

**Buncombe County Board of Elections**  
**Asheville/Buncombe County Board of Elections**

**Monitor Name:** Aiden Carson, Elaine and George Elam, and Cheryl Williams in person

**Date & Time:** January 13, 2025 3:30 PM

**Names of Board Members Attending:**

Jake Quinn, Chairman

Mary Ann Braine, Board Member

Steven Aceto, Board Member

Glen Shults, Secretary

Sally Stein: Board Member

**Names of Buncombe Co Staff Attending:**

Corrine Duncan, Director; Anna Katherine Moore, Administrative Coordinator and Clerk to the Board; Victoria Pickens, Accounting Technician and Campaign Finance; Devin Whitney, Elections Technical Specialist, GIS

**Location of Meeting:** 59 Woodfin Place, Asheville NC

**Observers:**

At least 8 in person including 4 LWVAB, plus 1 Common Cause, and 1 from each major political party and 1 with unknown affiliation.

**I. Agenda for this meeting approved without objection**

**II. Minutes (G.S. § 143-318.10)**

- Deferred to the next meeting because they were sent out just before the meeting

**III. Office Updates – Corrine Duncan, Director**

- Ms. Duncan said the Elections Services team met last week in 2 three-hour meetings to discuss lessons learned. The first meeting was called Thorns and the second Roses. More details will be discussed when that agenda item comes up
- Next the team will meet in 2 three-hour meetings to discuss hopes and dreams for FY 26. The second meeting will be to narrow down the items from the first meeting.
- The County has banned hiring and travel, but Ms. Duncan has asked that some money the office had set aside for team building, which they normally do this time of year, be made available to them. She expects a positive reply.
- Similarly, the Budget proposal will be discussed shortly.
- Last week about half the team took the County-offered management training and the remainder of the team will take it this week. Ms. Duncan found it very helpful. She expects to continue to take advantage of training offered by the County.

#### **IV. Budget Approval – Victoria Pickens**

- Ms. Pickens passed out large spread sheets with budget figures and descriptions which the Board members found very useful and helpful.
- Ms. Duncan said the today the staff hoped to get approval from the Board to pass the budget along to Tim Love, the Assistant County Manager, who has both Elections Services and Facilities in his portfolio. Following his review, Ms. Duncan will report to the Board.
  - She thinks that the requested travel will not be approved except for training and travel that are required by law. New Board members and Directors must attend as well as any staff whose certification, such as notary, is expiring.
- Ms. Pickens used a power point presentation to review the FY 2026 budget.
- The office is requesting just under \$1.5 million and resubmitting a request for a new position of Assistant Department Director
- By program, the office budget is divided as follows:
  - Absentee Voting – 6%
  - Early Voting – 34%
  - Election Day Voting – 49%
  - Office Operations – 10%
  - Board of Elections – 1%
- The advertising/voter education request is \$3,000 more than in FY 2025, or \$9,432
  - Advertising includes palm cards to pass out
  - Want to reach more people and engage in more partnerships
    - On Thursday, staff will conduct a full mock election at Carolina Day School
    - They want to reach out to more students in FY 2026
- Next is the line item for professional and contract services, the largest line item including:
  - Janitorial services - \$3,400
  - Professional services - \$85,579
    - Seasonal staff for primary, early voting, and election day
  - Contract services - \$909,484
    - Equipment maintenance
  - The County has asked the office not to budget for a second primary. Instead the County will absorb the cost is one is needed as it was in 2024.
  - A new item is fingerprinting and background checks which was not required until now.
- Information Technology including upgrade to software, replacement of equipment such as mouse pads, as well as a new item for IT licensing and maintenance (\$1,000)
  - Early Voting - \$2,630
  - Office Operations – \$4,360
  - Election Day voting - \$4,484

