

GRAFTON COUNTY COMMISSIONERS' MEETING
Administration Building
North Haverhill, NH 03774
January 31, 2023

PRESENT: Commissioners Piper, Ahern and McLeod, and County Administrator Libby.

OTHERS PRESENT: Kate Plumley Stewart; Marcia Selent; David Ruell; former Commissioner Linda Lauer; Executive Councilor Cinde Warmington; Donnie Spencer, District Director for Executive Councilor Warmington; and Ed Wargo, SNS

Commissioner Piper called the meeting to order at 9:00 AM and began with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Annual Report Dedication

The Commissioners presented their FY 2022 Annual Report Dedication to the individuals that they have selected from their respective districts. Commissioner Piper selected Kate Plumley Stewart from Enfield, Former Commissioner Lauer selected Marcia Selent from Mountain Lakes, and Commissioner Ahern selected David Ruell from Ashland. Each of the nominees were presented with a personalized copy of the Annual Report.

Ed Wargo from SNS arrived and gave the following report:

E. Wargo gave the Commissioners an update on the network upgrades: the jail, the courthouse, the biomass building and the Alternative Sentencing buildings have all been completed. The nursing home has been slowed down because of the COVID outbreak at the facility. They have finished the upstairs closet and hope to complete the first floor this week. That will leave only the Administration building to complete. E. Wargo hopes that will be done in the next couple of weeks.

E. Wargo updated the Commissioners on the new virtual servers and conversion of the thirty (30) servers that are being consolidated onto the new virtual servers. Twenty-six have been completed. There are just four (4) left to be moved. Once this is completed the old ones will be de-commissioned and moved to the AS building where they will be available for redundancy if necessary.

E. Wargo gave an update on security. There were no significant attacks and this past month things looked better than the previous months. E. Wargo stated we have become less of a target.

Commissioner McLeod asked if regular security training is done for employees. E. Wargo stated that training is sent out to employees every few months.

Executive Councilor Cinde Warmington was in attendance at the meeting. Commissioner Piper stated that Councilor Warmington had provided her with an update regarding Mascoma Community Health. Councilor Warmington has had a conversation with Gina Powers on behalf of Healthfirst and with Henry Lipman from DHHS and both parties believe that they are satisfied with the agreement that has been reached for the merger. This will need to go through legal review. Councilor Warmington stated that it seems to be progressing in a good way. She is advocating that the agreement be on the February 22, 2023 Governor and Council agenda for approval. Councilor Warmington has also spoken with the Charitable Trust division of the Attorney General's office to impress upon them how important it is to get this prioritized and moved forward in a timely manner. She stated that she knows this process can take time, she is hoping that she can help that process be expedited. Anti-trust will also need to review it. Councilor Warmington stated that she knows this process and knows where it can get hung up and that there is no time to be lost on this issue. She stated that it would be a real shame for Mascoma Community Health to fail because of a short term timing problem.

Commissioner Piper stated that the Commissioners had many thorough discussions regarding these issue and she is overjoyed that the Commissioners were able to approve funding and that the Executive Committee was able to unanimously support Mascoma's request for the full \$250,000.

Commissioner McLeod stated that her concern is Mascoma Community Health. Healthfirst has what it needs but she feels that Mascoma lacks the capacity and sophistication to get what it needs. Commissioner McLeod stated they need the advocacy. Councilor Warmington has reached out to Mascoma directly as well.

Commissioner Piper next wanted to discuss the meeting with DES and WW&L. Commissioner Piper stated that the County is required by statute to participate with Woodsville Water and Light for our electricity, sewer disposal and water needs. Commissioner Piper stated that several years ago Senator Guida sponsored legislation that allowed the County to look outside of Woodsville Water and Light for electricity, but the County was not able to find a provider that would sell electricity to the County. This was due to the fact that the County doesn't have a big enough electric load on its own to attract a different provider. Commissioner Piper stated that the County would also be looking at the Community Power Coalition of NH and investigating if that will be an option for the County.

Commissioner Piper went on to say that with ARPA funding, allowable infrastructure projects are for broadband, water and sewer. The County has invested in broadband. After identifying that sewer rates had increased 124% in the past ten (10) years the decision was made to do a feasibility study to look at our own on-site municipal septic system. The feasibility study has identified that it is feasible, but there is the obstacle of RSA 147:8 and that Woodsville Fire District will not grant the County a waiver. The Department of Environmental Services became involved due to concerns with the integrity of the wastewater treatment system as a whole and concerns with the Connecticut River Watershed and adding septic systems to it.

