

Coös County Delegation  
Annual Meeting of the 2023 Proposed Budgets  
March 18, 2024 @ 10:00 a.m.  
North Country Resource Center - Lancaster, NH

Present: Representatives Arnold Davis, Chair; Mike Ouellet, Vice Chair; Corinne Cascadden, Clerk; Sean Durkin; Eamon Kelley (10:08); Seth King; Michael Murphy; and James Tierney. Also, Present: Commissioners Thomas Brady, Raymond Gorman, and Robert Th  berge; County Administrator Mark Brady; Director of Finance Carrie Klebe; Sheriff Brian Valerino; Superintendent Ben Champagne; Nursing Hospital Administrator Laura Mills; Nursing Home Administrator Louise Belanger; Captain Keith Roberge; Register of Deeds Leon Rideout; Co  s County Attorney John McCormick; County Treasurer Sue Collins; Heidi Barker, UNH Cooperative Extension; Captain Adrian Reyes; Administrative Assistant Linda Harris; representatives of the various outside agencies.

Chairman Davis called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m. Representative Tierney led the Pledge of Allegiance.

The roll was called by the Clerk, Representative Cascadden. There were eight members present. Representative No  l was absent.

*Review & Approval of the Minutes of the December 13, 2023, meeting and public hearing, as distributed:* A motion was made by Representative King, seconded by Representative Tierney to approve the minutes of the December 13, 2023, meeting and public hearing, as distributed. The motion was approved unanimously by voice vote.

*Other Business:*

- Zoning Board of Adjustment Board Member Reappointments/three-year term: Mark Evans and Greg Sipple. A motion was made by Representative Ouellet, seconded by Representative King to approve the reappointments of Mark Evans and Greg Sipple as members of the Zoning Board of Adjustment. The motion was approved unanimously by voice vote.
- Review & Approval of the Financial Statements of Co  s County and of the Unincorporated Places for the period ended December 31, 2023.

The Director of Finance began the review of the Co  s County financials. The total expenditures for the period ending December 31, 2023, were \$40,388,264 or 82% expended. The total revenues for the period ending December 31, 2023, were \$44,971,899 or 91% received. A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative King to approve the Co  s County fourth quarter expenditures and revenues. The motion was approved by roll call 8-0.

The Director of Finance continued with the Unincorporated Places financials. Total expenditures were \$1,341,056 or 79% expended. The total revenues were \$1,597,087 or 95% received. A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative King to approve the Unincorporated Places fourth quarter expenditures and revenues. The motion was approved by roll call 8-0.

- Review & Approval of updated Co  s County Zoning Ordinances as recommended by the Board of Commissioners. Chairman Davis asked if anyone had questions concerning the proposed zoning ordinances. Representative Cascadden asked if there was a cycle that was followed to update the

document. Representative Ouellet replied that the zoning ordinances are updated when the Planning Board feels that certain changes must be done. The goal is to make them inline with the state guidelines and user friendly. A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Ouellet to approve the updated Coös County Zoning Ordinances. The motion was approved unanimously by voice vote.

*Opening remarks:* County Administrator Mark Brady welcomed everyone to the 2024 budget meeting. The County Administrator referred to the Commissioners' Report which is included in the 2023 Coös County Annual Report. He urged everyone to read the report as it lays out some of the big issues confronting the County. He highlighted the fact that there are two sides to a balance sheet, costs and revenues. He said there is an understandable preoccupation of costs without an appropriate discussion of revenues. He reiterated that New Hampshire County government is statutorily tasked with providing some of the costliest government services – healthcare and corrections. Administrator Brady said that county nursing homes operate in a structural deficit since state and federal reimbursements do not cover costs and the county's pricing power is limited. That was the reason for contracting with Berry Dunn to perform an operational analysis of the nursing homes. But he said that Coös County needs to have hard discussions relating to economic development so it can expand the tax base. That is why the Commissioners' are deeply concerned about Aurora Lands/Bluesource ownership of the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters Property as was articulated in the Annual Report. The Board believes it as an existential threat because reducing timber harvests and restricting access to the forests, will kill not only the North Country timber industry, which will be the first domino to fall, but also tourism and recreation. The County Administrator lamented that Concord was "tone deaf" to the North Country's problems and said that Coös needed to take care of itself and not expect any help from down state. He praised the efforts of the County Delegation.

The Administrator said to understand the budget in context -- it includes a three percent (3%) cost of living adjustment and a 11.41% health insurance increase in an overall inflationary environment which averaged 4.1% in 2023 and 8% in 2022.