- The line item is considerably less than the FY 2024-2025 budget that contained the cost of the new Express Vote machines
- The line item for Maintenance and Repair is also substantially less than the last request at \$200 to test the scanners used by poll workers
  - Ms. Duncan said they have had a very hard time finding equipment sensitive to their needs. The current models are too fancy and contain functions they do not need. Most of our equipment is on the simple side. They prefer to look for more simple equipment rather than paying a lot of money for things they don't need.
- The wide-ranging office expenses request is \$346,194 includes printing/copy paper, breakroom supplies, printing envelopes voting supplies, regular voting registration mailings, the consolidated school board mailing which is anticipated for some time in 2025, replacement ballot bags that must be both sturdy and tamper proof (\$50,000), and totem replacement (\$13,000)
  - Mr. Quinn noted that since the principal author of the study has recommended against consolidation which would mean one less line item.
  - School Board consolidation mailing – \$49,000
  - Totem replacement signs for voting sites– \$13,000
  - Ballot bag replacements – \$50,000
    - They need 81 new ones. Morgan is currently researching costs and several are being considered by staff
    - They have had the current ballot bags a very long time
    - They will likely be about \$550 each
      - Ms. Stein thought the price was steep but may be justified if they are substantially better than the current ones
      - Ms. Duncan looked through her emails and could not find a specific figure, so she will investigate further to help ensure that no error was made.
  - Printing – \$117,430
  - Subscriptions and dues – \$4,620
  - Office food and provisions -\$12,123
  - Mail management - \$48,655
  - Supplies - \$114,395
  - Postage - \$48,971
- The rent and lease line item is for Early Voting and Election Day Voting sites as well as training space for seasonal staff.
  - Ms. Duncan said that wherever possible the office uses county-owned property but may need to find locations for the municipal elections in 2025
    - Mr. Aceto commented that it would not hurt to let the County know that if the Elections Office stays at 59 Woodfin Place, this expense goes away.
  - Total request - \$46,371
  - 3 Early Voting and Election Day Voting sites - \$20,000

- Training space for Early Voting and Election Day Voting - \$22,000
- The travel and training line item request is \$64,298 and includes 2 State Board Trainings of which one is in person and one virtual
  - Registration - \$25,225
  - Airfare - \$3,500
  - Rental Cars - \$8,872
  - Training meals and food - \$10,515
  - Travel - \$6,889
  - Lodging - \$14,298
  - In 2024 many staff were unable to attend training due to scheduling conflicts with the elections.
  - Ms. Stein asked whether this figure is in line with past years. Ms. Pickens said comparisons are difficult since travel has not been “normal” since Covid.
- The last item is Uniforms at \$1,815 which includes laundering poll worker aprons for Early Voting and Election Day Voting, replacing aprons with neutral color ones, and team wear
  - Election Day voting - \$1,100
  - Early voting - \$100
  - Office operations - \$615
- Mr. Shults asked what cuts she expected. Ms. Duncan said that typically the County has asked for across the board cuts of a certain percent rather than singling out individual line items. She does not expect to get all their travel requests and she does not expect to get the new position, just like the last request.
- Mr. Quinn noted that while there will be elections in November the big election will be the 2026 mid-term primary in March. 2026 will be a very busy year.
  - Ms. Duncan said that the request this year is more than the request for FY 2024 but not significantly more. It seems in line with general cost increases.
- Mr. Quinn asked Ms. Duncan what she needed from the Board regarding the Budget proposal aside from any changes that result from the review of the cost of ballot bags.
  - Motion to approve budget proposal to pass along for further review by County Management – Passed 5/0

## **V. Facilities Discussion – continued from the 1/8/2025 meeting**

- Mr. Quinn said that the goal for today was to finalize a communication to send to County Management so that we can engage with them to determine what we can do to position Elections Services for future success. He appreciates the interest from Board members and from stakeholders, including both political parties, Common Cause, and League of Women Voters
  - Members were responding to a draft sent out by AK.

