

**CASS COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
WORK SESSION**

February 3, 2021

The Cass County Board of Commissioners convened for a Work Session on Wednesday, February 3, 2021, via Zoom.

Chair Dyes called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m. Commissioner File provided the Invocation.

Clerk/Register Monica McMichael called roll:

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Ryan Laylin, Annie File, Skip Dyes, Mike Grice, Roseann Marchetti, Robert Benjamin and Jeremiah Jones.

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: None.

STAFF PRESENT: County Administrator Jeff Carmen, Finance Director Becky Moore and Clerk/Register Monica McMichael.

PUBLIC COMMENT (Agenda Items Only)

None.

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

Commissioner Jones moved, seconded by Commissioner File, to approve the February 3, 2021 Work Session Agenda. Motion carried by voice vote.

NEW BUSINESS

Discussion

Administrator Carmen explained that commissioners were supplied with a list of issues to place in order of priority (in their own opinion). Administrator Carmen added that commissioners ranked the Budget, MERS and Economic Development high priority; however, those items would not be discussed at the February 3rd Work Session as each item merited a separate work session. Commissioners should expect three to four additional work sessions to discuss priorities.

Chair Dyes informed Commissioners that the Work Session would be informal. He then opened discussion on the prioritized items.

Historic Courthouse

Administrator Carmen explained that a study group evaluated the Historic Courthouse and recommended the County renovate and re-use the building to house the offices in the annex. The Maintenance Department gutted the Historic Courthouse before COVID hit. The County planned to research alternative funding through grants. Commissioner Dyes suggested the proceeds of selling county surplus properties be used for part of the funding.

Commissioner Benjamin expressed reservation over the timing. He believed that COVID, MERS funding and broadband were issues that should take priority. He requested more certainty with COVID before the County budgeted funds for the building. He and Commissioner Jones added that constituents in their districts were not passionate about saving the Historic Courthouse. Commissioner Grice stated that his district wanted to see the building revitalized.

Administrator Carmen stated the next step would be to hire an architect. A committee of Elected Officials and Department Heads in the annex would be necessary to determine space and layout of the new area. Commissioner Laylin volunteered to serve on the committee as liaison for the Board of Commissioners.

Parks, MSU Extension & 4-H Funding

Administrator Carmen reminded commissioners that no funding was appropriated to Parks, MSU Extension or 4-H for the 2022 Fiscal Year.

There was an Ad Hoc Committee formed that should meet to discuss the funding issue. Administrator Carmen urged committee members to include the very active Parks Board. Commissioners could bridge the communication gap between the Parks Department and the local townships. Administrator Carmen also recommended that the Ad Hoc Committee engage MSU Director Julie Pioch in discussion. MSU Extension employees have worked from their homes for the past year. What would they require from the county in the future?

Finance Director Moore reminded the board they could levy a 1/4 mill for the parks without a public vote. They could also request a millage and expand funding to include local history or tourism. Most neighboring counties had parks that were funded by millages.

Commissioners discussed connecting the bike paths between communities as well as using the Lawless Park Dark Skies Project to bring people to the parks.

Public Safety Staffing & Coverage

Commissioner Jones stated the Sheriff's Office needed additional staffing and equipment as many of his constituents have requested more coverage.

Discussion followed regarding budget cuts and the elimination of road deputies. The board, however, had not turned down a request from the Sheriff regarding funding. The Sheriff explained that positions had been eliminated over the years through the budget process. Commissioner Benjamin added that his district would be supportive of more coverage. Finance Director Moore reminded the board of the high cost of adding road patrol deputies. They not only required a salary and benefits but also uniforms, training and equipment. Commissioner Benjamin brought up the idea of requesting a public safety millage.

Sheriff Behnke informed commissioners that it was a challenge to fill positions in his department. There was a high demand for officers and neighboring counties offered higher salaries than Cass County.

Administrator Carmen reminded commissioners that they set the tone for the county. Many employees and Department Heads assume the default answer was no.

Commissioners Laylin and Jones offered to serve on the public safety committee and report back to the board.

Web Site and Technology

Information Systems Director Jodi Nestich informed the board that the county was under contract for the creation and maintenance of the county web site. The Information Systems Department currently had an opening for a web content manager. Once filled, that position would work with Elected Officials and Department Heads to update the site. In the meantime, commissioners and Electeds/Department Heads should examine other county web sites to gather ideas for content.