The County Administrator noted that there was one change to the budget from the meeting of March 4, 2024:

The Commissioners were asked, at the last minute, to apply for a grant from the Northern Border Regional Commission on behalf of the Northern Borders Dispatch which is comprised of five core towns (Colebrook, Columbia, Pittsburg, Stewartstown, NH and Canaan, VT). The towns are not positioned to apply, and, if awarded, the County will assume the role of grant recipient and administrator. The grant will be for an updated Computer Aid Dispatch program and equipment with mapping for the Northern Borders Dispatch Committee. This will enable first responders out on search and rescue better location coordinates on their mobile data terminal and is a significant upgrade to the current situation. Commissioner Gorman said this is as much an economic development issue as it is emergency management. Both appropriations and revenues were increased by \$1,200,000, which increased the topline County budget to \$50,184,515. It did not affect the county tax rate however, which remained at 5.76%.

The Director of Finance began the review of the budget by department.

The West Stewartstown Nursing Hospital (WSNH) increased the census projections by five to an average census of 65 as compared to a census of 52 in 2023 and 53 in 2022. WSNH reduced the nursing staff budget for a cost savings of \$250,000 since December and savings of \$274,000 from the 2023 budget. The total proposed WSNH budget with specials was \$15,978,000. To put this into perspective –

WSNH budget has an increase of 25% in annual average census and a 4% decrease in its nursing staff budget.

The Coös County Nursing Home (CCNH) in Berlin increased the average census to 80 as compared to a census of 71 in 2023 and 65 in 2022. Expenses decreased by \$360,000 from the budget presented in December which is a \$104,000 decrease from the 2023 approved budget. CCNH reduced the nursing staff budget for a cost savings of \$301,000 since December. The budget also utilizes \$35,000 of the Facility Fund to offset the GOFERR projects. The total proposed Nursing Home budget with specials was \$17,068,455. To put that into perspective – the Berlin budget has an increase of 13% in average annual census and 1% increase in the nursing staff budget.

The County Administrator noted that many of the BerryDunn recommendations were incorporated into the proposed budget. 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%.

Representative Cascadden inquired about past conversations relating to the consolidation of the two facilities. The County Administrator responded that he has heard of those suggestions but believes it is premature as there are many factors that would go into such a decision. He said that BerryDunn needs to do additional analysis for the County to understand the macro issues which will drive such a course of action. For instance, how many beds should the County have based on Coös demographics, should additional services be integrated into the product offering, what are health care labor market trends, etc. He noted that ultimately it is a political decision that will have far reaching repercussions to the county. Administrator Brady said the immediate priority should be focused on what the county controls – the operations of the two facilities – and therefore the BerryDunn recommendations should be implemented. He noted that there has been substantive positive change at the Berlin facility to control costs under Administrator Belanger (who took over at the end of November 2023) and Administrator Mills is aggressively increasing census while controlling nursing staff costs in WSNH. Both administrators are very aware of the high costs of contract nursing and are attempting to reduce their utilization. But again, he reiterated that New Hampshire County nursing homes are in a structural deficit and the immediate focus is on how to reduce the costs/revenue deficit. He offered to have BerryDunn address the Delegation at a future meeting.

Representative Ouellet stated that he appreciates the hard work that has been done to reduce the proposed budget. Building a new nursing home does not make sense currently until more is understood, and the immediate focus should be on cutting costs and increasing revenues by whatever means possible. The Delegation needs to trust the County Administrator's directives.

The budget review continued with the Administrative Office. The only noted change was the Grant & Contracts positions were moved from the Finance Department to the County Administration budget. The coordinator position will be well used and pay for itself.

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

The Department of Corrections showed a decrease of \$239,999. The heating project cost was significantly lower than projected. The remaining ARPA funds were used elsewhere.

The total proposed appropriations including the Northern Borders Grant were \$50,184,515.

The proposed revenues were reviewed. There were no questions. The total revenues which included the Northern Borders Grant were \$50,184,515.

The Director of Finance concluded with the revision of the Unincorporated Places Budgets. The legal and travel expense line items in all the Unincorporated Places increased by a total of \$10,000. The total proposed appropriations and anticipated revenues, including the changes in legal and travel expenses, totaled \$1,620,955.

The following resolutions were read by the Director of Finance:

#### **RESOLUTION #1**

Be it resolved by the Coös County Delegation duly convened on this eighteenth day of March 2024, that the sums hereinafter detailed in this resolution are hereby appropriated and the total amount for the fiscal year ending December 31, 2024, shall be \$50,184,515 for the County budget not including the Unincorporated Places. A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Durkin to approve Resolution #1. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

#### **RESOLUTION #2**

Be it resolved by the Coös County Delegation that the sum of \$28,041,720 is hereby adopted as the estimated income from sources indicated for the fiscal year ending December 31, 2024. A motion was made by Representative Durkin, seconded by Representative Tierney to approve Resolution #2. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

#### **RESOLUTION #3**

Be it further resolved that the total appropriation being in excess of the total estimated income in the amount of \$17,252,795. The Treasurer shall issue her warrant to the Towns and City in the County for this amount. A motion was made by Representative Murphy, seconded by Representative Durkin to approve Resolution #3. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

#### **RESOLUTION #4**

Be it resolved that \$4,890,000 of the operating surplus for the year 2023 be appropriated in the 2024 Budget for the purpose of reducing taxes for 2024. A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Ouellet to approve Resolution #4. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

#### **RESOLUTION #5**

Be it resolved by the Coös County Delegation duly convened on this eighteenth day of March 2024, that to comply with Department of Revenue Administration instruction, the Delegation separately approves total appropriations of \$1,620,955 and revenues of \$1,620,955 for the Coös County Unincorporated Places for calendar year 2024. The Unincorporated Places Budgets for 2024 are adopted separately from the Coös County Budget.