- Mr. Quinn said that the optimal approach in his view is to engage County Management in a neutral space. We have concerns and questions. County Management has ideas about what they want and how they want to achieve it but we just don't know what those are and we want to know.
- He added that what we want to do is set up a healthy environment to discuss their ideas. They may have restrictions and constraints that we don't know about and we need to respect their views. We want them to understand our concerns and questions. We do not want to be confrontational.
- Mr. Shults had a concern about Ms. Moore's draft and it's a criticism of County because they came up with this at the last minute. At the last meeting Corrine made a presentation about the history of the office's moves and the discussions with the County. Further, he was concerned about the emphasis on consolidated space. He recognizes that the County's budget is in terrible shape. Our solution to stay here is a band aid but that's good enough for now.
- Ms. Stein complimented the comprehensiveness of Ms. Moore's draft but thought the 5-year vision section should be moved to the end of the letter, move the "bumper sticker" section up front, then conclude with a request for further discussion about Canoe Lane, the 5-year plan, and what works best for us and them.
- Other suggestions were offered and discussed including:
  - Ms. Stein said we should let the County know what we would use the lobby space for to give them a better of idea of how inadequate the space is for candidate filing, voter registration, and Early Voting.
  - Mr. Quinn said that before all the offices were built in the space might have been adequate to host Early Voting for the municipal elections.
  - Ms. Duncan said that Ms. Pickens is currently the only Elections Services staff who has worked at 35 Woodfin Street. She also wanted to be certain that we not leave the impression that we would not be able to secure the space because we will do what we must do. It will just be more challenging and less efficient to ensure security.
  - Ms. Braine said she wants to be certain we ask for discussions and not leave the impression that we want more information. Additional information will not make her happier. She wants to understand. We should word our request with examples of why we are concerned.
  - Mr. Quinn agreed. We want more information about the proposed move, and it is proposed until the Board agrees with the move. He also added that regarding security, the goal is to improve the security not just maintain the status quo. But maintaining the status quo in at 35 Woodfin Street will require additional resources. He thinks County Management may also have questions that he wants the Board to answer.
- The Board agreed to meet at 35 Woodfin Street for a self-guided tour with Ms. Duncan and possibly facilities staff. Mr. Shults said he had gone into the building and found it even worse than Mr. Quinn described. They will need to

be mindful not to violate open meetings law. So, while they can ask questions, they cannot discuss the options or solutions outside of a public meeting.

- They selected Tuesday, January 28 for the tour. Mr. Aceto will be out of town but the other 4 Members are available.
- Ms. Duncan said it is important for Board Members to tour 35 Woodfin Street because her views changed after she saw the space. She was worried about different things after she saw the space.
- Mr. Quinn said he would consult the County Attorney Curt Euler. We can take the tour and then discuss our thoughts in a public meeting.
- Ms. Duncan said that she had been primarily responsible for working with the County Management on the past discussions of moving Elections Services, which at one time involved moving into remodeled space on Coxe Avenue.
  - Discussions went on for a long time, then right before the November 2024 election the plan solidified. So, in some regard, it was not entirely dumped on them even though things have changed quite a bit over the course of the discussions.
  - Mr. Quinn said the staff person who drafted the proposed move was not familiar with elections administration and is no longer employed by the County.
  - Ms. Duncan said there had only been one Department Head level planning meeting before the decision was finalized. The meeting involved all 11 staff and she felt it was productive. She submitted information whenever she was asked to. However, she does not feel her concerns were addressed. She felt she was told what to do rather than being involved in planning. Staff at the County have changed as well.
- Mr. Aceto praised Ms. Moore's work on summarizing a long and varied discussion. He proposed putting the bottom line up front but he needs to know who this letter is being sent to, who is the author, and at what point in the process is it arriving. He also agreed that the move is considered "proposed" until the Board agrees to move. He wants to mention the goal of consolidated space but not make it a condition of the discussion. Finally, he wondered whether we could incorporate the input from stakeholders.
- Mr. Quinn agreed about moving the discussion of consolidated space and mentioning that we thought we were moving to Coxe Avenue before the affordable housing project was approved. He stressed again that he wants to engage with the County Management as equals and try to achieve a common understanding.
  - He thought the email should be sent to Assistant County Manager Tim Love with a cc to the County Manager, Ms. Avril Pinder. That creates a document for public records requests. The goal is to have no surprises. He wants to know they have a fully understanding of the needs of Elections Services.
  - In addition, he thought that if no resolution is reached with County Management, then they might have to approach the County

Commissioners and would want a copy of the letter to show they had reached out to the County.

