



**Rutherford County Office Building  
289 N. Main Street  
Rutherfordton, NC 28139**

**Rutherford County  
Board of Commissioners  
Minutes of May 27 Special Meeting**

**Monday, May 27, 2025  
5:00 PM**

**I. Call to Order**

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Chairman King called the May 27, 2025 special meeting of the Rutherford County Board of Commissioners to order.

**Present:** Chairman Bryan King, Vice Chairman Alan Toney, Commissioner Michael Benfield, Commissioner Hunter Haynes, and Commissioner Donnie Haulk.

**B. Agenda Approval**

Commissioner Benfield made a motion to move II. Closed Session, A. ID-25-4161 to follow III New Business, A. ID-25-4160. Commissioner Haulk seconded the motion. The vote on the motion was:

**Ayes:** Commissioner King, Commissioner Toney, Commissioner Benfield, Commissioner Haynes, and Commissioner Haulk.

**Noes:** None

Commissioner Benfield moved to approve the agenda with the amendment. Vice Chairman Toney seconded the motion. The vote on the motion was:

**Ayes:** Commissioner King, Commissioner Toney, Commissioner Benfield, Commissioner Haynes, and Commissioner Haulk.

## II. New Business

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### A. ID-25-4160 Budget Workshop

#### B.

County Manager Steve Garrison presented preliminary budget 2025-2026 numbers which reflected \$107,237,287 to fill all total requests. This left a gap of \$12,963,662 which would have required a tax rate of 69.4 or an increase of 24 cents. The budget impacts, influences, obstacles and opportunities were:

- Sales tax, property and vehicle tax collections uncertainty
- Health insurance increase of 10% - effective Jan. 2026
- LEO Separation Allowance 9.62% increase – effective July 2025
- Risk management/liability 9% increase – effective July 2025
- Requested budget for County Departments came in at \$63,025,781 – Recommending \$58,115,669 (\$4,910,112 reduction)
- Competitive/market wage considerations (retention/recruitment) – Recommending 4% COLA effective October 2025
- Substantial capital facilities, property, equipment and vehicle needs – Requested \$1,290,077 – Recommending \$299,500 (\$990,577 reduction)
- IT software/hardware/equipment requested at \$662,800 – recommending \$626,377 (\$36,423 reduction)
- 5% increase to Foothills Health District - \$1,012,692
- 18 new staff requested (16 FT, 1 PT, 1 Temp) – 13 recommended (12 FT, 0 PT, 1 TEMP)
- 4 EMS staff to ensure coverage of all shifts for peak time response
- 1 new Sheriff's Office Investigator (Animal Control investigations)
- Delinquent Tax Specialist for Revenue Department
- Custodian for new Government Services Building
- 5 SROs
- 1 temporary FT position for Building Inspections Permit Specialist (3-month training/transition period due to retirement)
- Non-profit funding requested of \$132,916 – Recommending \$94,103

Manager Garrison reviewed the tax rate and requested increases of the fire departments. Those requesting an increase were:

- **Bill's Creek FD** – Requesting increase to purchase new equipment and to update existing equipment. They indicate that they are purchasing additional rescue equipment.
- **Cherry Mountain FD** – Although not entirely clear as per their budget submittal, it appears that Cherry Mountain is requesting additional funds to support additional staffing. They state that hiring additional personnel will be a priority.
- **Chimney Rock FD** – Replacing turn out gear, rescue life equipment, outdated brush skid unit, and setting aside funds for first out engine.

- **Cliffside FD** – Requesting an increase due to the increasing cost of operations, implementation of their 5-year plan, and to ensure the sustained operational readiness and resilience of their department. They specifically cite the addition of another full-time firefighter, replacement of a vehicle, remodeling of their Station 1, replacing aging turnout gear & rescue tools, and to increase the VIPER radio inventory.
- **Ellenboro FD** – Requesting an increase due to increase in costs for personal protective gear, insurance, training, vehicle maintenance, etc. They also state that they have financed a new multipurpose truck for \$480k. They also indicate that they are looking to hire 3-fulltime firefighters.

