

Minutes
Western Piedmont Council of Governments
Bimonthly Policy Board Meeting
Tuesday, September 26, 2023
Morganton Community House

Members Present

Jill Patton, Chair
George Holleman, Treasurer
Larry Chapman, Secretary
Larry Yoder, At-Large
Cole Setzer, At-Large
Marla Thompson, At-Large
Johnnie Carswell, Alternate
Ronnie Setzer
Ramona Duncan
Joie Fulbright
Jim Green, Alternate
Dennis Anthony
Barbara Pennell
Dr. Caryl Burns
Tracy Townsend, Alternate
Charlotte Williams, Alternate
Phyllis Pennington, Alternate
Ronnie Thompson, Alternate
Jerry Hodge
Allen Spencer
Charlie Watts
Rexanna Lowman, Alternate
Amparo R. Alfaro
Erisha Lipford
Tonia Stephenson
Tommy Luckadoo

Members Absent

Joseph L. Gibbons, Vice-Chair
Bob Floyd, Past Chair
Randy Burns, At-Large
Josh Lail, Alternate
Kelvin Gregory
Lloyd Robbins, Alternate
Mike Labrose
Robbie Wilkie, Alternate
Donald Robinson
Carroll Yount, Alternate
Barbara Beatty, Alternate

Local Government/Agency

Hickory
Taylorsville
Hudson
Alexander County
Catawba County
Long View
Burke County
Cajah's Mountain
Connelly Springs
Conover
Conover
Drexel
Gamewell
Granite Falls
Granite Falls
Hickory
Long View
Morganton
Newton
Rhodhiss
Valdese
Valdese
Appointed
Appointed
Appointed
Appointed

Lenoir
Town of Cedar Rock
Burke County
Alexander County
Brookford
Cajah's Mountain
Caldwell County
Caldwell County
Catawba
Catawba
Catawba County

Dale Sherrill
Steve Smart, Alternate
Ron Lackey, Alternate
Sheila Perkins
Ronnie Williams, Alternate
Chris Jernigan
Beverly Danner, Alternate
Kendra Edwards, Alternate
Wayne Annas
Yates Jensen, Alternate
Bobby Mosteller
Joe Wesson, Alternate
Jack Simms, Alternate
Helen Chestnut
Malla Vue

Claremont
Connelly Springs
Gamewell
Glen Alpine
Maiden
Morganton
Newton
Rhodhiss
Rutherford College
Rutherford College
Sawmills
Sawmills
Taylorsville
Appointed
Appointed

Guests/Others Present

Randy Feierabend
Abby Rich
Jimmy Harrison
Tamara Brooks
Sherri Bradshaw
Bonnie Caudle
Sally Sandy
Sonja Martson
Louis Vinay
Wendy Cato
Butch McSwain

Cajah's Mountain
Caldwell County
Caldwell County
Connelly Springs
Drexel
Gamewell
Morganton
Morganton
Morganton
Morganton
Morganton

WPCOG Staff Present

Anthony Starr, Executive Director
David Pugh, Director of Administrative Services and Human Resources
Andrea Roper, Director of Finance
Ben Willis, Director of Community and Economic Development
Alison Adams, Director of Community and Regional Planning
Jason Toney, Communications Manager
Elizabeth Moncrief, Program Manager of Regional Housing Authority
Tasmin Mack, Human Resources Coordinator
Elizabeth Hilliard, Executive Administrative Assistant

Call to Order/Welcome

Chair Patton called a regular meeting of the WPCOG Policy Board to order at 6:45 pm. Chair Patton thanked the City of Morganton for hosting. The city of Morganton Mayor, Ronnie Thompson, welcomed the Policy Board to Morganton.

Chair Patton congratulated Mr. Johnnie Carswell as the incoming president of the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC).

Introductions

Introductions were made by everyone in attendance.

Minutes of Previous Meeting

Minutes of the previous meeting were considered. Mr. Joie Fulbright made a motion to approve the minutes from the July 25, 2023 meeting and Mr. Larry Chapman offered a second. The motion passed unanimously.

Unfinished Business/Reports

There was no unfinished business.

