



LUMPKIN COUNTY
Board of Commissioners
Special Work Session Minutes
Executive Conference Room
99 Courthouse Hill
Dahlonega, GA 30533

June 18, 2025
8:30 AM

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 8:30 am. Present were Chairman Chris Dockery and Commissioners Tucker Greene, Bobby Mayfield, Rhett Stringer (arrived 8:45 am), and Jeff Moran (arrived 8:41 am).

DISCUSS 2026 BUDGET

Chairman Dockery explained this is a work session to review budget items from departments that requested to meet with the Commissioners. The County Manager and staff put together a proposed budget based upon guidance from the Board of Commissioners. That guidance is almost always the same; to live within your means.

8:30 am to 9:00 am - Library

Leslie Clark thanked everyone for attending the meeting with them today. The library had requests for \$39,053 in three specific areas of need. She said the state health benefit is increasing once again, and it has jumped significantly over the last 18 months. They are requesting \$11,053 to cover the increase and an increase in materials of \$15,000. She explained that it is not all that they need for materials, but they are using unassigned fund balance to cover the rest. The third request was to cover a cost-of-living adjustment of 3%. Those items have been included in the recommended budget. Ms. Clark thanked the Board for their continued support. She wanted to make them aware of some things they have changed in response to budgetary needs, constraints, and cuts from the state and from SHB. The SHB is the insurance that the library provides to full-time staff. She said over the last 18 months, they have reduced their full-time staff from four, and by the beginning of September, they will be down to two because paying the SHB is unsustainable moving forward. They will change the two full-time positions to part-time. They are trying to do some 28-hour positions, recognizing the fact that they still have to pay teachers' retirement, which is also increasing to 22.43% at the beginning of July. She said that's not insignificant, but they think that is obviously a better cost than \$22,620 annually for health insurance. That's just what it costs them to allow a staff member to choose health insurance benefits. She wanted to make sure they were aware that the library is doing everything they can to meet those budgetary constraints.

The Library Board has been hard at work in a campaign to raise donations and to help with materials. So far, they have been very successful. The community involvement has been significant. The library is making an additional change to their open hours beginning September 1st. Ms. Clark said they are currently open every day at 9 a.m. They will be changing that to 10 a.m., but they are going to stay open till 7 p.m. three nights a week. They are prioritizing access

and literacy. They want to be open for working families as much as possible, and they are having their newest employee focus on literacy programs for children under 5.

Ms. Clark has been approached by the Master Gardeners, and they want to put in raised flower beds or garden beds for a community garden. The only space that they really have to do that would be where the pavilion is supposed to go. She said before they started putting anything up, they wanted to check with the Commissioners. The other main need is additional staff to help clean the library. They currently use staff to clean, but with increased traffic and program attendance, they will need assistance with keeping the facility clean.

Chairman Dockery asked for clarification if they would need the \$15,000 for materials or if they would have enough in their unassigned fund balance to cover the cost. Ms. Clark responded that they would need the \$15,000 because their fiscal year is different from the county's. Chairman Dockery asked how successful their fundraising was going. Bobbi Larson said there hasn't been a lot of fundraising done this year because they are running behind in getting started. They are building a plan and testing a few things this year to see if that would be a good, sustainable, annual strategy that they can build upon. She said the goal they set for this year is \$25,000.

What they have learned going in is that they need to cultivate their relationship with the Friends of the Library. They are rebuilding their organization. They do have the Lumpkin Library Foundation, but it needs to do some rebuilding as well. Several members have passed away, and others are unable to continue their service for a variety of reasons. They have an event planned just to raise awareness of the library in October, and they are running their Champions Game right now through August. All of these efforts, combined with some grants to Friends of the Library. Once their plan is in place, they can start training volunteers. Chairman Dockery agreed that awareness is the biggest thing. He said they have a community that gives more than any community he knows; you just have to make them aware of the need.

