and further stated that we needed to adjust our security even though the physical layout of the building will make it difficult to provide but the Clerk's Office has no security nor any of the other county offices. Judge Walker stated that nothing bad has happened so far but it could and he knew this can't be fixed overnight but a long term project goal needed to be set and move forward. Judge Walker stated that this is a serious issue now and this needed to be started now. Commissioner Williams stated that he has been in several courtrooms throughout the district and they are no better than ours and we have authorized the Sheriff to provide extra security which will include overtime. Commissioner Williams stated that he does not want to move the courthouse out of town because it would be a loss to the Town of Robbinsville but he did understand the security concerns. Commissioner Williams stated that we want to work with them but be cannot ask the taxpayers to take on this burden but he was sure that something could be done to make the courthouse more secure. Commissioner Williams stated that the reason the board authorized more security was to protect the girls and staff but he couldn't agree to build a new courthouse at this time. Commissioner Williams stated that he would be in favor of remodeling.
4. Ashley Welch, 30th District Attorney stated that she spent two years in Graham County as an Assistant District Attorney and she thanked the board for allowing them to come today. Ms. Welch stated that it was her job to make sure that her staff was safe. She stated that her staff sat on the same level as the criminals and their backs are to the crowd and her concern is the safety of the people who work for her. Ms. Welch stated that she was not here to ask for a new building but to ask for more security. Ms. Welch stated that in Swain County everyone used one door. Ms. Welch stated that we have only one bailiff in the courtroom during court in Graham

County and we need to enhance security. Commissioner Williams asks how many deputies they thought was needed for court day.

5. Tammy Holloway, Clerk of Superior Court stated that she has been in the courthouse for 22 years and two weeks ago Judge Forga ordered security for us and we still do not feel comfortable. Ms. Holloway asks is there is any way we could have one entrance for everyone to enter the courthouse and keep the bottom doors guarded. Ms. Holloway stated that the people who come to see them are not happy and they try to make them happy but they are not comfortable any longer with the minimal security. Ms. Holloway stated that they do not have any security unless they are having court. Commissioner Williams agrees that the staff needs to be safe and this is something that the board will address. Commissioner Williams stated that the board would need to talk to the sheriff and we will provide enough money for the extra security. Ms. Holloway stated that Sheriff Millsaps has always provided everything that she has asked and she appreciated everything he does now.
6. Judge Coward stated that he was willing to work with the commissioners and bounce ideas back and forth and asks that we schedule another meeting for further discussion. The board was in full agreement to another meeting and they looked forward to working with everyone here. Judge Coward suggested that the board put a bond referendum on a ballot and let the taxpayers decide if they wanted a new courthouse or not. Commissioner Eller stated that he couldn't ask the taxpayers to do this but he would provide armed guards full time. Commissioner Orr stated that she agreed with the added security and did not want anyone unprotected. Judge Coward stated that he would ask state legislation but there were no guarantees that they have the funds available.
7. The board thanked Judge Bill Coward; Judge Rick Walker, District Attorney Ashley Welch and Clerk of Superior Court Tammy Holloway for speaking with them.

Keith Eller, Chairman, Graham County Commissioner

Jacob Nelms, Vice-Chairman, Graham County Commissioner

Lynn Cody, Member, Graham County Commissioner

Connie Orr, Member, Graham County Commissioner

Raymond Williams, Member, Graham County Commissioner

ATTEST:

Kim Crisp, Clerk to the Board