New Business

Placer AI Regional Data Subscription

Ms. Alison Adams, Director of Community and Regional Planning, stated at the request of some local governments, staff invited representatives from Placer AI to present an overview of their local government data products. The WPCOG engaged with Placer AI about a regional subscription as a cost-effective alternative to each local government purchasing their own subscription. After obtaining feedback from managers and the Executive Committee, WPCOG was able to negotiate a lower rate for individual access and lower the dues cost per capita by creating an umbrella partnership with Placer. WPCOG departments, using available federal funds, are also contributing to help lower costs to our local governments. As a result, member governments will have two options:

1. WPCOG staff will handle requests on behalf of the local government (cost of dues only) or;
2. The local government at a higher rate will have a direct access license (as part of the umbrella partnership there is roughly a 20% savings to member governments versus a stand-alone license with Placer).

The cost analysis was included in the agenda packet as an attachment and provides a breakdown of the two different options.

Capability of Placer for our Region

Placer AI provides a range of timely data using mobile phone data. The data is anonymous and nearly real-time, with only a three-day delay in many cases. Here are a few examples of how the data may be used:

- Understanding attendance at local events like festivals. Data can be used to learn about where attendees come from and their characteristics like income, etc. This helps tourism offices, local governments, and others measure the return on investment for events.
- Traffic counts at specific locations that could be used to identify potential improvements or perhaps used at land use related hearings/meetings. This is advantageous over the data collected by NCDOT every two years at limited locations.

- To promote grocery/retail recruitment information about sites and the characteristics of the surrounding area(s).
- To gather info for economic development site location purposes regarding workforce characteristics within specific geographies.
- Tracking attendance/usage at local government parks and info about users to inform decisions about enhancements or new parks.
- Understanding your communities' daytime or nighttime population and their migration characteristics.
- To inform our region's economic resiliency strategies by using new technology for decision-making.

There are many other possibilities to use this data to inform decisions in local government. Here is the link to the website: <https://www.placer.ai/solutions/municipalities>

If there is strong interest, the WPCOG could fund the regional subscription (umbrella partnership) with an increase of the WPCOG Assessments to local governments. The dues will allow local governments the ability to request analysis proposals from the COG's Research and Data Analytics Center staff. This level of research and data is currently not something the WPCOG can provide. The umbrella partnership will allow our Research and Data Analytics Center staff to provide more impactful real-time data to our local governments.

Key Points about the Value:

- Based on the pricing structure we received from Placer, a single seat and WPCOG dues rate is 20% less than an individual contract would cost.
- Cost Savings + decades worth of WPCOG's staff analytical and historical data analysis experience.
- Ability of WPCOG staff to right size and properly design project parameters to obtain a clear picture of the data.
- Continued support from WPCOG-trained staff to support local government needs (project scoping and development, resulting in improved efficiency and ability to explain research results from a historical perspective).
- Stand-alone subscriptions to Placer would be more expensive for local governments than gaining access to Placer through WPCOG's umbrella partnership.

A start date of service, upon approval, is slated to begin December 1, 2023. This will allow Placer AI and WPCOG Staff time to install and test the software and conduct training.

The Executive Committee reviewed the proposal and recommended an increase to the WPCOG local government assessments to support the new initiative.

The Executive Committee and staff request the Policy Board approve an increase to the dues rate total \$0.981 per capita (December 1, 2023 - June 30, 2024) and authorize an agreement with Placer AI to accommodate this initiative. This represents a 10.5-cent per capita increase for the current fiscal year.

Mr. George Holleman made a motion that the Policy Board approve the assessment increase to 98.1 cents per capita for FY24 and authorize the executive director to execute an agreement with Placer AI through June 30, 2025 and Mr. Larry Chapman offered a second. Motion passed.

Burke River Trail Funds Reallocation

Ms. Alison Adams, Director of Community and Regional Planning, stated an appropriation of \$465,000 (\$80,000 Rhodhiss, \$60,000 Hildebran, and \$325,000 WPCOG) was made from the State Capital and Infrastructure Fund to the Western Piedmont Council of Governments in the FY2021 State Budget “to facilitate the development, planning, and construction of a trail along the south side of the Catawba River connecting the eastern terminus of the Fonta Flora Trail near the western terminus of the Hickory Trail, including connecting trails and spurs to local communities and tourist attractions.” WPCOG received Office of State Budget & Management (OSBM) scope approval in late spring of 2022. WPCOG contracted services to carry out the construction of the trail with a total of \$2,819.77 spent at the end of FY22 leaving a remaining balance of \$462,180.23.

