

Workshop Session – May 16, 2017

The Graham County Board of Commissioners met Tuesday, May 16, 2017 at 4:00 p.m. for their regular workshop session in the Graham County Community Building located at 196 Knight Street Robbinsville, NC. All board was present.

1. Chairman Eller called the workshop session to order and stated that the board would need to go into closed session under G.S. 143-318.11(a) (1) (6) for privileged or confidential information and personnel. Commissioner Wiggins made the motion to go into closed session as stated. Commissioner Williams seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.
2. Commissioner Wiggins made the motion to go back into open session. Commissioner Orr seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.
3. Chairman Eller welcomed the USFS and asks Sophia Paulos to give the introductions. Ms. Paulos introduced the USFS personnel present Mr. Alan Nichols; Michelle Aldridge; Angela Gee; Alice Cohen and asks the commissioners to give a history lesson to open the floor for discussion. Commissioner Williams stated that he has worked with the Forest Service for many years and sometimes he was helped and sometimes he was not but the recent problems is trees that are cut down due to storms or powerline issues and they are not allowed to be taken as firewood unless they obtain a permit for \$25.00. If a permit is not obtained then the timber lays and rots. Commissioner Williams stated that in the past the USFS Officers have not been respectful to our law enforcement and he feels that all of our officers deserve the right to be treated like somebody. Commissioner Williams stated that we have had game wardens for 25 years and when they wrote you a ticket they would have you laughing before they left you and as an ex-security guard with Alcoa, our people deserve a manner of respect to be given to them. Commissioner Williams stated that the USFS will write tickets to boat trailers without a tag when the tag was in their trucks and this is a big problem here. Commissioner Williams stated that he has spoken with the state troopers and it is not illegal unless the trailer is in motion. Commissioner Williams asks that the USFS tell the commissioners when activities are going to be taking place such as the blasting of trees in the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. Commissioner Williams stated that the county had many calls over this issue and had we known we would have gotten the word out. Commissioner Williams stated that the restrooms on USFS land is not fit for a dog to use. Commissioner Williams stated that the bathroom at the Massey Branch Boat Dock stayed dirty for two weeks. Commissioner Williams stated that our rescue squad boys are the ones that are rescuing lost hikers at their expense and people would appreciate a thank you from the USFS. Commissioner Williams stated that the county has a tax base of 28% of the land and the rest is owned by the USFS, Tribal land and TVA and he will not be for any more wilderness. Commissioner Williams stated that more logging jobs needed to be let and not junk! Commissioner Williams asks why you would want more wilderness when you can't take care of what you have now. Commissioner Williams stated that Graham County was the first county in the state to stop clear cutting which was done by the forest service. Our loggers are responsible men but many have went out of business because of not enough jobs. Commissioner Williams stated that the USFS needed to work with the commissioners and then we could see a positive change.
4. Commissioner Nelms stated that he was too young to deliver a history lesson but he would like to see more recreation and he has come to understand the importance of recreation or the lack thereof. Commissioner Nelms stated that he hopes we can get to a good place especially concerning the infrastructure impact on the economy and he does not want any more wilderness. Commissioner Nelms stated that Graham County probably does have areas that qualify for wilderness but it doesn't make sense to him why more land is needed for wilderness just because they meet the Forest Service criteria when we have Joyce Kilmer, Slickrock, Snowbird and other areas and we are very sensitive when this topic of conversation is mentioned.
5. Chairman Eller stated that he knows the economics of the forest service and stated that the forest service lands are in the worst shape they have ever been in. Chairman Eller stated that he couldn't understand why the roads have to be closed after big game hunting and questions why can't the gates stay open for the small game hunting. Chairman Eller stated that the trails are in bad shape and the side trails are really bad. Chairman Eller stated that the forest service relies on the volunteers of this county to do search and rescue and he will not ask permission to use whatever means necessary to recover individuals who may be injured or lost. Chairman Eller

stated that he is not for any more wilderness and he felt that the criteria is not met due to the sounds of the motorcycles passing throughout our county. Chairman Eller stated that you can hear a motorcycle accelerate when you are on Big Fat Gap. Chairman Eller also asks why the roads are open in Tennessee but they are not open in Graham County.

