

MINUTES OF THE BUNCOMBE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS'

BRIEFING MEETING OF MAY 19, 2026.

BE IT REMEMBERED: That the Board of Commissioners met to hold a Briefing Meeting on May 19, 2026, in the 1st floor conference room at 200 College Street in downtown Asheville, North Carolina at 3:00 p.m.

Present: Chair Amanda Edwards; Commissioner Terri Wells, Commissioner Al Whitesides; Commissioner Drew Ball; and Commissioner Jennifer Horton; Commissioner Parker Sloan.

Absent: Vice-Chair Martin Moore.

The following updates were reviewed and discussed:

Letter of Support for the Western NC Rail

Commissioner Ball provided background information. He explained that the proposed letter of support is for the North Carolina Department of Transportation's application for the Western North Carolina Rail Safety Modernization Program – Phase I through the Railroad Crossing Elimination Grant Program. He highlighted the project's role in improving rail and vehicle safety through upgrades to more than 40 highway-rail crossing signals across Rowan, Iredell, and Catawba Counties, while also supporting the long-term restoration of passenger rail service to Western North Carolina. The letter noted the project's potential economic and transportation benefits, including improved regional connectivity, tourism, mobility, and freight rail efficiency. The letter urged the U.S. Department of Transportation to approve funding for the project.

The Chair noted that the Board previously supported this in 2023 and that there is a history of support for this project. The Board consented to adding this letter to the regular meeting consent agenda for approval to sign and send.

Helene Recovery | Hazard Mitigation Grant Program Update

Kevin Madsen provided background information. He explained that Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), supports voluntary property acquisitions and elevations to reduce future impacts from natural disasters following Tropical Storm Helene. He noted that 362 total applications have been received, including 278 acquisition requests and 84 elevation requests, with multiple groups currently in state and federal review. Staff shared that appraisals and offers have been completed for many Group 1 and 2 acquisition properties, with closings expected to begin the week of May 25, and outlined future demolition, site restoration, and deed restriction requirements for acquired properties. He further explained that the Helene Recovery Office is also coordinating long-term planning efforts for acquired open space properties, including land management strategies, maintenance considerations, and potential greenway development.

COVID Recovery Funding Reallocation

Rachael Sawyer, Strategic Partnership Director, provided background information. She explained that Buncombe County received COVID Recovery Funding through the American

Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which provided the County with \$50.7 million in federal recovery funding to address public health, economic recovery, infrastructure, and community needs. The presentation highlighted that all funds were fully obligated by the December 31, 2024 deadline, with 88 percent expended as of May 1, 2026, across 54 projects, including housing, mental health services, broadband expansion, and small business assistance. Staff shared examples of community impacts, including housing development, job creation and retention, food and health services, broadband connectivity, and mental health support. The Board also reviewed proposed reallocations of approximately \$3.82 million in unused project balances to support Community Paramedic radio purchases and operational costs related to Tropical Storm Helene response and recovery efforts, she noted that formal Board action is anticipated on June 2, 2026.

Potential GO Bonds Opportunities

Rachael Sawyer, Strategic Partnership Director, provided an overview of remaining and potential future General Obligation (GO) Bond opportunities related to open space and affordable housing. She noted that of the 2022 bond referendum funding, approximately \$3.6 million remains available for open space projects, while all affordable housing bond funds have been allocated or are pending commitment. She further highlighted ongoing strategic goals, including conserving 20 percent of county acreage by 2030, expanding parks and recreation infrastructure, and supporting the development of affordable housing units for households earning less than 80 percent of Area Median Income, with an estimated additional \$40 million housing bond potentially helping address remaining housing gaps.

The presentation also outlined school capital needs identified by Asheville City and Buncombe County Schools noted that the schools had originally requested a \$130 million bond, however, they have since requested to wait until future funding cycles. Commissioner Wells provided a more detailed update specific to school capital funding. In closing, Sawyer outlined the procedural steps required to place a potential 2026 GO Bond referendum on the upcoming ballot.

Legislative Update

This item was moved to the regular meeting agenda.

