

Coös County Commissioners
Coös County Delegation
Joint Meeting
Coös County Nursing Home – Berlin, NH
Monday, March 4, 2024

Present: Commissioners Thomas Brady, Raymond Gorman, and Robert Théberge;
Representatives Arnold Davis, Sean Durkin; Seth King, Michael Murphy and Henry Noël;
County Administrator Mark Brady, Director of Finance Carrie Klebe, Nursing Hospital
Administrator Laura Mills, Nursing Home Administrator Louise Belanger, Superintendent Ben
Champagne, Sheriff Brian Valerino, Captain Keith Roberge, County Treasurer Suzanne Collins,
Attorney Jonathan Frizzell, Administrative Assistant Linda Harris; and members of the public.

Chairman Brady opened the Joint Meeting at 11:06 a.m. Representative Murphy led the Pledge of Allegiance.

The roll was called by the Representative Noël. There were five Delegation members present.

Approval of the agenda: A motion was made by Representative Davis, seconded by Commissioner Gorman to approve the agenda as presented. The motion was approved in the affirmative.

Hearing of the public:

Jon Swan, Chairman of the Dalton Conservation Commission, reported that he had emailed the Board of Commissioners as well as the members of the Delegation requesting a letter of support for the opposition of the proposed landfill in Dalton and Bethlehem. He noted that his email also provided a link to the report sent to NH DES.

Chairman Brady encouraged Mr. Swan to attend the next Commissioners' Meeting.

Other Business:

- a. Discussion of 2024 Budget Items: County Administrator Mark Brady welcomed new Delegation Members: Representative Sean Durkin and Representative Michael Murphy.

The County Administrator referred the Commissioners' Report which is included in the 2023 Coös County Annual Report. He urged everyone to read the report.

In December, the proposed county tax rate showed a rate of 9.74%. After working with the county department heads, the county tax has dropped to 5.76%.

BerryDunn made recommendations for the nursing homes and some of those recommendations were incorporated in the budget.

The budget includes a three percent cost of living adjustment and an 11.41% health insurance increase.

Coös County Nursing Hospital in West Stewartstown (WSNH)) increased the census by five to an average census of 65 as compared to a census of 52 in 2023 and 53 in 2022. WSNH NHA reduced the nursing budget for a cost savings of \$250,000 since December and savings of \$274,000 from the 2023 budget.

The revenue was also increased: an additional \$500,000 due to the census increase as well as \$40,000 in the NH Quality Incentive Payment as suggested by the County Treasurer at a prior meeting.

The Coös County Nursing Home (CCNH) in Berlin increased census projections to 80 as compared to 65 in 2022 and 71 in 2023. This is a 13% increase year-over-year. Expenses decreased \$360,000 from the budget presented in December. A \$104,000 decrease from the 2023 approved budget.

Representative King inquired how the nursing homes incorporated the recommendations from the BerryDunn report.

The Berlin Nursing Home Administrator reported that strengths and weaknesses were reported in the business office. Regular department meetings are scheduled, policies and procedures have been implemented and the department is also staying on top of arrearage accounts.

The West Stewartstown Nursing Hospital Administrator reported that positions that have not been filled in the nursing department will not be filled this year (reducing utilization of contract nurses vs. in-house nursing is a recommendation of Berry Dunn's analysis). Additionally, Administrator Mills said that revenue was increased since there is a waiting list for admission and a priority of hers. She noted that new admissions were being hampered currently by the recent COVID outbreak. Representative King asked if staff like the changes. Administrator Mills replied that there has been some pushback from staff as they are accustomed to providing care a certain way, but they also understand the need to increase census and control costs and will adapt.

Representative Durkin asked how long it will take to recoup the cost of the BerryDunn report. The County Administrator replied that it is already paying for itself. The report highlights concrete ways to operate more efficiently by reducing costs and increasing revenue. He noted that Covid wreaked havoc on both nursing homes and made the healthcare provider workplace environment very difficult to manage and staff. This shows up in the utilization of contracting nursing. In West Stewartstown, in 2022 the inhouse nursing staff was 79% and contract nurses were 21%. In 2023, inhouse nursing staff was 69% and contract nurses were 31%. In Berlin in 2022 the inhouse nursing staff was 70% and contract nurses were 30%. In 2023, inhouse nursing staff was 56% and contract nurses were 44%.

The Sheriff's Department showed an increase of \$160,000 due to two additional grants.

Department of Corrections showed a decrease of \$240,000. The heating project costs were significantly lower than projected and that money was repurposed for other uses. The

Superintendent noted to the Delegation that sentencing reform completely changed the Department of Corrections. Criminal justice reform hinders public safety.

LATCF reserve funds were appropriated to the Unincorporated Places budgets. An additional \$5,000 for legal expenses and \$5,000 in travel expense were also appropriated to the Unincorporated Places. This additional \$10,000 will need to be added to the budget for approval on March 18, 2024. The Administrator said Aurora Lands/Bluesource is a reason for this as articulated in the Annual Report. He said that it would only take a few transactions on certain property to collapse the North Country economy.

The County Administrator noted that the County is seeking to fund an economic impact analysis of carbon first forest management. Attorney Frizzell noted that the County Delegation's proposed legislation is putting the information in the public eye. He said he has advised on specific legislation and highlighted the relevancy of this to the Unincorporated Places and the Board of Commissioners. Representative Davis noted that he was not happy with the current write-up of his legislation by the Office of Legislative Services. The proposal of a registry specific to current used owners is good. He noted that the Department of Revenue Administration interprets carbon credit value differently from timber cut value.

After a brief lunch recess, the meeting resumed.

Chairman Brady requested that the Nursing Hospital Administrator explain why the County Administrative offices were relocated. Ms. Mills replied that the county offices, which had been in the nursing home for decades, had to be relocated per the State's response to the Covid Pandemic. Nursing homes were shut down to public access and county administrative offices, being public and non-medical in function, were locked out of the nursing home. The county staff were forced to work from home.

Chairman Brady inquired about the cost to the county taxpayers. The Director of Finance replied that GOFERR, ARPA and Opioid Abatement Funds (in the amount of \$329,654) were used on the administrative office facility over the last three years. Additionally, \$55,096 of county funds have been used for the roof, septic, electrical, generator, HVAC, and parking area. Thus 86% of the cost was covered by grants and 14% from the county.

Any Other Business:

County Treasurer Sue Collins reported that SB553 had made it thru the Senate unanimously and was now in House Finance Committee. She explained that SB553 restricts the NH Public Investment Pool (NH PDIP) to investing in only New Hampshire entities.

NH PDIP is competition for NH banks and the NH Bankers Association supports SB553. This restricts and limits diversification of investments, thereby restricting potential returns to the pool's members. In 2023, Coös County realized \$97,301 in interest from NH PDIP. Many towns in Coös will lose revenue generated by NHDIP if the legislation passes.

Ms. Collins, as County Treasurer, urged the Delegation to vote no on SB553.

With no other business to discuss, the meeting adjourned at 1:33 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Commissioner Robert Théberge, Clerk