

Special Meeting – American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Funds  
December 10, 2021

The Graham County Board of Commissioners met Friday, December 10, 2021, at 9:00 a.m. for a special meeting on the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Funds. Board present Connie Orr, Lynn Cody, Jacob Nelms and Dale Wiggins. Board absent Keith Eller. Also, present Manager Jason Marino, Finance Director Becky Garland, Clerk Kim Crisp. Public present Carissa Cable, Sheriff Jerry Crisp, Chief Deputy JJ Wooten, Editor Charlie Benton, 911 Director Misty Hembree, Deputy John Lovin, Deputy Patrick Cable.

1. Chair Orr called the meeting to order.
2. Chair Orr asks for approval of the agenda. Commissioner Wiggins made the motion to approve. Commissioner Cody seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.
3. Chair Orr asks Manager Marino to begin the discussions. Manager Marino apologized for the meeting delay and asked for introduction from the public. Manager Marino stated that Sheriff Jerry Crisp would like to speak with the board first and then 911 Director Misty Hembree.
4. Chair Orr asks Sheriff Crisp to speak. Sheriff Crisp thanked the board for allowing him to present a proposal to the board. Sheriff Crisp stated that his proposal includes a more competitive pay rate for his regularly employed staff and to request that his staff receive the Covid premium pay. Sheriff Crisp presented salaries from Cherokee, Clay and Macon Counties and stated that ours fell in the middle, but he needed to be competitive with other agencies to retain staff. Sheriff Crisp stated that there is no way for any of the counties to be competitive with the Tribe but if we could remain competitive with the surrounding counties this would help us retain and recruit the best officers. Sheriff Crisp stated that he needed the best officers that are responding to the homes that have been broken into because if the officer is new, they do not know the procedures that must be followed and if the officer is not certified then the county pays for that uncertified officer responds to a call, then charges will be thrown out in court. Sheriff Crisp discussed the average number of hours worked by his officers.
5. Sheriff Crisp stated that his officers deserve the premium pay as much as the EMS Staff because many times, law enforcement is called to enter the home first prior to the EMS Staff so they are exposed. Sheriff Crisp stated that over 50% of his staff had Covid causing the remaining staff to work ten 12-hour days straight. Sheriff Crisp stated that they have had at least four COVID outbreaks at the Jail. Sheriff Crisp stated for every call that comes into dispatch with a hang up law enforcement is called first, and they enter the home prior to EMS Staff to make sure that the scene is safe and secure.
6. Sheriff Crisp presented the board with the amounts of money given in the surrounding counties and further stated that Macon and Cherokee Counties gave all their employees \$800.00 and declared all their employees essential. Sheriff Crisp stated that Macon County added \$2.00 per hour for all essential workers through 2024 and Swain gave \$1.50 per hour every six months up to \$14,000.00 through 2024. Chair Orr asks if all employees were given this money. Sheriff Crisp stated yes that it was given to all employees. Sheriff Crisp stated that Cherokee County used their funds to purchase equipment, vehicles and added salary to the narcotic officers.
7. Sheriff Crisp presented the board with a proposed hourly wage for his staff which did not cover FICA, Insurance or Retirement and the difference is around \$20,000.00. Sheriff Crisp stated that he reviewed the detention workers as well and compared them to the other counties which will be a difference of \$28,705.00. Sheriff Crisp stated that all his employees must meet sheriff standards and he would like to work on merit increases which will help retain personnel. Sheriff Crisp stated that his staff is required to take (20) hours of continued education per year, and this is across the State. Sheriff Crisp stated that he would like to advocate for the premium pay because his staff doesn't get COVID pay when they are out and contracted COVID on the job and last year they were short staffed due to the COVID outbreaks. Sheriff Crisp stated that Asheville Police Department lost (96) officers mostly due to council policies and he reached out to recruit but our pay for a veteran officer was too low. Sheriff Crisp stated that he got some interest until they discussed pay. Sheriff Crisp stated that our county has a lot to offer on hunting, fishing, wildlife, camping and people would like to come and live here but cannot due to the low salaries. Sheriff Crisp stated that this is one of the reasons he is asking for these adjustments to the salaries.
8. Chair Orr stated that unfortunately we do not have a Wal-Mart in our area to bring in much needed revenue.
9. Commissioner Wiggins stated that he sat with Sheriff Crisp, and he agrees that if someone comes to his home to steal, he wants a qualified officer responding because they have violated his property and he is for the salary adjustments not only for Sheriff but for Dispatch, EMS, and Jail. Commissioner Wiggins stated that we cannot afford not to increase the salaries. Sheriff Crisp stated that he appreciated the board's time. Director Garland thanked Sheriff Crisp and

stated that the cost for the turnovers is more expensive than the salary adjustment and for Fiscal Year 2020 and the Sheriff had a 40% turnover and the Jail had a 25% turnover which becomes very expensive, and she has done the math on the proposal and the turnover continues to increase the overall budgets for these departments. Director Garland stated that changes have been made to the Dispatch and EMS budgets and last year was hard for 911 at a turnover rate of 21%.