Commissioner Piper discussed HB 186 and that the NH Municipal Association and DES are opposed to the legislation. DES facilitated a conversation between Woodsville Water and Light and Grafton County and are hopeful that an inter-municipal agreement can be drafted to address some of the concerns on a local level. Commissioner Piper stated that she is doubtful that HB 186 will pass.

County Administrator Libby provided an update from the meeting that was held yesterday with Woodsville Water and Light. She reviewed the most recent sewage bill for the County with the Commissioners along with the rate chart that was provided to her by Woodsville Fire District. The charges are proportional.

Commissioner McLeod stated that was a great update. Commissioner Piper stated that DES is strongly encouraging that the two agencies work together as they feel it is in the best interest of everyone involved.

Commissioner Ahern stated that he is hopeful and positive, but stated “we will see.” He is interested in getting out from underneath WW&L. Commissioner Ahern explained Slightly Used Nuclear Fuel to Councilor Warmington. He stated that the County had a presentation from Steve Curtis a couple of years ago. There is a committee in Concord that has been set up to look into this. Commissioner Ahern stated there is a lot of money available in Washington, DC for states who are willing to look into this. Commissioner Ahern stated that Governor Sununu is not interested in this. Commissioner Ahern said that this could be used to produce energy very inexpensively and that it is safe.

Councilor Warmington thanked the Commissioners for giving her the update on this situation. She stated that she has heard about the proposed legislation. She also thanked the Commissioners for having her at their meeting this morning. All the Commissioners thanked Councilor Warmington for attending their meeting. Councilor Warmington and Donnie Spencer left the meeting.

Commissioner McLeod stated that she felt that the Commissioners should ask the RR&D Committee to retain HB 186. The Commissioners further discussed their position on HB 186, which has a hearing before the Resources, Recreation and Development Committee tomorrow, February 1st. The Commissioners decided that their approach would be to write a short narrative addressing the reasons for the legislation and to make a request that the bill be retained. There are three (3) Grafton County representatives on that committee. This will be sent to them as well as Representatives Stavis and Sykes as they are the sponsors of the bill. County Administrator Libby will also send it to Kate Horgan of the Dupont Group and ask if she will be available to testify tomorrow if necessary.

MOTION: Commissioner Ahern moved that the Commissioners recommend HB 186 be retained to allow the Commissioners time to work on the relationship with Woodsville Water and Light and to educate our representatives on this very important matter. Commissioner McLeod seconded the motion.

Discussion: Commissioner Ahern stated that he is torn because he can see from a selectmen standpoint the concern that the Municipal Association has about how broad the language is. He stated that he has seen times when legislation is amended for one entity.

The Commissioners voted on the motion. All were in favor.

Agenda Items:

1. Commissioner Piper asked if everyone had a chance to read the minutes from the January 17th and January 24th meetings. The Commissioners had edits in each set.

MOTION: Commissioner Ahern moved to approve the minutes from the January 17th meeting as amended. Commissioner McLeod seconded the motion and all were in favor.

MOTION: Commissioner Ahern moved to approve the minutes from the January 24th meeting as amended. Commissioner McLeod seconded the motion and all were in favor.

2. The Commissioners signed the following check registers: 1097-1098; 1100-1102; 2023-01.20.2023.

3. Commissioner Piper signed a CDBG drawdown request for the NH Alliance of Regional Development Corporations for \$40,341.39.

4. On-Campus Housing. County Administrator Libby explained that Commissioner Piper had asked to have this topic put on the agenda for a full discussion. County Administrator Libby explained that she had a meeting with department heads to discuss the topic in terms of recruitment. Overall, the group did not feel that on-campus housing would be a solution to the recruitment challenges that the county currently faces. Human Resources Director Karen Clough stated that this has not been a challenge in terms of recruitment.

The discussion involved the fact that we have so many vacancies we wouldn't be able to offer housing for all the vacant positions, and how would we choose which positions it was offered for. The other big concern expressed was, what about the people that already work here and are not offered a benefit of housing. It seemed as though that would not be fair unless something was being offered to existing employees as well. It was also discussed that it would require additional staff to manage and maintain whatever types of housing were offered on campus.

The group discussed that having some short-term housing for employees might be beneficial. It would maybe allow us the flexibility to hire employees from a distance and they could come work three (3) twelve (12) hour shifts and have a place to stay for those days and then go home. That then turned to who would maintain and clean between employees coming and going.

