

**MINUTES OF BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
OF GUILFORD COUNTY
WORK SESSION**

Greensboro, North Carolina
June 3, 2021

The Board of County Commissioners met in a duly noticed Work Session at 4:00PM in the McAdoo Conference Room located on the third floor of the BB&T Building, 201 W. Market St., Greensboro, NC.

PRESENT: Chairman Melvin “Skip” Alston, presiding; Vice Chairman J. Carlvena Foster; Commissioners Mary Beth Murphy, Carly Cooke, Kay Cashion, Justin Conrad and Alan Perdue. Participating via virtual communication: Commissioners Carolyn Q. Coleman and James Upchurch.

ABSENT: None.

ALSO PRESENT: County Manager Michael Halford; Assistant County Manager Jason Jones; County Attorney Mark Payne; Clerk to Board Robin Keller; Jessica Wolf, Deputy Clerk to Board; Alex Smith, Budget, Management & Evaluation Director; Dr. Sharon Contreras, Guilford County Schools Superintendent; Angie Henry, Guilford County Schools Chief Financial Officer; Attorney Jill Wilson; Board of Education Members Winston McGregor and Deena Hayes; and media. Virtual participation was made available to the general public and media.

I. WELCOME AND CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Melvin “Skip” Alston welcomed those present and called the meeting to order at 4:00PM.

II. NEW BUSINESS

**A. UPDATE ON GUILFORD COUNTY SCHOOLS FY 2021-22 PROPOSED
BUDGET REQUEST**

Chairman Alston thanked members from Guilford County Schools and the Board of Education and opened the floor to questions from Commissioners.

Commissioner Cashion questioned if there were any new items of update. She asked if there were any items the GCS staff could point to that could make up the difference in what we have projected and what the School Board has requested?

Dr. Contreras, Guilford County Schools Superintendent, explained their request. She shared that they need \$6.8 Million to cover increases for Legislative mandates for county paid positions. Dr. Contreras also stated that they are requesting \$8.1 Million for administrator supplements, fully funding bus driver and school nutrition worker raises to \$15 per hour, and to restore one-time reductions for magnet schools. She is also requesting \$10 Million for the teacher supplement increase and they are requesting \$6.8 Million in capital increases.

Commissioner Conrad thanked the Superintendent and Board of Education members. He asked what were some of the biggest positive and negative impacts of 2020, and how did it translate into the proposal?

Dr. Contreras stated they did see some savings, but their school district was back in session much earlier with more students than other large districts. She noted that they were running learning hubs and schools for homeless students. She shared that they did not have a program as other districts did for a one-to-one device initiative. They used many of their funds and resources to provide devices without offering a lease-to-own program that many other districts had to do. Dr. Contreras stated that they also had to purchase a lot of personal protective equipment. She shared that they are spending a lot of money on learning loss and that she is starting to receive the test scores coming in and it is like nothing they have ever seen in the county, state, and country. They will need to invest lots of resources for support of our students.

Dr. Contreras stated that they saw very little savings in comparison to the need the pandemic created.

Angie Henry, Guilford County Schools Chief Financial Officer, stated that they continued to feed students while kids were learning from home, and that they kept every employee employed.

Board of Education Commissioner Winston McGregor stated that they learned a lot about scheduling and hybrid scheduling and innovative use of buildings; more children learning from home and kids enrolling in college programs.

Dr. Contreras stated that they doubled the number of high school students enrolled in GTCC.

Commissioner Perdue questioned current events on safety and security, regarding the most recent incident and several other incidents that occurred just this week. One question is around cameras, there has been tremendous effort for safety concerns. Of the \$10 Million allocated for safety and security, about \$5 Million was used to improve the radio systems, what was done to help improve camera systems and what is being done to help upgrade those, and what are the plans with any current dollars coming in?

Dr. Contreras stated that in regards to the most recent incident, the cameras were used to go back and investigate the issue. They simply have not had enough money to address the camera issues when there are so many other basic issues, such as heating and cooling issues. She stated that

they do not have the funds for all of the safety issues. Contreas added that the \$10 Million could only address a radio issue. She noted that another school district just passed a bond referendum for \$22.5 Million to address the doors in one high school alone. She emphasized that you can do at \$10 Million is the radios. Contreas stated that have tried to gain access to the funding and have received \$63,000 of the funding to date. She stated that they were denied the ability to put out an RFQ.

Commissioner Perdue shared that he was told about an EC student who went missing while the cameras were down, and several hours were spent where staff was looking for the student before sheriff deputies were involved. He questioned if any of those systems have been done.

Commissioner Perdue stated that students are being paid to attend school with gift cards to get students to attend class. He questioned if this a program that the schools are handling?

Dr. Contreras stated that the district has no such program; however, that the schools have for decades created their own incentives. She stated that she does not micro-manage the schools and that she has no way of knowing the incentives that the school improvement teams create.