MINUTES OF THE BUNCOMBE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS'

REGULAR MEETING OF MAY 19, 2026.

BE IT REMEMBERED: That the Board of Commissioners met to hold a Regular Meeting on May 19, 2026, in the Chamber at 200 College Street in downtown Asheville, North Carolina at 5:00 p.m.

Present: Chair Amanda Edwards; Commissioner Terri Wells, Commissioner Al Whitesides; Commissioner Drew Ball; and Commissioner Jennifer Horton; Commissioner Parker Sloan.

Absent: Vice-Chair Martin Moore.

The Chair opened the meeting and provided opening remarks.

CONSENT

1. Approval of the May 5, 2026, Meeting Minutes
2. Resolution Approving Pyrotechnic Experts for Fireworks Display
3. Approval of the Rate Adjustment for Purchased Transportation Services Provided under the Transportation Agreement between Buncombe County and the City of Asheville
4. Approval of the Buncombe County Schools Lottery Project Applications
5. Approval of the JCPC Updated Funding Plan and Budget Amendment
6. WNC Rail Support letter – added from Briefing Meeting.

Commissioner Ball made the motion to add the WNC rail support letter that was discussed at the Briefing meeting to the consent agenda for approval. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Whitesides and carried unanimously.

Commissioner Whiteside made the motion to approve the consent agenda as amended and the agenda as presented. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Ball and carried unanimously.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Julie Forbes– described ongoing unsafe and unsanitary conditions at her residence following the bridge collapse two years ago, including severe fire hazards, health risks, and criminal activity. She urged the Board to expedite demolition and cleanup efforts, emphasizing the urgent impact on her safety, well-being, and ability to relocate.

Pepi Acebo – requested that the County Commissioners schedule a discussion on allowing civil enforcement for violations involving motorists illegally passing stopped school buses, citing ongoing safety risks.

MANAGER'S REPORT

Legislative Update

Whitney Christensen with Ward and Smith provided the legislative update remotely. She explained Buncombe County's legislative priorities for the 2025–2026 North Carolina General Assembly biennium, with a primary focus on disaster recovery and long-term stabilization following Hurricane Helene. Top priorities include direct recovery and stabilization funding for local governments, permanent housing solutions for displaced residents, and additional support for the Emergency Watershed Protection Program to address technical assistance and infrastructure needs. Additional appropriations and policy priorities include mental and behavioral health resources, business recovery grants and loans, water and sewer infrastructure expansion, emergency response equipment funding, and reimbursement for the County's school consolidation study. The presentation also highlighted recent Helene relief legislation approved by the General Assembly, ongoing advocacy related to education funding and teacher salary supplements, and continued efforts regarding property tax reform and protections for Helene-impacted communities.

PRESENTATIONS

1. Older Americans Month Proclamation

Commissioner Ball read the proclamation. He said that Older Americans Month highlights the contributions of older residents in Buncombe County through their volunteerism, charitable contributions, unpaid caregiving, and consumer spending.

Billie Breeden thanked the Board for their continued support and said that the Age Friendly Action plan has been updated and that she would be happy to provide a future presentation. She also invited the Board and public to attend the Second Age-Friendly Summit on June 4.

2. Recognition of Clerk to the Board Proclamation

Chair Edwards read the proclamation to recognize the work that Board Clerks do to manage official records, agendas, and support Commissioners and their community.

3. US Forest Service Update

Jennifer Barnhart with the U.S. Forest Service Appalachian District, provided the update. She explained that on Helene Recovery efforts are ongoing, including impacts and public safety. She said that Tropical Storm Helene downed tens of thousands of trees and damaged an estimated 850 miles of trails. Recovery priorities include fuel and debris removal, reopening trails, roads, and recreational sites, and improving emergency responder access.

The Commissioner's thanked the U.S. Forest Service rangers for their continued service and stewardship of public land.

4. FY26 3rd Quarter Financial Update

Melissa Moore, Finance Director presented the County's fiscal year 2026 third quarter report, including General Fund budget-to-actual results, year-to-date comparisons for this quarter versus last year's third quarter, key revenue sources, current net county cost, solid waste operations, capital projects, investments, and donation activity.