Expenses for FY23 totaled \$105,311.04 for contract work, staff salary, and supplies, leaving a remaining balance of \$356,869.19. As part of the FY23 work WPCOG, staff completed the River Trail of Burke County Feasibility Assessment that extends from Morganton to Hickory, <https://www.wpcog.org/copy-of-water-resources-committee>.

In the FY23 Budget year, a grant application was submitted to the NCDOT Integrated Mobility Division for a multi-modal feasible study of the River Trail from the Hickory Airport, through the Town of Long View and ending in the Town of Hildebran. The NCDOT selected AECOM to facilitate engineering services with WPCOG staff supporting the collaboration process. In the FY24 WPCOG Budget, \$20,000 of the State Budget funds have been encumbered to cover WPCOG staff costs associated with coordination efforts.

As part of the FY24 State Budget, the remaining unspent and unencumbered are to be reallocated as a directed grant to the Burke River Trail Association, a nonprofit corporation, to be used for the completion of the remaining trail projects.

Staff requested the Policy Board to relinquish the remaining funds totaling \$336,869.19 as directed by OSBM.

Mr. Tommy Luckadoo made a motion that the Policy Board approve the relinquishment of unencumbered funds associated with the River Trail Project and Mr. Larry Chapman offered a second. Motion passed unanimously.

2022 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDS) Update and Amendment Request

Mr. Ben Willis, Director of Community and Economic Development, stated WPCOG was designated as the Economic Development District (EDD) for our region in 2004 by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA). The WPCOG is required to develop and maintain a regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) every five years. The last CEDS was adopted in September 2022.

The 2022 CEDS represents a document to lead the region and WPCOG in several key directions, including:

- Robust and aggressive economic development
- Construction of desirable and affordable housing
- Successful marketing of regional assets
- Development of an inclusive community
- Retention and recruitment of a talented workforce
- Development of an efficient and well-maintained infrastructure system

These objectives are aimed at ensuring an equitable and resilient future for the entire region. EDA requires the WPCOG to submit an annual progress report along with any additions, edits, or modifications to the 2022 CEDS. Furthermore, WPCOG staff has identified four (4) areas where additional language will enhance the current CEDS.

CEDS Accomplishment Update

Economic Development

City of Morganton (Gerresheimer Glass)

- \$500,000 grant
- 78 new full-time jobs
- \$62 million in private investment

City of Newton (Pasta Piccinini)

- \$175,000 grant
- new full-time jobs
- \$7 million in private investment

Catawba County/City of Newton

- Microsoft's investment of \$1 billion in data center facilities

Workforce

Western Piedmont Community College

- Regional Skilled Trades Solutions Center completed.

Infrastructure

- Completed Metropolitan Transportation Plan
- Digital Access Plans were completed for all four counties.
- Town of Hudson
- Submitted a \$250,000 grant application to Golden LEAF Foundation for stormwater mitigation

Housing

Town of Valdese

- Ongoing conversion of former Houston Hosiery Mill into 60 workforce housing units

City of Hickory

- Agreement with a developer for 80 new downtown apartments (\$20 million leveraged private investment)

Community Life

Burke County

- First meeting of Burke Emerging Leaders group

Emergency Management

- LiDAR drone mapping and photo imagery taken of areas in Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, and Catawba counties subject to frequent flooding.

Town of Taylorsville

- Research into nominating Downtown Taylorsville Historic District to the National Register of Historic Places

City of Hickory, City of Lenoir, and Town of Valdese

- Tree Canopy Cover Assessment grant applications completed.

Caldwell County

- Submitted Building Outdoor Economies grant application (\$50,000)

CEDS Amendment Request

The 2022 CEDS was adopted in September of 2022. Since the adoption, WPCOG staff has become aware of the need to add more language in the following areas:

- Homelessness
- Dislocated worker re-employment
- Research data and analytic support
- Centralized workforce center solution.