10. Sheriff Crisp stated that it is discouraging to the officers who make \$15.50 per hour and people who work for Kentucky Fried Chicken start out at \$17.00 per hour. Sheriff Crisp stated that deputies put in 1000 hours of training. Chair Orr stated that it has been a revolving door for many departments, and it is very expensive, and the commissioners are aware of turnovers and are committed to working on this issue. Commissioner Wiggins stated that years ago the county was politically motivated and when a different party went in everyone was fired so things have been improving over the years.

11. Chair Orr asks Misty Hembree, 911 Director to speak. Director Hembree thanked the board for their time and stated that she appreciated the information from Sheriff Crisp. Director Hembree showed a slide presentation to the board and stated that this will take teamwork and team effort to move forward and as a director for the past 6 years the changes that are being made are benefiting the employees. Director Hembree stated that the board allowed her staff to go to a 12-hour shift schedule which helped her staff to rotate weekends and that is a big deal. Director Hembree stated that her turnover three years ago was one-half her staff and the main issue was the scheduling, and this was corrected successfully. Director Hembree stated that she created two new pay plan levels and her goal is to submit pay increases according to training. Director Hembree stated that she does receive 911 funds that has strict regulations, and she tries to use this money in the most beneficial way. Director Hembree would like to begin telecommunicator courses to make their services better, to increase the pay scale and build up morale so that she retains employees who want to build a career here because they love what they do and want to stay here in our county. Director Hembree stated that the biggest obstacle is the pay scale and stated that the new generation does not care about benefits or retirement they are only looking at the dollar amount and our county has great benefits but unfortunately that is not enough any longer to attract personnel. Chair Orr stated that we have a much younger workforce, and we are a training ground then they are off to make more money. Director Hembree stated that in 2018 she was very short-staffed, and she lost good, qualified staff because of the pay. Director Hembree stated that staff are expected to work nights, weekends, and holidays and this is not appealing either. Director Hembree stated that she did a salary study with Swain County and our rates were about the same and she did one with Jackson County and they make \$1.00 more on the hour than us. Director Hembree stated that she did a North Carolina study along with a National Study and used the average. Chair Orr asks if Swain County gave 911 ARPA funding. Director Hembree stated that Macon County gave \$2.00 per hour and Jackson and Swain went the formula that Sheriff Crisp discussed. Director Hembree stated that she fears if we do nothing, she will lose folks, so she is proposing an overall increase of \$3.00 per hour for her employees. Director Hembree stated that her staff is behind the scenes, and they were blessed with the new schedule, but the pay scale needed to be adjusted to a livable wage and asks that the board support her request. Chair Orr stated that she appreciated the information. Commissioner Wiggins stated that he supports all of 911 Staff and they do watch over our county, and he is very proud of the manager that Director Hembree has become over the past five years. Director Hembree stated that she has a good staff, and they work as a team, and they are not afraid to work hard. Chair Orr thanked Director Hembree for the new facility and the work that she did to make this happen. Director Hembree stated that she was very grateful for the grant that was given for the new facility.
12. Manager Marino asks for further questions. No further questions from the public currently. Manager Marino stated that there are a lot of questions moving forward and our EMS and Nurses have received premium pay earlier because the guidance we were receiving limited the people who could receive the money. Director Garland stated that the rules are still not clear, but she is still learning. Director Garland stated that the guidance included exposure to COVID and there was no doubt for EMS and Nurses but now the outbreaks have occurred in our detention and sheriff departments, and this is very clear exposure. Director Garland stated that she can now work on a broader base for all employees because now all qualify. Chair Orr stated that they have looked at other counties and there were no rules set in stone. Director Garland stated that the board now has the flexibility to use the funds in a fair manner. Director Garland stated that she was advised to document every step and do what worked best for our employees. Manager Marino stated that the board would need to decide on a one-time payment, quarterly payment, etc. Chair Orr stated that it would be hard for some employees to operate when the money is stopped because people become accustomed to the take home paycheck. Manager Marino stated that it would benefit more employees to spread out the