There was a lot of discussion about the up-front and on-going costs that it would take to do this. The group collectively thought that if the Commissioners wanted to invest significant dollars that it should be invested in wages as it was felt that is the main driver behind what employees are looking for today.

Commissioner Ahern stated that he did not feel that these concerns were insurmountable. He explained that he was remembering what was done in Sullivan County years ago when they provided housing. He is not surprised by the department head concerns. He stated that he is trying to identify existing spaces. CA Libby asked Commissioner Ahern what existing spaces he was referring to. He stated that he does have some thoughts as to spaces that he feels are potentially available. He stated that he just wants to look into the potential.

Commissioner Piper stated that she knows this has been a long standing question of Commissioner Ahern's and she thinks it is really important to research it, talk it through and figure it out. Commissioner Piper stated that any Commissioner can bring something up that is important to them and it needs to be investigated and the Board of Commissioners needs to make a decision about that.

Commissioner McLeod explained that her own situation involved her husband having a job for the state parks and they were provided housing. She stated that it is not uncommon for these types of jobs to require employees to live on-site. CA Libby stated the difference is that we do not require any staff to live on campus.

Commissioner McLeod said it is hard to implement, most of the situations she is aware of have established housing.

Commissioner Ahern feels there are lots of options. He stated that the County is blessed with resources and that land is one of them. However, there are too many rules and regulations. Commissioner Ahern suggested that we could use our own lumber and inmate labor to build a couple of small houses across the street. Commissioner Piper stated this could be a source of revenue for the county.

Commissioner Piper asked Commissioner Ahern his thoughts on the suggestion for recruitment and retention of investing in wages as opposed to housing. She is looking at outcomes, and wondering if it would be more successful to increase wages. Commissioner Ahern stated we have already been doing that, but it should all be looked at.

Commissioner Piper asked Commissioner Ahern what he wanted to do. Commissioner Ahern stated that he just wanted to raise it up the flag pole, he would like to pursue it but it takes a majority of the Board. Commissioner Piper stated that she doesn't want the conversation to go away, she feels this needs to be attended to.

Commissioner McLeod stated that we could bring in people from housing entities that have done studies and done a lot of work in the area to understand the issues with housing. She suggested that we could gather information before we do anything.

Commissioner Ahern stated that he respectfully disagrees with the thoughts of the department heads. CA Libby understands Commissioner Ahern's feelings but thinks that it is important for the Commissioners to give consideration to the feedback that they are receiving from the departments.

Commissioner McLeod stated that department heads are one piece of the puzzle and might be relevant to direct on campus housing. She suggested that a new concept out there now is to create land trusts. She isn't familiar with all the details of this but felt we could bring in someone who can explain the options. Commissioner Ahern stated that he feels we currently have a lot on our plate, and maybe this should wait. Commissioner Piper stated she thinks it's important and wholeheartedly agrees with Commissioner McLeod, that the departments are one part of the conversation and the Commissioners are the other. Commissioner Piper stated that she is pleased with what Commissioner McLeod is saying and her ideas that might be helpful. Commissioner Piper stated that affordable housing and economic development are problems the county faces.

Commissioner Piper felt that the Board should have action items on this topic. They decided to invite AHEAD, Twin Pines Housing, North Country Council and Lakes Region Community Development to come in for a meeting to discuss housing.

Commissioner Ahern felt that bringing housing to NH would be good for a lot of people

The Commissioners further discussed the Community Power conversation that was held last week with the Executive Committee. Grafton County will look at this more thoroughly.

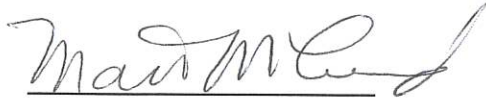
Commissioner Piper reviewed issues that are currently being worked on or being addressed including housing, community power and ARPA funding to outside agencies. She stated that there is funding in the budget to hire an assistant to the County Administrator and that the Board needs to address this also.

Commissioner Issues:

1. Commissioner Ahern met with Father Bennett's Boys Club in Bristol last week. They invited him to come and speak. He reviewed the status of the broadband project and then updated them on other things the Commissioners are doing. The group was very happy with the report and he received good feedback.

11:55 AM with no further business, the meeting adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Martha S. McLeod", is written over a horizontal line.

Martha S. McLeod, Clerk