Chairman Dockery is a little hesitant about the raised beds. That space is intended for a pavilion, but allowing the building of raised beds is almost like conveying ownership. It may be difficult to remove the raised beds later on. He suggested that the Master Gardeners approach the county about a space in Yahoola Creek Park so that there would be more space down there for them to do what they needed. If they want to come to the library to help people with produce, he thinks that's a great idea. He said he thought the Board would be supportive of doing that. There have previously been gardens at Yahoola Creek Park that the inmates maintained. Ms. Larson said that when volunteers are asked to be involved with fundraising, they are initially uncomfortable with asking people for money. As a result, they are doing some education for volunteers on how they can help without having to solicit donations.

Commissioner Mayfield commended them for the job they do and the nice-looking building, which is well-maintained, well-used, and certainly an asset to the community.

9:00 am to 9:30 am - Clerk of Courts

Clerk of Court – Rita Harkins, Clerk of Court, said there were no changes to the BOE budget. She said the intangible recording is up a bit. That is out of her control because it is based on real

estate. The reason she wanted to meet was to discuss the staffing request. She said the Grand Jury had put it in their recommendation for the Commissioners to allow her to hire one additional person to help with the backlog. She currently has two senior judges who help; they're not full-time but are used when they are backed up. The case involving the City and County was assigned to a senior judge because they knew it would take up a lot of time. Ms. Harkins said they are receiving a lot more appeals from the Department of Corrections than they used to.

Commissioner Mayfield said he has taken the time to stop by her office when court was not in session to see what is going on down there. He said they are always very busy working every time. Ms. Harkins said there is just so much more paperwork involved in litigation overall at all levels, whether it's criminal or civil. They do a lot of electronic filing, but e-filing is not mandated for criminal cases; just for civil cases. She attached to her budget request the filing data on how many cases they have come in and filed. There was no cost listed for the requested positions. Ms. Harkins said she has some employees leave or retire who have been there for several years, and they are hard to replace. She has always had the rule to offer those positions to anyone internally first. There was a new law effective July 1, 2024, that requires the clerk to track more cases. They had to use a new program and convert the old program from being manually tracked. She said there is a lot more data and entry codes they had to learn to help them produce reports. Commissioner Stringer asked her to get a cost for the two positions she requested.

9:30 am to 10:00 am - Coroner

Mark Cox began discussing his salary and the difference between the salary line item and coroner services. The case fees are taken from the coroner services. Commissioner Stringer said he didn't know how sustainable increasing the budget by \$15,000 - \$20,000 a year was. Mr. Cox said the increases were because the budget had not received a lot of attention over the last several years. He said they were trying to make it competitive with the surrounding counties, and that is why it has increased so much. Commissioner Stringer asked what the big increase was for. Mr. Cox responded that it was for salaries. He said he has been right at \$32,000 and responding to 80% of the calls. He is requesting \$35,000 for his base salary to let the Deputy Coroners take the case fees. He said he would promise to take 50% of the calls. Commissioner Stringer said his reservation is that they have seen before that coroners will get a base salary and then never run the calls. Then, all of a sudden, the coroner service budget goes through the roof because everybody else is running the calls.

Mr. Cox understood, but he said the problem he has is trying to find someone to fill the third open position that he has. He has been trying to fill the position for the last year and a half. Mr. Cox said we need to start drawing some interest for the job. He said for them to hold him accountable and suggested they increase the pay and the benefit package. That may draw some interest. Commissioner Stringer stated based on what he is asking for, it shows an increase in the salaries and wages of basically \$20,000, but then the coroner service remains the same. He explained that that is exactly what he's afraid of. Mr. Cox said when he looked at that yesterday, he realized a mistake. He said the coroner's bill did not pass. There had been \$6,000 or \$9,000 added in the requested budget that would have helped cover the on-call per day fee if it had passed. Since that's not an issue this year, that coroner service would be reduced by \$8,500. He

did request that the case fees be increased to \$250 per case.