Social Justice

Chair Dyes explained the recently formed Social Justice Committee meet regularly to discuss local issues. The group hoped to address issues of race and get everyone on an equal playing field. Dyes is the chair of the committee and will report back to the board.

Countywide Broadband

Commissioner Benjamin opened the broadband discussion by stating Milton Township had a priority goal of providing 80% of the township with coverage. Currently, the township exceeded that goal as 95% of residents had broadband coverage. The internet was a huge benefit when COVID hit last year. He added that the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission (SWMPC) was conducting an inventory; however, he was concerned they were concentrating on larger counties. He urged the county to take action by identifying areas with no access to broadband.

Commissioner Laylin agreed with Commissioner Benjamin. He was aware of local students unable to attend Zoom classroom sessions due to lack of internet. Chair Dyes expressed his gratitude to Midwest Energy for providing fast and affordable service to much of the county.

Commissioners agreed that countywide broadband was a priority. Chair Dyes, Commissioner Benjamin and Commissioner Laylin agreed to examine the issue and report to the full board. They would also request a report from SWMPC Executive Director Jon Engelhoff.

Disposition of Surplus Properties

Chair Dyes stated a committee was formed to examine surplus property owned by Cass County. The committee would meet and provide a report to the full board.

Reasonably Priced and Senior Housing

Commissioner Marchetti informed the board that she often heard concerns over the lack of affordable housing as well as the lack of affordable housing for seniors. Commissioner Grice agreed as he knew residents forced to move out of county due to the lack of senior housing. Administrator Carmen shared that the Medical Care Facility property included 180 acres of vacant land. A committee could investigate the property, private facilitators or leasing land with restrictions.

ORV use on Specific County Roads

Commissioner Marchetti stated that ORV use on county roads was a big topic between township supervisors before COVID hit last year. Marcellus and Penn Townships passed ordinances to allow ORVs on certain roads. Commissioner Grice and Sheriff Behnke discussed the safety issues with allowing ORVs on roads. They added that most law enforcement agencies were against the idea. The Road Commission also was not in favor due to the damage caused to the side of roadways. All agreed that the issue should be handled at the township level.

COVID Response

Commissioner Jones addressed the fact that Cass County was 83rd out of 83 Michigan Counties for residents receiving the COVID vaccine. Commissioner Marchetti informed commissioners that she contacted Senator LaSata and Representatives Carra and Paquette regarding the issue. She explained she would attend a House Meeting the following day. Health Department Administrators Jeff Elliott, Danielle Persky and Dr. Larry Wile would also attend. Commissioner Marchetti added that she sent a letter to Governor Whitmer. Unfortunately, Governor Whitmer replied; but, did not address the concern of the small allotment of vaccines sent to Cass County.

Employee Morale

Commissioner Benjamin voiced concern over employee morale. He suggested the county distribute an anonymous survey for employees to provide feedback. Commissioners Marchetti and Grice were not in favor of surveys as the board were co-employers along with the Elected Officials for most employees.

Chair Dyes explained that the board of the Van Buren/Cass Health Department addressed low employee morale years ago. Because of follow-through and trust, the health department dissolved their union. He suggested the county do little things to encourage employees such as fixing odds and ends and installing new carpet.

Administrator Carmen specified there was no hostility toward any union. Employees should be comfortable enough to voice concerns with their supervisor. He added that uncertain times were tough on everyone. People wanted stability and to return to normal.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Drain Commissioner Jeff VanBelle shared his thoughts on each of the issues discussed by commissioners.

CLOSED SESSION

None.

BOARD MEMBER COMMENTS OR ANNOUNCEMENTS

Chair Dyes thanked board members for their prayers during his medical treatments. Commissioner Benjamin stated that he looked forward to hearing output from various committees. Chair Dyes and Commissioner Marchetti thanked the two new commissioners for speaking up.

ADJOURNMENT

Commissioner Benjamin moved, seconded by Commissioner Marchetti, to adjourn. Motion carried by voice vote.

The meeting adjourned at 7:36 p.m.

Approved: _____
Date

Dwight Dyes, Chairperson

Monica McMichael, Clerk/Register