

Workshop Session – June 17, 2025

The Graham County Board of Commissioners met Tuesday, June 17, 2025, at 5:00 p.m. for their regular workshop session in the Graham County Community Building located at 196 Knight Street Robbinsville, NC. All board was present. Also, present Manager Brady Cody, Finance Director Stacy Carpenter, Project Manager Jason Marino, Interim Health Director Donna Stephens and Clerk Kim Crisp.

1. Chair Smith called the workshop session to order.
2. Chair Smith asks Sara Coplai, WNC Bridge Representative to speak. Ms. Coplai thanked the board for letting her come and speak about the Fitness Center, it has been a year's long journey for our community. Ms. Coplai stated that she served the eighteen far western counties in North Carolina starting from Burke County all the way to Cherokee County. Ms. Coplai stated that they work in each of the counties to get data points. Ms. Coplai stated Graham County recently participated in a County Health Assessment that happens about every three years which was done in 2021-2022. Ms. Coplai stated that her foundation looks for the best ways to improve health in all the counties. Ms. Coplai stated that this county had an amazing Interim Health Director Donna Stephens who shared time with her and Scott Buchanan, who was not able to make it today due to a prior commitment. Ms. Coplai stated that they started working with Director Stephens on different projects and although her company does not make grants they work with other resources to find funding and bring them westward. Ms. Coplai stated that some of those resources are available and it takes a connection point to find the right method to get those resources here and again going back to Director Stephens, she met with Scott and I and went over the County Health Assessment which has big rocks and big goals that the county has and one of those was to increase the number of medical professionals in the community. Ms. Coplai stated that you have an Urgent Care Center going through some changes, there is no hospital, and she was looking for funds to help with health practitioners. Ms. Coplai stated for about a year, there is a program through the Office of Rural Health that does provide funding for certain medical professionals in rural areas. Ms. Coplai stated that she is simplifying the process, the actual application process is tedious, and it took Director Stephens and she about two months to complete which Director Stephens did along with her regular duties. Ms. Coplai stated that through that process they got to know Graham County really well, so they prevailed with that application and they did get funding for two years through the Office of Rural Health for two practitioners for two years and they will apply again because the team which includes the Board Chair Meggan Smith along with the other practitioners really knocked it out of the park. Ms. Coplai stated that the two of them almost doubled the amount of people that they estimated services for and applying for two additional years they have asked to redo the numbers on what they had previously applied for. Ms. Coplai stated they did not want to burn out the practitioners, but they learned of their interest in the fitness center and after speaking with Director Stephens, the task force that the board established held all the right community members to represent the county. Ms. Coplai stated you had folks from the school, from EBCI, public health, county health department and more who were dreaming up how to make this fitness center a reality. Ms. Coplai stated they did all the right things, including the county board, when they got involved and interested, and you deeded over land to this project which is an awesome head start and a great starting point for a capital build. Ms. Coplai stated that this county did it all right and it was just so beautiful, so she came and met the taskforce and heard about the needs. Ms. Coplai stated that she learned about a project with Angela Knight at the school about what the children wanted to see and one story from a 15-year-old at that time was that they wanted to have their own pool party. Ms. Coplai stated that this community response made an impact on the Bridge Foundation. Ms. Coplai stated that they met with Director Stephens and she was very brave and told the board about all the initiatives which resulted in a feasibility study and with the task force they saw this as a possible project. Ms. Coplai stated that the cost is around \$30M to \$31M dollars and after getting over the sticker shock they started looking for the resources to make that happen, they knew of some of the restrictions of being a rural county, and there are other needs that need to be supported as well. Ms. Coplai stated they started talking to other funders and other representatives in the state about how the county laid this out from the very beginning and it was perfect for the capital that they want to