The coroner had added some money in there because there were several calls that he needed assistance with. When he needs assistance from another coroner they will split the case fee. If it is less than \$250, then it's not worth it for someone to come and help. Commissioner Stringer asked if someone on the scene could assist him. He responded that he has had deputies and firefighters refuse to assist with bad decomposition cases in the past. They have in the past had RTS transporters come to the local pickups; they did everything, including the cleaning up. They paid for that service from the contract services line item. That would increase the budget by \$3,000 or \$4,000 in that line item. Commissioner Stringer asked why he did not use them now. He responded that they only use them for transport down to the crime lab. The amount for transports can vary depending on the medical examiner and what they accept as an autopsy case. The Coroner has been working in the past with LifeLink donation services and trying to get them to accept cases. If they accept cases for donations, they pay for a transport to come up and pick them up from the morgue and take them down to North Cross. They will transport themselves over to the crime lab. He said that it has helped him and saved him three or four times this year so far.

Commissioner Stringer explained staff's recommendation was to keep salaries and wages at \$15,000. Mr. Cox said he wasn't sure why and had not been invited to attend the budget meetings with staff. He did some figures and said he was basing the requested on-call fees on 140 cases per year. Commissioner Stringer asked if that wasn't a high number? The coroner said last year was a record low year for him. He only had 110 cases for the year, but on the high end, he has had 127. He said this year, he has an increased number of calls from assisted living. He is expecting a higher number of deaths because they have had a lower amount for the last couple of years. That is why he is figuring for 140 cases. He said, for whatever reason, the cases seem to go in a rotation of being low for a few years, then higher for a few years. Commissioner Stringer did some calculations, and he said, based on what the coroner is asking for, it has the deputy coroners picking up 102 calls. Mr. Cox said that was not how he was figuring it; he is basing it on 140 cases a year, with him picking up 70 cases at the low end per year. Commissioner Stringer said he believed him, but that wasn't what was in the budget. Mr. Cox said that what he is requesting is a base salary of \$35,000 and not being paid a case fee for himself. That would free him up to assist with additional calls that needed assistance. He still would not draw a case fee. Commissioner Stringer is concerned with the amount creeping up each year.

Commissioner Stringer asked about meetings and training. There is \$5,000 in there for this year, and it is showing nothing has been spent so far for this year. The coroner responded that he is the only one who has been to training so far this year. He isn't sure why it has not been deducted from that yet. The \$5,000 is based on all four employees in the coroner's office getting training. Initially, getting trained is a 40-hour course for a new deputy, and then getting recertified every year is a three-day course. Commissioner Stringer asked if they hadn't been recertified this year, and he confirmed he had, but the others had not.

The coroner reviewed his requests, saying he is requesting \$35,000 as his base salary and to not be paid case fees. He said with a promise that he would do at least 50% of the cases. He suggested that the voters hold him responsible for doing at least 50% of the cases. He also asked

them to think about paying the Deputy Coroners \$150 to transport the bodies to the crime lab instead of paying a transport service. That would be a way for them to make extra money. He said he knows coroners in other counties who have recruited law enforcement and firefighters to do transports for them. It's a minimum of a four-hour trip if there is no traffic. He said right now, it's approximately \$175 per trip for contract services, but they go up every year. He said if he could get approval for paying them, he was thinking they could pay them \$150, but it would be using the county vehicle. Commissioner Stringer said he was going to say, you have the contract services money in the budget, but you're using county equipment. Is it worth it for \$25 to have a county logo traveling to Atlanta and back?

The coroner suggested new equipment as a great recruiting tool. He said there is a pricey battery-powered lift that lifts the stretcher up. There are counties that do the transport for the morgue. Banning County just upgraded all their EMS ambulances to that system and also included their coroner van because they just paid out a huge settlement. There's a deputy coroner injured. The system's close to \$90,000 - \$95,000, for the stretcher and all. Commissioner Stringer explained that it was just not possible due to the budget.

10:00 am to 10:30 am - Magistrate Court

The Magistrate Judge was unable to attend the meeting.

10:30 am to 11:00 am - Sheriff's Office

The Sheriff is requesting an increase to the minor equipment budget to cover the cost of printers and scanners to print tickets in the patrol cars. They are currently handwritten tickets. Sheriff Jarard said they have the system now, so it's for the software for that system and the actual printers and scanners. Chairman Dockery asked what the advantage was. Sheriff Jarard responded that it speeds up the process and transfers information from GCIC directly onto the citation, so there's less possibility for mistakes. For example, it could be questioned in the court if the officer writes "Cherry Lane" instead of "Cherry Street," and this would help prevent that. Chairman Dockery asked as far as supplies, would they just need the paper? Captain Garland confirmed it would be thermal paper. He said they would just take that expense from supplies. The printers do not use ink; they are thermal printers. Once you buy the initial roll of paper for every car, it lasts a bit.