PUBLIC HEARINGS

1. CDBG-DR Commercial District Revitalization — Public Hearing #1

Tyler Henry provided background information. He explained that the CDBG-DR Commercial District Revitalization program provides funding for physical repair and improvement projects in commercial areas damaged by Tropical Storm Helene and that projects must meet certain criteria, including being related to the storm, benefiting populations with low-to-moderate incomes, and prioritizing physical recovery from storm damage. Henry presented three projects presented by staff, which include the Swannanoa Commercial Corridor Revitalization, Commercial Corridor Remediation and Revitalization, and the Commercial Corridor Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) Property Activation. Henry further noted that the public comment period opened on May 8 and will close on June 5 and a second public hearing will be held on July 21. He said that comments can be submitted in writing to the Buncombe County Helene Recovery Office, 200 College St., Asheville N.C. 28801, via email at HeleneRecovery@BuncombeNC.gov, or by calling the Recovery Office at 828-250-6100.

The Chair opened the Public Hearing at 6:19 p.m. there were no public comments. The Chair closed the Public Hearing at 6:19 p.m.

Commissioners asked staff for clarification on grant eligibility and also discussed potential project areas, including Highway 70 and downtown Swannanoa, with interest in exploring revitalization efforts beyond sidewalk improvements. Henry provided updates on related grants, the current applications across the state, and the county's standing in the process. To conclude, Henry confirmed the public comment process, highlighting that it will be open through June 5.

2. FY27 Budget Public Hearing

John Hudson, Budget Director, provided background information. He noted that this is the last step in the budget process before adoption on June 2. Hudson presented the FY27 Recommended Budget, outlining the County's financial priorities, economic context, and strategic investments for the upcoming fiscal year. He said that the recommended General Fund budget totals \$485,055,095, supported by a proposed property tax rate of 43.52 cents per \$100 of assessed value, 4.3 cents above revenue neutral. For the median Buncombe County home value of \$446,500, this equates to an estimated \$192 increase in property taxes annually.

The FY27 budget reflects:

- A local economy continuing to stabilize following Tropical Storm Helene
- Rising costs associated with inflation and health insurance
- Ongoing uncertainty at the state legislative level, including potential property tax law changes

Revenue & Expenditure Highlights

The County's projected \$483.2 million in revenues is primarily generated through property tax, local option sales tax, and intergovernmental sources. Expenditures focus on essential services, with the largest allocations dedicated to Education (\$137.3 million), Public Safety (\$106.5 million), and Human Services (\$100.3 million).

Strategic Investments

The FY27 Recommended Budget prioritizes community needs and long-term resilience across multiple focus areas, including:

- Education (14.60¢ of the tax rate): Funding for Buncombe County Schools, Asheville City Schools, AB-Tech, and early childhood education programs.
- Public Safety (10.33¢ of the tax rate): Sheriff's Office, EMS, 911 operations, justice services, and emergency management.
- Human Services (6.47¢ of the tax rate): Social services, public health, aging services, and veteran support.
- General Government, Cultural & Recreational Services, Economic & Physical Development, and Debt Service, including 2022 GO Bond projects.

Personnel & Capital Investments

The FY27 budget proposes a 2.71% cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for County employees and funds 32 new positions across multiple departments while bringing in six positions as the former Asheville-Buncombe Air Quality Agency becomes a County-funded service following declining federal funding and reduced fee revenue. Capital recommendations include investments in public safety facilities, libraries, parks, and critical infrastructure, totaling \$38.3 million in debt-financed projects and \$1.6 million in pay-as-you-go projects.

Community Investments

The budget includes \$11 million in discretionary community investments, supporting early childhood education, affordable housing initiatives, behavioral health services, arts and culture, and local nonprofit partners.

The Chair opened the Public Hearing at 6: 37 p.m. There were 9 speakers:

Ralph Jones -urged the county to improve budget transparency by setting clear departmental performance targets that employees can understand and relate to the overall budget.