Commissioner Perdue asked if those funds come from tax dollars.

Dr. Contreras stated that there are many ways to raise these funds, including use of their Title 1 dollars. She reiterated that she does not micro-manage the schools.

Jill Wilson stated that they would love to provide specific instances of where they have security issues in a confidential setting.

Commissioner Coleman questioned the classified employees, she stated that she was under the opinion that when the commissioners brought the bus drivers up to \$15 per hour that the schools were responsible for the other classified positions.

Dr. Contreras stated that the schools do not generate revenue and all funding comes through federal funding, state funding, or through the county. The only way to give raises is through the county. They can provide bonuses

Commissioner Coleman asked if she would raise the funds for classified employees.

Dr. Contreras stated the Board of Education has agreed to provide bonuses to classified workers that equate to about \$15 per hour, but not raises.

Commissioner Coleman questioned the school nurses, and that all 40 of the nurses will be reporting to the school system. What happens if the funds last for three years and then the County is responsible for picking up the nurses when they will no longer be paid for by the ESSER funds. How will we determine who comes back to the county payroll versus who stays on the school's payroll?

Dr. Contreras stated that she hoped that we continue to advocate our legislative agenda that the state funds all nurses at all schools, which is usually the case.

Commissioner Coleman stated that we could avert the problem by having the county pay for the 21 nurses and the school pay for theirs, so that in two or three years, there would not be a problem as to deciding which nurses would be paid for from which pot of funds.

Dr. Contreras stated that they put a lot of nurses into the budget, and the real issue is that they most likely will not be able to find these nurses. While included in the budget, it is highly unlikely to place that amount of nurses in the budget. They are competing with hospitals, urgent cares, and home care systems as well.

Commissioner Coleman stated that is her concern, that she is hoping to avoid this.

Dr. Contreras stated that they have been trying to contract for nurses and have not been successful. It is a much bigger issue than finding the funds for them.

Commissioner Murphy thanked Dr. Contreras and staff for being present, she noted that there is a commitment to support staff through significant raises, and a commitment to lift-up people in our community but also a recognition that we survived the pandemic because of our people in this organization. The three groups that seem to be the focus are bus drivers, school nutrition staff, and teachers, as well as, assistant principals and some administrators.

Commissioner Murphy asked how many bus drivers would be impacted by these raises?

Henry stated that they have 520 bus driver positions, not all are filled. She also stated that these positions were impacted by the raise provided in 2019.

Commissioner Murphy asked on average, what the salary is for bus drivers?

Henry stated that she does not have that information with her to share right now.

Dr. Contreras stated that once they get to the issue of \$15 per hour salaries, they will be faced with compression issues. They are creating a problem with fixing a problem.

Commissioner Murphy asked for similar information regarding school nutrition staff.

Henry spoke that there are a little over 700 employees in the nutrition program. Because they are an enterprise fund and generate their own revenue, they were able to give them a small raise last year in an effort to get them to a better salary last year. They are asking to move them up to \$15 per hour.

Dr. Contreras stated that in many other districts that have more modern facilities, you can have food courts with various food options. You have a pizza station, a salad station, and you don't have a food line where students only have one choice for a meal. They have modern facilities in which students have many different choices. She stated you can only give raises with the funds they generate due to being an enterprise fund.

Commissioner Murphy stated that the teacher supplement has fallen to 12th in the state. She thinks the plan to bring the supplement to first in the state is very ambitious and she hopes to see support from the board for raises. Murphy asked how many teachers would be impacted by implementing the first year of the proposed five-year plan?

Dr. Contreras stated the number impacted would be approximately 5,000 teachers and spoke to the overall impacts of the raises. Dr. Contreras also spoke to the impact of the administrator supplement stating that 300 administrators would be impacted as well.

Commissioner Murphy stated that the impact would be roughly 7,000 employees who would be affected by these raises. That we could provide raises for 70% of the school system's employees.

Commissioner Cooke stated that she appreciated all of the efforts to push forward school facilities improvements. She noted that she tries to focus on people but understanding the limitations with revenue constraints due to the pandemic. Cooke stated that if we can not get to the full increase this year, is there some place that we can get to this year to show our commitment?

Dr. Contreras stated that roughly \$18.2 Million would help the schools. They are willing to be flexible with ESSER funds as long as staff isn't cut in two years, so that they could provide all employees a livable wage.

Vice Chairman Foster asked for clarity that in January 2020, the board allocated \$800,000 to increase bus drivers to \$15 per hour which included compression. You're currently asking for \$1.6 Million, which is two times more than what was allocated in 2020, is this over a two-year period?