Chairman Dockery asked if they have any indication how long those printers are going to last. Will it be two years or 20 years? Will they be back in a couple of years asking for more printers because now they have version two? He said that's usually what happens with technology. Sheriff Jarrard hasn't researched their lifespan. Chairman Dockery thinks it's a good idea and can support it, but when you do it, you want to know what the second and third-order effects are. You need to know how much it's going to cost. Sheriff Jarrard said it wouldn't be any more; it'd probably be less than the ticket books. Captain Garland said they researched it, three or four years ago, when it was Zuercher, and it was more expensive. They researched it again, and the quotes they received were cheaper. It's actually gone down in price.

Sheriff Jarrard said they asked for \$25,000 for ammunition. The recommended amount stayed at

\$20,000. They are asking for an increase of \$5,000 for the additional employees. Chairman Dockery asked how the ammunition is distributed. Is it for the public to use at the firing range or just for personnel? Sheriff Jarrard said it is only for personnel. The firing range has donations that they use to purchase their targets, and the people who use the firing range bring their own guns and ammunition. The ammunition is only for the jail to practice so they can qualify each year. Chairman Dockery asked how many rounds they are given. The sheriff said they are given 50 rounds a month. They may not get or use the 50 rounds each month. They are only given ammo if they request it, and they have to use it only at the range. Post requires the officers to pass the test once a year. The department has them do it twice a year to make sure they can pass the test. They also have the officers pass a long gun qualification. The state requires them to pass a test for anything they carry. Sheriff Jarrard said they use Georgia Arms because they take our brass and give a discount on the exchange and reload ammo. Chairman Dockery asked if there was any way they could do every other month instead of every month. He understands the reason for every month, but it's going to be a very difficult budget.

Chairman Dockery asked if they still use the bike patrol since the city has its own police department. The sheriff said they use them mainly twice a year, during Gold Rush and at the Christmas parade. Chairman Dockery said there is \$750 in the budget for bike patrol. He asked if the Sheriff would be comfortable taking that out and putting that towards supplies and materials? The sheriff said he thought he would be. Chairman Dockery said it isn't a lot of money, but it would help. Chairman Dockery asked how often they used the K-9s and how many they had. Sheriff Jarrard said they have three, and they use them every day. They use them for traffic stops, and one at the high school that the school system bought and pays for. They have two on patrol that they split, so one on each rotation. They have a kennel outside behind the jail, so when they're off on vacation or something, they can still be used. They have a volunteer group that just purchased a wash bay for the dogs and takes excellent care of them.

Sheriff Jarrard asked for an increase for new uniforms for the Courts. The uniforms are getting worn out, so they would like to replace them. They are also needing the additional funds to purchase vest covers. Chairman Dockery asked if they could get a grant to cover the cost. Sheriff Jarrard replied yes to the vest panels, but the outer shells are starting to get worn out. They are not covered.

Sheriff Jarrard said he doesn't want anything that they are requesting to affect the COLA or merits. He knows the budget is going to be very tight, and he is willing to try and help anyway that he can. Chairman Dockery asked him to prioritize a list of needs, and they would do their best to help them with their needs that could be within the budget.

Sheriff Jarrard asked about POAB. He said he requested it, and it was shot down by the staff. It is a separate additional retirement for law enforcement employees. The cost is \$2,450 monthly or approximately \$30,000 a year. It is a separate retirement for law enforcement employees that can be switched from one organization to another as long as you stay in law enforcement. He said it is just another way to get employees to come and work for us. Other counties are doing it, so that is why he is asking about it, he explained. It says there are 147 different agencies in the State of Georgia that do it.