Also, as part of this request staff has provided a list of accomplishments:

Addition to Community Life Strategy 4: Promote Regional Healthy Living Initiatives

Action:

- Assist regional efforts to address unhoused populations, including but not limited to housing and integration of the unhoused into the workforce

Metrics:

- Number of people assisted
- Amount of grant funding secured

Addition of Workforce Strategy 5: Assist communities that experience significant plant closures and job losses due to downturns in the economy and natural disasters

Actions:

- Deploy rapid response teams to sites experiencing layoffs
- Support employee ownership initiatives as a method to employ displaced workers
- Provide job training to displaced workers for re-employment within the region
- Explore methods to improve access to capital

Metrics:

- Number of rapid response team deployments
- Number of workers assisted
- Number of identified sources of capital

Addition of Workforce Strategy 6: Explore locating workforce services into one centralized site

Actions:

- Complete an analysis of possible accessible site location
- Obtain funding and explore grant opportunities not limited to construction and outfitting

Metrics:

- Identified site location
- Amount of grant funding and purpose

Addition to Economic Development Strategy 2: Enhance and Maintain Capacity for project and grant development

Action:

- Explore emerging software and technologies to improve regional research and data analytics

Metrics:

- Number of new implementations

Staff requested that the Policy Board approve the 2022 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy amendments to include the items outlined.

Mr. Jerry Hodge made a motion that the Board approve the 2022 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy amendments to include the items outlined and Ms. Tonia Stephenson offered a second.

WPCOG Building Expansion – Timeline Update

Mr. David Pugh, Director of Administrative Services and Human Resources, stated a project schedule visual timeline was included in the Policy Board agenda packet which is the most recent, updated building expansion schedule from McMillan Pazdan Smith Architects. Construction bids are expected to be released in later spring 2024.

This item was for informational purposes only and no Policy Board action needed.

Changes in Applicable Payment Standards

Ms. Elizabeth Moncrief, Program Manager of the Regional Housing Authority, stated the Public Housing Program through HUD determines the amount of assistance provided to clients through publishing a schedule of fair market rent (FMR) rates based on the housing type. Those rates directly affect the payment standards that housing authorities use for providing rental voucher assistance. Typically, HUD's FMRs increase each year, however in 2021, HUD's FMRs decreased. This, along with the pandemic created a burden on many families that were searching for housing because rents were unaffordable.

Although there was an increase in HUD's FMRs for 2022 and 2023, it was not enough to keep up with rising rental costs and the affordable housing market. HUD encouraged all housing authorities to adopt a waiver to increase their payment standards to 120% of the FMR's temporarily. This was allowed to help bring our housing assistance payments back in line to meet the needs of the housing market. Recently, HUD announced their 2024 FMRs, which show an average increase of 12% nationally. The new FMR levels will enable the voucher program to keep up with rent increases in the private market and will allow voucher holders to access and secure leases in more units so they can benefit from the housing affordability and stability that vouchers provide.

Our goal is to help as many families as possible in our communities while maximizing the funding that HUD allows us to spend. Using HUD's new 2024 FMRs will allow our RHA to reduce our payment standards back to 110% of the new FMRs. This will still be an increase in the payment standard amounts to be paid on behalf of the tenants. This will also bring the RHA back into HUD compliance since the 120% waiver ends December 31, 2023.

Staff requested that the Policy Board approve the changes in the applicable payment standards to become effective November 1, 2023.

Mr. George Holleman made a motion that the Policy Board approve the changes in the applicable payment standards to become effective November 1, 2023 and Mr. Larry Yoder offered a second. Motion passed unanimously.

1st Amendment of the FY2023-2024 Budget

Ms. Andrea Roper, Director of Finance, stated the 1st Amendment of the FY2023-24 Budget Summary Sheets, which were included in the Policy Board agenda packet, reflects a total budget of \$26,245,899 and an operating budget of \$10,027,280 which represents an increase of the total budget from the May 23, 2023 budget adoption of \$130,048.

The 1st Amendment of the 2023-2024 Budget includes:

- An increase in Transportation to reflect additional funding from the Coronavirus Response & Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2021.
- Environmental Protection increased \$27,428 due to an additional contract for stormwater mapping.

- A decrease in Community & Regional Planning to reflect contract amendments for several planning contracts.
- An increase in Aging to reflect an increase in supplemental nutrition funding.
- WIOA increased due to the Innovation Grant awarded.
- Supplies increased in anticipation of the purchase of new computers for planning staff and other normal programmatic needs.
- Advertising/subscriptions increased to reflect software subscription costs.
- Capital Outlay increased to reflect the purchase of a code enforcement vehicle and GPS unit.
- Compensated Absence Liability decreased to correct the line-item expense budget for planning. Funds were meant to be budgeted to contingency.
- Transfer to Capital Reserve Fund decreased due to the decrease in indirect funds generated by chargeable salaries.
- Special Revenue Funds for Aging and WIOA increased due to new grant funding for each fund.
- Capital Reserve Fund decreased due to a reduction in transfers from the general fund.
- All other changes reflect normal programmatic needs.