Sales tax funds set aside for current and future debt service obligations were:

- County - \$2,292,912 (21.33% of total)
- ICC - \$1,149,843 (10.70%)
- RCS - \$6,870,556 (63.91%)
- Water/Sewer Project - \$198,958 (1.85%)
- Critical Education - \$237,664 (2.21%)
- TOTAL: \$10,749,933

Looking at other Counties for examples of what they are funding their school districts for FY2025-2026, Burke County Manager is proposing \$20.5mil for operations for their school system from local appropriations. Burke County is a NC Commerce Tier 2 economically distressed County, and they currently have a student enrollment that exceeds 11,300 with 15 elementary schools, 5 middle schools, 4 high schools, 1 Stem School, 1 Academy, 1 Virtual Academy and a middle college. The DPI student enrollment number for the beginning of the school year show RCS's enrollment at approximately 7,031 students with 10 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, 3 high schools, the Rutherford Opportunity Center and REACH. RCS began this budget cycle requesting a total of \$23,541,125 for operations for FY2025-2026. Comparing the cost per student for Burke and Rutherford, the cost per student in Burke based on the Burke County Manager's recommended budget is **\$1,814** per student and the cost per student in Rutherford County is **\$3,348**, which is **\$1,534** more per student than the appropriation for operations in Burke County. If Rutherford County were to use the same per student cost amount of \$1,814 per student as Burke County, the appropriation to RCS would be \$12,754,234, which is approximately **\$10.8 million** less than what RCS is currently requesting from the County.

- Loss of students from 2,500 in 2023 increased to 2,600 in 2025
- Burke County – NC Commerce Tier 2  
11,300 students  
28 schools  
Proposed local appropriation for operations = \$20.5mil  
Cost per student = \$1,814  
1 charter school with 11-12% of funds redirected
- McDowell County – NC Commerce Tier 1  
5,776 students  
15 schools  
Proposed local appropriation for operations = \$10,700,700  
Cost per student = \$1,852.49  
No charter schools but some students do attend out-of-county charter schools

- Chase High School – Loss of 341 students since 2008 (-37.93%)
- East Rutherford High School – Loss of 302 students since 2008 (-33.82%)
- R-S Central High School – Loss of 435 students since 2008 (-38.06%)
- Chase Middle School – Loss of 239 students since 2008 (-33.15%)
- East Rutherford Middle School – Loss of 151 students since 2008 (-22.21%)
- R-S Middle School – Loss of 273 students since 2008 (-33.54%)
- Early College – Gain of 85 students since 2008 (+76.58)
- Cliffside Elem. School – Loss of 237 students since 2008 (-53.26%)
- Ellenboro Elem. School – Loss of 54 students since 2014 (-9.36%)
- Forest City-Dunbar Elem. School – Loss of 38 students since 2008 (-7.80%)
- Forrest Hunt Elem. School – Loss of 46 students since 2008 (-10.57%)
- Harris Elem. School – Loss of 154 students since 2008 (-27.40%)
- Mt. Vernon Ruth Elem. School – Loss of 102 students since 2008 (-32.08%)
- Pinnacle Elem. School – Loss of 236 students since 2008 (-52.80%)
- Rutherfordton Elem. School – Gain of 12 students since 2009 (3.21%)
- Spindale Elem. School – Loss of 153 students since 2009 (-32.55%)
- Sunshine Elem. School – Loss of 108 since 2008 (-37.76%)

The Rutherford County Solid Waste Department is operating as an enterprise system and is self-supported by the revenues generated by the program. Due to the increase in the operating costs, the increasing of critical/urgent capital facility and equipment needs, and the reduction in State revenues for State mandated programming, it continues to be exceedingly challenging to generate revenues sufficient for meeting the current and ongoing operations and capital facilities/equipment costs for the Department.

Unfortunately, since costs to operate and manage the Solid Waste operations as well as the costs for vendors and their subcontractors continues to climb, there must be an increase in various fees to cover these operational increases. The primary factors impacting the Solid Waste budget are as follows:

- Continued and sustained increases in fuel, oil, tire, and parts prices, which for large trucks and large pieces of equipment are very expensive. Also, fuel surcharges have increased due to fuel prices on our disposal and MSW contracts.
- There is an annual 2-3 % Consumer Price Index increase for tire disposal, MSW hauling & disposal, and recycling hauling and processing.
- Increases in employee benefits due to larger than normal State increases.

The Solid Waste Department continues to explore ways to ensure the fiscal sustainability of the Solid Waste Department as an enterprise fund. The focus has been on the following:

- Establish a fee structure that is fair, equitable and less wieldy to implement and for the public to comprehend. The current fee structure places a large amount of the fiscal burden of supporting the operations/management of the landfill, transfer station and convenience centers on the backs of the citizens who live in the unincorporated areas of the County. Currently, approximately 71% of the county population lives in the unincorporated areas of the County and not in municipalities.