Atkinson & Gilmanon Academy Grant	\$ 24,955
Bean's Grant	2,385
Bean's Purchase	24,280
Cambridge	111,337
Chandler's Purchase	3,787
Crawford's Purchase	8,029
Cutt's Grant	2,077
Dix Grant	24,329
Dixville	238,632

Erving's Grant	1,238
Green's Grant	102,583
Hadley's Purchase	77
Kilkenny	948
Low & Burbank Grant	12,809
Martin's Location	23,910
Millsfield	466,553
Odell	39,937
Pinkham's Grant	97,820
Sargent's Purchase	42,665
Second College Grant	26,964
Success	146,454
Thompson & Meserve's Purchase	77,030
Wentworth Location	<u>142,156</u>
Total	\$1,620,955

A motion was made by Representative Durkin, seconded by Representative Murphy to approve Resolution #5. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

#### **RESOLUTION #6**

Be it resolved that \$38,745.04 of the 2023 Budget Surplus Balance be reserved and added to the following accounts for interest earned in 2023:

Interest on Sick Trusts 2023	\$15,307.34
Interest on Facility Fund 2023	\$20,655.07
Interest on Vehicle Reserve Fund 2023	\$2,782.63

A motion was made by Representative Murphy, seconded by Representative Tierney to approve Resolution #6. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

#### **RESOLUTION #7**

Be it resolved that \$50,000 of the 2023 Budget Surplus Balance be reserved to the account for the 2026 53<sup>rd</sup> Payroll Fund. A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Ouellet to approve Resolution #7. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

#### **RESOLUTION #8**

Be it resolved that \$660,502.29 of the 2023 Budget Surplus Balance be reserved for the LATCF Funds and of the LATCF Funds Reserve, \$761,000 to be moved to the 2024 Budgeted Revenues in the County Budget and \$50,000 to be moved to the 23 Unincorporated Places Budgeted Revenues. A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Ouellet to approve Resolution #8. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

#### **RESOLUTION #9**

Be it resolved that \$6,230.15 of the 2023 Budget Surplus Balance be reserved to the Opioid Abatement Fund Reserve and of the Opioid Abatement Fund Reserve, \$28,000 be moved to the 2024 Budgeted Revenues. A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Durkin to approve Resolution #9. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

### **RESOLUTION #10**

Be it resolved that \$1,779,440 of the ARPA Reserves to be moved to the 2024 budget as revenues:

To Move from Reserves to Budget

ARPA – HVAC Nursing Hospital	\$1,440,000
ARPA – BNH Windows	\$270,900
ARPA – BNH New Entrance	\$1,500
ARPA – DOC Heating System	\$51,180
ARPA – Audits/Admin Fees	<u>\$15,860</u>
	\$1,779,440

A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Ouellet to approve Resolution #10. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

### **RESOLUTION #11**

Be it resolved that \$239,999 of the ARPA reserved funds for DOC Heating System be moved to the 2024 budget as revenues for ARPA Unreserved Funds. A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Durkin to approve Resolution #11. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

### **RESOLUTION #12**

Be it resolved that \$39,511 of the ARPA Unreserved Fund be moved to the 2024 Budgeted Revenues. A motion was made by Representative Ouellet, seconded by Representative Durkin to approve Resolution #12. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

### **RESOLUTION #13**

Be it resolved that \$35,000 of the Facility Funds be removed from Committed Funds and moved to the 2024 Budgeted Revenues. A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Ouellet to approve Resolution #13. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

### **RESOLUTION #14**

Be it resolved that \$255,050 of the Reserve for Software be moved to the 2024 Budgeted Revenues. A motion was made by Representative Ouellet, seconded by Representative Murphy to approve Resolution #14. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

### **RESOLUTION #15**

Be it resolved that \$100,000 of the 2023 Surplus Balance be moved to the Reserves for Bad Debt for the Berlin Nursing Home. A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Ouellet to approve Resolution #15. The motion passed by roll call vote 8-0.

*Any Other Business:*

Representative Kelley noted that SB553 had passed the Senate. The county will not see any benefit from this bill.

Don Campbell, Selectmen Town of Columbia, thanked the Commissioners and Delegation for the approval of the Northern Borders Grant.

The next Quarterly Delegation meeting is scheduled for Monday, April 29, 2024, at 10:00 a.m. at the North Country Resource Center.

A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Durkin to adjourn the meeting at 11:27 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Representative Corinne Cascadden, Clerk

Pending Approval