see in the rural areas. Ms. Coplai stated that the county is not asking for a grant to fix a problem, they are asking for a grant to prevent future problems where all the community can access the fitness center along with the other amenities such as a walking track, the bowling lane, the pickle court and more. Ms. Coplai stated that all of these things that the county has imagined is a possibility with the right funding so in the fall they found a process through the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, who excel at moving capital to areas that need projects. Ms. Coplai stated that they started in 2024 in a rural collaborative projects, they applied and the project was accepted and it was mentioned this month in one of their publications as a promising project for 2025, which is due to the great work that the county has done. Ms. Coplai stated that this is the part where she says “show me the money”, because this is a lot of money, but the county deeded over the land which gives you access to funders that do have a lot of capital, that want to invest and they are very interested in this project. Ms. Coplai stated they have talked about it briefly, and they do understand that the county is going through financial documents to get your audits in order and this summer they will be approaching these funders to see if they are still interested for the original ask of up to \$30M. Ms. Coplai stated they already have interest up to \$14-\$15M investment which leaves another \$14-\$15M to figure out, which is a big undertaking, but is possible. Ms. Coplai stated that Western North Carolina did have a storm that caused a lot of chaos and a lot of damage and we have a lot of different financial institutions that are investing in our region to try and help us rebuild. Ms. Coplai stated that Graham County was not impacted as badly, but they could have been, but there were some flooding and home damage which leads us to a great need for Graham County. Ms. Coplai stated that the fitness center could be used as a shelter, a place for people to come to take showers or get supplies and building the fitness center beside the health department, was a brilliant move for the county. Ms. Coplai stated this can become a complex. Ms. Coplai stated that the other funder from Truist Bank of North Carolina, Rob Garofalo heard about the project and would like to speak with the board on what debt financing would look like that could be available to you and Truist is already helping North Carolina rebuild again. Ms. Coplai stated that they have \$700M dollars to help North Carolina rebuild but there is a time limit on that because they do not want to sit on the disaster funding, they are ready to invest and fortunately for Graham County you have a shovel ready project, so the leadership can decide what to do with these resources, WNC Bridge Foundation finds the resources and the board leads the direction. Ms. Coplai stated that the county needed to stay in contact with Truist along the way so the county can continue to move into the next future. Ms. Coplai asks for questions. Director Stephens stated that they will not know the grant amount until the audits are current and complete then they can apply. Ms. Coplai stated that is correct, once the audits are complete then they can apply for grant funding. Ms. Coplai stated that the funders are already aware of the project, the hard part has been done by the county and these are large investors who do have an interest in the project. Chair Smith thanked Ms. Coplai for the information, the hard work and stated that she will look forward to the upcoming meetings. Ms. Coplai stated that Director Stephens has all our information on the list of funders and the county has all the fundamentals in place. Ms. Coplai stated the board can proceed as they want once the audits are complete. Ms. Coplai stated there are state funders who are looking for counties like Graham County which is rural and interested in building their own infrastructure to better their community. Ms. Coplai stated that she would include the two projects that the board is doing, the Justice Center and the Fitness Center and there may be school needs as well. Ms. Coplai stated that she will look forward to working with the county, these funders want to work with the county going forward. Ms. Coplai stated that they are looking forward to working with the federal reserve for future projects. Chair Smith introduced Jason Marino, Project Manager, to Ms. Coplai and stated that they will stay in touch. Chair Smith thanked Ms. Coplai for her assistance and for her work. Ms. Coplai stated that she looks forward to working with the county and providing technical assistance when the application begins. The board thanked Ms. Coplai for her time and information.

3. Chair Smith asks for a motion to adjourn. Commissioner Williams made the motion to adjourn. Commissioner Cody seconded this motion. Vote unanimous.

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Meggan Smith, Chair, Graham County Commissioner

Lynn Cody, Vice-Chairman, Graham County Commissioner

Jacob Nelms, Member, Graham County Commissioner

Connie Orr, Member, Graham County Commissioner

Natasha Williams, Member, Graham County Commissioner

ATTEST:

Kim Crisp, Clerk to the Board