- Ensure that revenues are generated that support the burgeoning capital facilities, equipment and vehicle repair and replacement costs. This would permit the creation of an equipment replacement plan, a financial assurance plan (State mandate to cover the costs of maintenance to the old, closed landfills and set funds aside for any future landfill closures), a capital facilities plan and a future landfill cell plan.

In order to meet the legislative requirement to present a balanced budget for the Solid Waste enterprise fund, the following is recommended:

- RA fee would go from \$13 a year to \$43 a year. ***HOWEVER, if it is a priority for the Commissioners that convenience centers reopen on Wednesdays, the RA fees would need to increase to \$45 or \$46 per year (depending on whether or not the annual COLA is included in this year's budget).***
- SWW fee would go from \$160 a year to \$190 a year.
- SWH fee would go from \$70 a year to \$95 a year.
- MSW tipping fee would increase from \$76 a ton to \$80 a ton.
- C&D tipping fee would increase from \$66 a ton to \$70 a ton.
- Brush tipping fee would remain the same at \$45 a ton.

The Board discussed the possibility of opening the convenience centers on Wednesdays. The current structure excludes Wednesday service. Solid Waste Director James Kilgo said the cost to bring Wednesdays back would be approximately \$2 to the RA fund. Manager Garrison advised that if the Board wished to pursue this option, this could be considered.

Commissioner Haynes asked to forfeit his salary pending legal review. He noted his support for fully funding the school's request for what is needed.

Questions were raised regarding funding for the school resource officers and the impact this would have on grants. The school system has a \$700,000 grant for SROs and a \$500,000 grant from Representative Tim Moore could be used for this purpose. School superintendent David Sutton is not sure whether grants will be received if the funding for the SROs is not in the school's budget. The Sheriff wants the SRO's directly funded to his department and believes that the grants would be qualified. However, it was pointed out that any funding to the schools in their operational budget would be partially funded to charter schools. Manager Garrison said either way the officers are still employees of the Sheriff's Department.

The Board of Education had submitted a revised budget which reduced their request from a 37% increase to a 29% increase which would still require a substantial tax increase. Fund balance is being used for FEMA operations. Using a sizeable amount of fund balance would cause problems for rating agencies and the Local Government Commission.

Since the tax increase had been removed for consideration, Manager Garrison said his recommendation would be to increase the budget of the Board of Education by \$1,000,000. Operational segmentation could include teacher supplements, Public Safety (SROs), and General Education. Funding for Cliffside Sanitary District could be added. Funding for Wednesday operations would be added to the Solid Waste fees. The recommended budget would then total more than \$6,000,000 over the current year's budget which would be funded with fund balance.

Chairman King pointed out that the County is still under a State of Emergency proclamation. This is proving to be a very unique year, and \$6,000,000 is a lot of money. The FY 2025–2026 budget reflects a complex balance of rising costs, staffing demands, educational needs, and financial constraints. Strategic use of the fund balance and transparent allocation decisions are vital to maintaining county services and financial integrity.

Finance Director Paula Roach advised that she would prepare a budget ordinance with the changes reflected.

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### **III. Closed Session**

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**A. ID-25-4112 INDUSTRIAL LOCATION N.C.G.S. 143-318.11(a)(4)**

**Vice Chairman Toney moved to go into Closed Session for discussion regarding Industrial Location under N.C.G.S. 143-318.aa(a)(4). The County Manager and the Clerk to the Board would be included in the session. Commissioner Haulk seconded the motion. The vote on the motion was:**

**Ayes:** Commissioner King, Commissioner Toney, Commissioner Benfield,  
Commissioner Haynes, and Commissioner Haulk.

**Noes:** None

**7:46 P.M. The Board went into Closed Session.**

**7:56P.M. The Board returned to Regular Session.**

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### **IV. Adjournment**

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**At 7:57 P.M. Vice Chairman Toney made a motion to adjourn. Commissioner Benfield seconded the motion. The vote on the motion was:**

**Ayes:** Commissioner King, Commissioner Toney, Commissioner Benfield, Commissioner Haynes and Commissioner Haulk.

**Noes:** None

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Chairman, Board of Commissioners

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Vice Chairman, Board of Commissioners

ATTEST:

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Clerk, Board of Commissioners