6. Commissioner Orr thanked the USFS for coming and her first concern is our economics diminishing which affects our tax base and this is a hardship to our county. Commissioner Orr stated that we have to find a way to eliminate this hardship. Commissioner Orr stated that she has been a camper, hiker, and biker and has enjoyed our trails and enjoyed going to hunt ginseng with her father. Commissioner Orr stated that we needed access to and from private property for timber management and she has spoken with one sawmill owner who stated that loggers are required to leave logs laying in the forests that they could sell as firewood and they only have the ability to haul out one load per week but they cannot move their equipment and no one can suffice on one load a week. Commissioner Orr stated that our loggers need to be able to harvest healthy timber.
7. Commissioner Wiggins stated that we have lost our SRS revenues and the timber proceeds continue to decline and this costs us around \$200,000.00 per year. Commissioner Wiggins stated that anything that can be done to increase timber harvest would be appreciated. Commissioner Wiggins stated that one trail that the board of commissioner's helped to get opened took 16 years and this is a deterrent to our tourism. Commissioner Wiggins stated that our young folks have to leave home to find decent paying jobs because Graham County does not have the tax base to sustain revenue increases. Commissioner Wiggins stated that we do not want a hand out but a helping hand would be appreciated. Commissioner Wiggins stated that we love our forests and they are a part of our culture and heritage. Commissioner Wiggins stated that there were only 15 ginseng permits issued to Graham County last year and the percentage of reduction is 80% to where this once was. Commissioner Wiggins stated that the USFS stopped all moss permits and these were revenue streams for our residents. Commissioner Wiggins stated that he understands the need to protect the lands for our future generations but find a way to make it beneficial for everyone in the present. Commissioner Wiggins stated that he wanted our forests to be healthy and wanted our forests to produce. Commissioner Wiggins thanked the USFS for coming and speaking with the board and he hopes that this will begin a better relationship instead of arguing and that everything will be for our mutual benefit. Commissioner Wiggins stated that the USFS exists because our ancestors sold off our property and we are a poor county but we have to find a way to work together.
8. USFS Alan Nichols thanked the board for their time and previous efforts. Mr. Nichols stated that we are working on a plan which is required by Congress and we are working with a group of stakeholders with different backgrounds and he often wondered why the county was not involved. Mr. Nichols said that hunter groups keeps us informed and Sam Evans is also a part of our team. Mr. Nichols stated that we have met and made a map but asks that the board pay closer attention to the plan and not the maps. Mr. Nichols stated that this plan affects 18 counties in all and we want the local voices heard. Mr. Nichols stated that the plan will come out in late May and we hope that the board reviews the plans with feedback. Mr. Nichols stated that he did read the 20 pages of notes prepared by Sophia Paulos and they have a better understanding of what the people want. Mr. Nichols stated that these things are on the plan but not all things will be in the plan. Mr. Nichols stated that we have 19 miles of bicycle trails and it is up to management, Angela Gee to keep up these components. Mr. Nichols stated that they do want a partnership on a lot of things. Mr. Nichols stated that our roads are currently open and we will try to increase the number of roads but we cannot maintain all the roads.
9. Michelle Aldridge stated that we will be able to share some of the plan in late May and early June and it like building blocks with information continually being pulled in. Ms. Aldridge stated that she did not look at all the comments but some related to places around Santeetlah Lake, timber management and trails. Ms. Aldridge stated that the plan was worked with goals in geographic areas and understands the need for tourism. Ms. Aldridge encourages the board to look at these geographic areas.
10. Angela Gee stated that we did see the 20 pages of notes and we had over 100 people to comment and there are wilderness notes from residents. Ms. Gee stated that we will be having open house at the district office and maybe this is not the best location so we will work with the commissioners and Sophia on places that will be more successful. Ms. Gee stated that your input is important to us and we will be willing to attend more board meetings.

11. The board also discussed the sheriff department patrolling the USFS campgrounds and felt that they should receive more money. Commissioner Williams stated that 911 Center is tied up all day with a lost hiker on USFS lands and this should be compensated back to the county. The board will get the mileage from the sheriff's department of the patrol.
12. Mr. Nichols stated that you can tell us of things that you want but they cannot promise you anything but they will continue to educate us on our growth, trails and the agency does want to work as a partnership with the county. Mr. Nichols stated that if someone is treating the county officers poorly then he wants to know about it. The board welcomed the USFS to come to their open meetings which are held every 1st and 3rd Tuesdays.
13. Chairman Eller recessed the meeting.

Keith Eller, Chairman, Graham County Commissioner

Connie Orr, Vice-Chairman, Graham County Commissioner

Jacob Nelms, Member, Graham County Commissioner

Dale E. Wiggins, Member, Graham County Commissioner

Raymond Williams, Member, Graham County Commissioner

ATTEST:

Kim Crisp, Clerk to the Board