- He's not asking for a zero-based reconsideration but for stepping back about 3 steps and he's optimistic that a better understanding will be achieved.
- He made a plea for at least one other Member attend the meeting with him. The Elections Services staff should not be signing or sending the email. The Board is the built-in advocate for the Staff.
  - Sending only 2 Members does not violate the open meetings laws.
  - The Board will follow the same procedures it used when they discussed the Director's salary which did not violate open meeting laws.
- Mr. Aceto praised Ms. Moore's use of the word optics regarding security. It is hard for people to understand the importance of bipartisan cooperation in elections; that every piece of paper in an election must have two sets of eyes on it.
- Ms. Braine asked why we would worry about whether the meeting is public. Shouldn't it be public because we feel the plan will adversely affect the work of Elections Staff?
  - Mr. Quinn said that's why he favors a stepwise approach and that each step be taken softly. The County has a lot going on and this email could appear like a wrench that we want to throw into the gears.
  - He would be concerned that a big meeting could quickly lose focus. Mr. Aceto agreed. We need to try our best to guide the agenda and to make the process incremental and methodical.
- Ms. Braine said should develop a resolution that demonstrates the unified concerns of all Board members. The resolution is part of the public record.
  - Mr. Quinn said he would draft a resolution and send it to Ms. Moore for distribution to the Board this week.
  - Members should send their comments to Ms. Moore, then she can have a draft for the Board at the 1/21 meeting.
  - Mr. Quinn will share the draft with Curt Euler, the County Attorney as well.
- Ms. Braine asked whether we were doing a self-guided tour or one led by facilities. Ms. Duncan said she thought facilities staff would like to lead the tour.
  - Mr. Quinn said that with the blue prints we are well equipped to tour the building ourselves but a led tour would be fine.
- Ms. Stein asked about the stakeholders. Mr. Quinn said the input he has gotten is that the folks attending this meeting – both political parties, Common Cause, and LWVAB – are very concerned and asking who they should talk to. He's encouraged them not to contact anyone yet. A past event that involved concerns was not handled well and neither the Board nor County Management was well served. He would like to avoid a repeat of that.

## V. Lessons Learned – Corrine Duncan

- Ms. Duncan said the staff met in 2 three-hour meetings to discuss lessons learned. They called the first meeting Thorns and the second Roses. All staff members attended and it was very helpful.
  - We learned a lot about Express Vote machine use under high volume turnout.
  - It's very important to train seasonal staff well in how to use the Express Vote printers.
  - High curbside usage in the Presidential Election pointed out that not everything we do scales up well. We need to move away from small locations and we need to start looking for big sites now. We may need to talk with AB Tech. We need more parking and bigger rooms, especially for Presidential years.
  - As with every election, finding training sites large enough is difficult. We should start now. This may be an opportunity for the Board to advocate on behalf of the staff.
    - 35 Woodfin Street may offer us space in 2025 but we need long term agreements.
  - Because of Storm Helene we weren't able to do as much voter education as we wanted to. So, for many people voting in November it was their first time using a Express Vote machine. We had videos and information on our website. We had low turnout in the primary. We didn't have internet, but we used Billboards and radio.
  - Ms. Duncan said they need to have a backup phone system plan for the office. The help line problems were not confined to the vendor. She said the IT is already involved in helping.
  - Improving interoffice communications during voting through short meetings to keep everyone on the same page.
  - The ballot on demand printers are cumbersome. We still use them for back up printers and for absentee voting. It's not an issue for this budget cycle but in the next cycle we need to consider getting new ones to use for absentee voting.
  - Now for the Roses part of the meeting. The Express Vote machines were a big help, especially given the last-minute changes that needed to be made. We were not at all concerned about the recount. Many great things about using them.
  - Election Day call center worked well.
  - All chief judges had prior election experience despite the challenges of the storm and its aftermath.
  - We had permanent staff at each Early Voting polling locations in the morning of the first day of Early Voting. Both staff and poll workers appreciated being together. We will continue doing that.
  - We printed out own sample ballots using the Ballot on Demand machines which saved some money.



- Devin Whitney having control of door access was very helpful. The in-house IT expertise was wonderful. Not all counties have that.
- Our fancy scanner we use for auditing and early voting was a life saver with the large turnout. It was helpful that they could read Express Vote ballots.
- The auditing process was better because training was better.
- Tongue in cheek, Corinne noted that everyone liked the 9-5 hours.
- Re-organized MAT teams so that a person can be an Early Voting poll worker or a MAT member but not both because there is too much overlap in schedules. It also freed up MAT members to help the Board such as with auditing and ballot duplication.
- The coordination with County Emergency Services with the joint table top exercises really paid off. In the aftermath of the storm, restoration of infrastructure was first the priority and Elections was second. They helped us find sites to replace damaged ones and were very collaborative. Because we had taken the time for form relationships with them, we knew they were thinking of us.
  - Mr. Aceto suggested the Board find a way to commemorate their help and communicate our thanks with a plaque or letter suitable for framing. Ms. Duncan said we should do that.
  - All firefighters, whether City, County or Volunteer, were immensely helpful.
- Mr. Aceto said the media management was good. Ms. Duncan said the focus of media became radio.
- The support of the Board for elections staff is wonderful and does not exist in every county.
- We were also thankful for being in this building that had Wi-Fi and power.
- We were happy we had done our budget planning early which freed up time for us to help other counties.
- Ms. Stein mentioned the thorn when one of our two new 950 machines stopped working reliably. Ms. Duncan said ES&S came out to inspect the machine and found that the bottom feeder tray was not calibrated accurately even though they had just been serviced. ES&S fixed it. They are the ones who must fix it although if we had had enough time we might have been able too.
- Ms. Stein said the new legal requirement for Board Members to close the Early Voting sites prevented us from getting to the warehouse until quite late.
  - Mr. Quinn said he would phrase it differently. He would say the law prevented us from conducting election oversight. He predicts the problem will only get worse because absentee ballots received on Election Day must be processed on Election Day night, or more realistically the wee hours of the day after the election.
  - He further noted that the next Board will have to define the work flow on election night, including the order and timing of posting election nights.