money and it allows for incentives over time as well. Chair Orr stated that it would depend on the upcoming funds as well. Carissa Cable asks if the salary will be changed. Chair Orr stated that has not been determined. Commissioner Cody stated that he felt the same as Chair Orr that individuals will get used to the extra pay and then when it is cut out people will be upset. Manager Marino stated that the board could give the money as a bonus. Carissa Cable stated that she had questions on behalf of the workers that worked in the offices, and she did do research and understands why EMS was given the maximum premium pay. Chair Orr repeated what Commissioner Eller had previously stated that they deserved the pay because they hauled the patients and were in close quarters for a long period of time. Carissa Cable stated that the jail is smaller or the same size as EMS and no other agency will take our prisoners, so they have had up to (20) people at one time in our small jail and wanted the board to know the risk that the jailers take every day. Ms. Cable stated that the officers are the ones doing intake and riding with these folks as well that have had COVID. Chair Orr stated that the first guidelines that were given, the jail and Sheriff's office was not included in the premium pay. Commissioner Wiggins asks what the size of the jail had to do with contact with EMS. Chair Orr stated that they were comparing the proximity of hauling the patient in the ambulance versus the small jail quarters. Carissa Cable stated that the officers and the jailers have had the same comparison that EMS has had and further stated that prior to COVID they could outsource but now they have no choice but to keep them in our jail as many as 20 people at a time and felt that they deserved the maximum pay.

13. Jonathan Allison, Detention Officer stated that from May to November they have had (31) positive COVID cases and they had no choice but to hazmat up and enter the cell and other employees were allowed to go and work from home. Commissioner Wiggins stated that the Jail is not a sterile environment, and the board will consider payment for the jail. Carissa Cable stated that the board spoke of having \$586,000.00 with another same amount coming in May so these monies could be used as incentives for our detention and officers. Chair Orr stated that the board will decide at a later date.

14. Juanita Colvard, Transit Director stated that her staff is exposed every day and she has money that can be used from Transit, so she did not need the county funds. Director Colvard stated that she has \$64,000.00 additional revenue in operating and can apply for \$274,000.00 in Cares Act Grant Funds through Fiscal Year 2023. Director Colvard stated that she wanted to give her employees more on the hour for work time only. Commissioner Wiggins asks if this will be used in 2022. Director Colvard stated that no this will be for June 2021 to September 2021 forward. Commissioner Wiggins stated that Transit does have a high exposure and they cannot cease their operations. Commissioner Cody made the motion to allow for the CARES ACT funds to be used in retro pay to the Transit staff. Commissioner Wiggins seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.

15. Manager Marino asks if the board wanted to proceed with the discussion on the funding. Chair Orr stated that the board was looking at a workshop and she needed to give this issue some more thought.

16. Chair Orr asks for new or old business. No further business.

17. Chair Orr asks for closed session. No closed session.


18. Commissioner Wiggins stated that the board needed to schedule the workshop. The board agreed to have discussion at the Tuesday, December 21<sup>st</sup> meeting so that Director Garland will be able to get the numbers together. Commissioner Cody stated that he will be attending the Local Government Commission meeting held by Sharon Edmundson on December 13<sup>th</sup>. Director Garland stated that the board would need discussion on salary separate and apart from the ARPA funding. Commissioner Wiggins stated that we needed to do all we can while we have the funds because of the exposure by many of our employees.

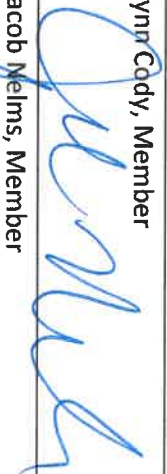
19. Director Garland stated that EMS went back to January 2020 through July 1, 2021, and we need to use this same timeframe for detention and sheriff. Commissioner Wiggins asks that the board be ready to discuss the pay increases as presented at the meeting as well. The board discussed possible meeting dates and agreed to hold the discussion on Tuesday, December 21<sup>st</sup>.

20. Chair Orr asks for a motion to adjourn. Commissioner Wiggins made the motion to adjourn. Commissioner Cody seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.


Signature page for Special Meeting – December 10, 2021

  
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Connie Orr, Chair

  
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Keith Eller, Vice-Chairman

Lynn Cady, Member  
  
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Jacob Nelms, Member

  
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Dale Wiggins, Member

ATTEST:   
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Kim Crisp, Clerk to the Board