Staff requested that the Policy Board review and approve the First Amendment of the 2023-2024 Budget.

Mr. Larry Yoder made a motion that the Policy Board approve the First Amendments of the 2023-2024 Budget as proposed and Mr. Jerry Hodge offered a second. Motion passed unanimously.

Other Business

Nominating Committee

Chair Patton stated each year at the September Policy Board meeting, four Policy Board members are asked to serve on a nominating committee. Under the WPCOG Charter, the Policy Board Chair appoints the nominating committee. This committee is responsible for presenting a slate of officers. Executive Committee members and appointed (non-elected) board members for the following year during the November meeting. The nominating committee includes a representative from all four counties. Traditionally, two county officials and two municipal officials compose the four-member committee.

The following board members have been appointed and have agreed to serve on this year's nominating committee:

Larry Yoder – Alexander County
Chris Jernigan – City of Morganton
Mike Labrose – Caldwell County
Chair Jill Patton – City of Hickory

Executive Director and Staff Reports

Mr. Anthony Starr, Executive Director, reviewed the Executive Director's Report providing details and current operations of the WPCOG and issues that may be of interest to board members.

Administration

- The WPCOG continues the search process for the Drexel Town Manager position. The Caldwell County DSS Director position search is complete. The search process is starting for the Granite Falls Town Manager, who indicated his retirement in 2024. Staff completed assisting the Town of Long View with its finance director position search.
- The WPCOG has filled its Homelessness Response Manager position and has filled three of the four Homeless Outreach Specialists. Position searches are ongoing for a transportation technician and accounting technician. Position searches are complete for GIS technician, code enforcement officer, and transportation project coordinator.
- The next Mayor-Chair-Managers Meeting will be held on Thursday, October 26th at Brushy Mountain Golf Club in Alexander County.
- Mr. Anthony Starr, Executive Director, will be out of the country on a family trip in October. Ms. Sherry Long, Assistant Executive Director, will be acting Executive Director for the WPCOG in Mr. Starr's absence.

Area Agency on Aging (AAA)

- The AAA Director served as Conference Co-Chair for Southeastern Association of Area Agencies on Aging (SE4A) for 2023 conference in Asheville. The conference had over 700 people attend – it was very successful!

Community and Economic Development (CED)

- CED staff have been working with Dogwood Health Trust on two capacity-building grants that will help serve Burke County. Additionally, staff have been working closely with Alexander County, the City of Claremont, the Town of Valdese, and Caldwell County on finalizing ARC and CBDG grants. The City of Hickory was awarded a \$200,000 award from Golden Leaf for an economic development project on Fairgrove Church Road that will create 200 new, full-time jobs.

Community and Regional Planning

- In August, Burke County adopted the Digital Inclusion Plan prepared by the WPCOG.
- Transportation Planning staff continue to work to score transportation projects with NCDOT's prioritization process. Anthony said to not expect many new projects to be funded.

Regional Housing Authority (RHA)

- RHA staff completed the "purging" of the waiting list. This means that the RHA staff reached out to all families that were on the waiting list for housing to make sure that they were still interested in staying on the Section 8 housing waiting list. As of August 29, 2023, 1,168 applicant families were dropped for non-response. That leaves 1,136 applicant families that are still active on the waiting list. This purge greatly assists the RHA staff in managing the waiting list and eliminating those that are no longer interested or no longer have housing needs.

Workforce Development

- Mr. Anthony Starr, Executive Director, thanked Alexander County and Ms. Charity Patterson Hamber, Director of Workforce Development, for their partnership on a job fair for those affected by

the Mitchell Gold closing. The job fair was September 12, 2023 with dozens of employers and nearly 200 job seekers attending.


Next Meeting

The next Policy Board meeting is scheduled for November 28, 2023 and will be hosted by the City of Conover.


Adjournment

Chair Patton adjourned the meeting at 7:35 pm. Mr. Larry Yoder made a motion to adjourn and Mr. Larry Chapman offered a second. Motion was unanimously approved.

Respectfully submitted,



Jill Patton
Chair



Larry Chapman
Secretary