- Mr. Aceto wondered whether we could prepare a document that could be used in discussions with legislators about this issue.
- Mr. Quinn said the tasks need to be listed in order and how much time the law allows for each task. Even though absentee ballots can be processed prior to Election Day, the Board and staff will have to process any that are received on Election Day.
  - Mr. Aceto said perhaps staff could develop a time line or flow chart to show us the one that already exists.
  - Mr. Quinn said a comparison between 2024 and 2025 would be helpful.
  - Mr. Shults asked whether the State Board had prepared such a document. Ms. Duncan said no but prior to the law being passed over the governor's veto, the NC Association of Directors of Elections sent a letter to legislators which she will send to Members. Later this week the Wake County Elections Director has a meeting with the State Board to discuss this issue. She will share any written summary that results from that meeting.
  - Mr. Shults questioned the feasibility of processing provisional ballots in such a short time.
  - Mr. Quinn said someone will have to set priorities. He thinks ballots should be processed in the order received: Absentee, Early Voting, and Election Day ballots. As it is now, voters on Election Day have their ballots processed first, their ballots can't be challenged after being cast, and the results are posted quickly. He noted that the 60,000 votes challenged in a current court case were all cast in Early Voting or by mail.
  - Mr. Aceto said the critical path through the tasks in the flow chart should help identify priorities.
    - Mr. Quinn said adding the time when each task must be completed would be a help as well.
    - Mr. Aceto said that Board members are in a unique space to talk with legislators about whether the results of the law are what they intended and, if not, what could be changed.
    - The people in the trenches, who must implement the law, are the best ones to let legislators know how well it works.
    - We also have plenty of lead time to develop the flow chart in time for the 2026 elections.

**Public Comment:**

- One person asked whether ES&S must do all recalibrations of the scanners. Ms. Duncan said no, staff can do some.
- Another commenter said the Board and staff did a great job completing an election with record turnout in extenuating circumstances.
- An LWVAB observer asked how the Board wanted input from stakeholders. We want to meet with County Management and see what progress we can

make in achieving a good resolution. If not, that would be the time for stakeholders to contact decision makers.

- Mr. Aceto said that stakeholders are independent of the Board and can express their views how they wish. Nevertheless, it's not untoward to offer some direction. On the other hand, we do the political players a favor by not letting them walk unawares into the propeller. They would rightly be upset if we just sat back and not made them aware that others share the concerns of the Board and staff. It's a little dicey because we should not be seen as having spun the propeller. The slow and methodical pace coupled with open discussions should help ensure that no one is surprised.
  - Mr. Quinn said most of all he does not want the County Manager surprised, in part because they have been very supportive of the Board and staff. Further, he said that the last time others contacted elected officials it did not go smoothly and the County Management was not well served by the process. Lessons learned from that. We want a constructive process. I don't want to complain. I want them to understand what we need and why.
  - Ms. Stein asked whether the concern is that if stakeholders start contacting elected officials, they in turn would contact County Management.
- Mr. Aceto stressed that County Commissioners and County Management have been nothing but supportive of Elections Services and that should lead off the letter to them. We need to affirm that, while they are obliged to support us, but their assistance in the 2024 election was critical to successfully conducting an election under stressful circumstances.

Meeting adjourned 5:35 pm

#### **VI. Next Meetings: Tuesday, January 21, 2025 at 3:30**

- **Location 59 Woodfin Place**
- **Possible tour of 35 Woodfin Street January 28 time TBD.**