Dr. Contreras noted that they saw increases in insurance claims in addition to the salary needs. The County provided the schools \$3 Million of their shortfalls and the County left the district to make up the liability rates, hospital rates, and insurance rates, as well as charter school increases.

Vice Chairman Foster asked the average salary for school nutrition workers.

Henry stated the minimum is \$12.30 per hour but did not know the average salary.

Vice Chairman Foster stated that if we don't get people up to a living wage, it will cost the county as they will then need to be on county services.

Board of Education Chairman Deena Hayes stated that Guilford County Schools is the largest employer in Guilford County by far and imagine they have the largest number of employees on public assistance. She shared that they need to look at this more holistically than in the past. From healthcare, to food and nutrition services, to housing subsidies, much comes from the county. These are real tangible concrete dollars.

County Manager Halford stated that they have researched that, but with the state restrictions, they are not able to pull that data.

Henry stated that the \$20 Million that they do have in ESSER funds, they are giving that to employees as one-time bonuses.

Dr. Contreras noted that it has not been advised to give bonuses out of the ESSER funds but felt compelled to do so. She asked the board to fund as much as they can and that they continue to meet to work towards finding solutions.

Vice Chairman Foster shared that she works with a group to help work on community wish lists to provide student incentives and being able to connect every school with a community partner is very important.

Commissioner Conrad noted that in regard to the statement that the schools do not have access to security funds that the 2/3rds funding is based on reimbursement of expenses. It is his understanding that is how those funds are handled for many years. That expenses are incurred by the schools then reimbursements are submitted for payments.

Dr. Contreras stated that the schools asked for \$60 Million in reopening money, and they did not ask the board to spend the district's safety funds. She stated that they were told, in writing, that they could not issue the RFQ until a meeting was held. The safety money has not been spent, only \$63,000 has been spent on safety.

Commissioner Perdue advised the Commissioners took a vote to release \$4.4 Million out of the \$10 Million to go towards fixing those issues.

Halford clarified that of the \$10 Million, \$600,000 has been allocated for the study and \$5 Million was allocated for HVAC and security related access control. The remaining \$4.4 Million has not been allocated by the Board and is still there. He shared that he will work with the schools to get that moving again.

Halford noted there was a decision to separate \$5 Million of the \$10 Million to address windows and safety controls. The remaining \$4.4 Million is still in the project ordinance.

Commissioner Perdue stated he thought the \$600,000 was for the study and then to do a preliminary design to address issues.

Commissioner Perdue questioned the GCS staff regarding any insight on access and affordability for broadband needs as we, as a county, work to expand broadband connectivity.

Dr. Contreras shared that they have recently received an award from Harvard regarding connectivity and use of data analysis to help with connectivity. She gave insight on some of the data and can provide that information to the Board.

Commissioner Upchurch shared that he hopes that next year, the two boards can get together to discuss what the needs are of the schools and what the incoming revenue of the county looks like. The conversations that have taken place over the last few weeks have not been productive, and he hopes that next year we all try to work together prior to budgets coming out and have a long-term plan.

Commissioner Cashion shared that communication is the key and we need to talk more, and we need to understand what the schools' needs are.

Commissioner Cashion asked the schools for information regarding school safety and what they are doing to provide a safe environment.

Dr. Contreras stated she isn't responsible for all the safety in the county and that she also works for a board. She stated that there are several factors that are a challenge. Speaking to the incident,

there are layout issues at the school, the doors were all locked at the time, and there was help from someone inside the building. She stated you can't solve cultural and social issues with capital funding. The schools continue to follow all processes and do what they are supposed to do.

Chairman Alston stated, as a reminder, that we are one team, and there is no "us" and "them", and we cannot eat this entire elephant in one year. He stated that he is encouraged that the schools are agreeing to implement the bonuses so that we are not forced to address this in the midst of a pandemic. Chairman Alston added that we cannot address a \$32 Million increase in one year, but the manager has proposed as strong increase, more than has ever been proposed in the past. He noted that the recommendation is \$13 Million and to dip into our fund balance to meet the school needs. He reminded the community that we are also absorbing the \$300 Million bond revenue. He stated that he is encouraged to use the ESSER funds to do the one-time bonuses which would give us a 2-year window to try to get to where we need to and address those needs. Some of the requests we are seeing for the first time, such as, \$1.9 Million for administrator supplement. Chairman Alston stated that we want to be a state leader and this board is committed to working with the schools and we are going to get where we can have pride in our school system and have confidence knowing that you have partners, not foes. Chairman Alston asked that we do put together this committee and that we don't meet once a year, that we meet quarterly, and we can understand each other's needs so that we can know what is going on.

Chairman Alston stated he would like to approach it collaboratively moving forward.

III. OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business discussed.

IV. ADJOURN

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned by unanimous consent at 5:21PM.

Melvin "Skip" Alston
Chairman

Robin Keller
Clerk to Board