Tom Kelly -emphasized the urgent safety needs of firefighters, rising equipment costs, and the importance of recognizing EMS workers during National EMS Week.

Paul Benjamin- expressed concern that rising taxes and county spending priorities strain families, schools, law enforcement, and businesses, urging reductions in the overall budget.

Erica Swing- asked the board to preserve visual arts positions at Asheville High and SILSA, stressing the program's essential academic and emotional benefits for students.

Matt Allen- encouraged commissioners to adopt a measured budget and property tax rate, preferably revenue-neutral or lower, and cited precedent in other counties.

Kevin Long- thanked the county for extending funding for the lethality assessment program and requested long-term support to sustain this life-saving domestic violence intervention model.

Rob Stinson- reported that many residents are worried about rising property values and future taxes, and he urged commissioners to base budget decisions on practical personal experience and necessary cuts.

Andrew Paul- supported raising property taxes, and noted that doing so promotes equity, strengthens public services, and discourages land speculation during a housing crisis.

Pepi Acebo - highlighted the role of the Asheville City Schools special tax district and warned that proposed state teacher raises may shift financial burdens onto local governments

The Chair Closed at the Public Hearing at 7:03 p.m.

John Hudson provided background for the Economic Development Hearing. He said that routine appropriations include Asheville Buncombe Regional Sports Commissioner and the Asheville- Buncombe County Economic Development Coalitions. Previous Economic Developments include BorgWarner Turbo Systems, LLC, New Belgium Brewing Company, Inc. And Pratt and Whitney.

The Chair opened the Public Hearing at 7:04 p.m. there were no public comments. The Public Hearing closed at 7:04 p.m.

NEW BUSINESS

1. 2026 General Obligation Bond Referendum

Melissa Moore, Finance Director, provided background information. She explained there are two proposed Resolutions. One resolution approves a public notice on the intent to apply to the Local Government Commission for the approval of bonds, and the second authorizes the finance director to apply to the Local Government Commission and make certain findings of fact.

The proposed bond amounts include \$30 million for Open Space Bonds and \$40 million for Affordable Housing Bonds.

She further explained next steps, noting that at the June 2 meeting, Commissioners will introduce bond orders and set a public hearing on those bond orders. At its June 16 meeting, the Board is scheduled to hold a public hearing and vote on the bond orders. If approved, Commissioners will adopt a resolution setting a special bond referendum for the November ballot.

Commissioner Wells made the motion to approve the resolution directing the publication of notice. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Sloan and carried unanimously.

Commissioner Sloan made the motion to approve the resolution making certain statements of fact concerning the proposed bond issue and authorizing the application to the local government commission. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Wells and carried unanimously.

2. Resolution to Accept Hazard Mitigation Grant Program Properties

Kevin Madsen, Helene Recovery Officer, provided background information. He explained that the resolution is for the County Manager to accept private property participating in the federally funded Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) administered by North Carolina Emergency Management (NCEM) to mitigate risk from future natural disasters. Commissioner Horton made the motion to approve the resolution. Commissioner Whiteside seconded the resolution, and it was carried unanimously.

3. Budget Amendment to Realize Insurance Proceeds for Helene Vehicle Replacement

John Hudson, Budget Director, provided background information. He explained that This action is to realize \$606,000 in insurance proceeds that the County has received for vehicles damaged during Tropical Storm Helene at the County Garage. He said that the proceeds will be used to replace 7 Sheriff's Office vehicles (\$574,000) and 1 Tax Assessment vehicle (\$32,000).

Commissioner Wells made the motion to approve the budget amendment. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Horton and carried unanimously.

CLOSED SESSION

Curt Euler, County Attorney provided the reason to go into closed session: to establish, or to instruct the public body's staff or negotiating agents concerning the position to be taken by or on behalf of the public body in negotiating the price and other material terms of a contract or proposed contract for the acquisition of real property by purchase, option, exchange, or lease. The statutory authority is contained in G.S. 143-318.11(a)(5).

Commissioner Horton made the motion to go into closed session for the reasons stated. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Whitesides.