The Sheriff asked about how Lumpkin County is doing overall with the budget. Chairman

Dockery said their task is to determine how to stay within their means. He said several years ago, we were way off on retention for recruitment because we weren't competitive as far as salaries. As a result, they did two salary studies to make sure that people were compensated according to a job description. The commitment was cost-of-living adjustments and merit. The bulk majority increase in the budget is personnel. The problem is, especially with public safety, if you don't keep pace, then the employees that you're going to attract are the ones that are the biggest liability. The Chairman said he thinks he speaks for the whole Board; their priority is to be able to keep pace with the COLA and merit increases.

11:00 am to 12:00 pm - Staff

Chairman Dockery started with the library. He explained they are going to use some of their unassigned funds to help pay for their materials. The Board talked to them about doing some community fundraising to offset the cost of the materials. The library staff did ask about the Master Gardeners installing some raised vegetable beds where we plan to do the pavilion. That wasn't related to their budget, but he told them he didn't think that was an appropriate place because once they put those beds there, then it kind of becomes their property. He suggested it might be more appropriate to do it somewhere in Yahoola Creek Park. He told them to come to the county and discuss it with them. He said they were going to leave the state health benefit plan and COLA in the budget.

The next item of discussion was the Clerk of Court's budget. Commissioner Stringer said she did not provide any information about what the requested positions would cost. He asked Ms. Branan if she had that information, and she responded that she did not. The Clerk did not provide a potential pay grade for those positions. She guessed it would be around \$80,000 to \$100,000 plus fringe, but she will not know for sure until the Clerk provides the pay grade. There was discussion over the required workload versus the elected workload. Chairman Dockery said there is some validity to them bringing in part-time judges and trying to clear these cases because it pulls them out of what they are supposed to be doing.

Commissioner Mayfield said he had been to the Clerk of Court's office no less than ten times since they had this meeting last year, just so he could put some eyes on what has been happening there. He said every time he has been there, it has been as busy as a beehive. Ms. Branan said the Clerk did provide disposition data from 2017 to 2024 along with filing data, and she displayed it on the screen. Chairman Dockery said if you are looking at workload numbers, they are decreasing. Commissioner Stringer said her main justification was that she has had two senior employees who have left.

Moving on to the Coroner, Commissioner Stringer asked Ms. Branan if she had sat down with him prior to this meeting. She said she had received his request, and he had come by after this meeting to tell her the BOC had concerns about where things were budgeted. She explained the difference in the salary and the coroner service is to differentiate between the salary that is paid to him and what the case fees are. The case fees are paid through payroll and ultimately get charged to the salary account, but they are budgeted separately to differentiate between the two. At the end of the year, she moves the coroner service budget to salary to cover what was actually paid out in salaries. They agreed it was the best way to differentiate between the actual salary and the case fees between those two budget lines. Commissioner Stringer's concern is if we do

the salary and then keep the contract services amount high, we will still have to pay out both, even if we have a coroner who doesn't answer a lot of calls.

The Coroner is asking for case fees to go up to \$250. There was discussion on the number of times he has had to request assistance on calls and how if he calls another coroner in for help, they split the case fees. He has requested additional funds in the case fees so that each coroner would receive a case fee. Commissioner Stringer said the Coroner is also asking for an increase to his base salary to \$35,000 and for an increase in case calls to \$25,000. Ms. Branan said his submitted request did not include him going to a salary. The Coroner was expecting the bill to pass that would make his salary \$35,000 based on our population. That legislation did not pass, and he did not indicate to her that he was requesting the salary, regardless of what the state legislature said. The Budget Committee was not going to make a recommendation on that unless it actually passed.

The confusion for the Coroner is that he thinks his salary is \$32,000 now, and it is listed as \$15,600. That is why he is asking for the salary to be increased to \$35,000. What is actually happening is that his salary is \$15,600, and he gets the case fees when he responds to cases. If he responds to half of the cases, then his salary is \$32,000 because he gets his salary and half of the case fees. Commissioner Stringer said if we increase his salary to \$35,000 and he then decides he isn't going to work any of the cases, we would still have to pay him \$35,000 and the case fees. The way the Board has it set now is kind of a hybrid system where he has a guaranteed salary and then case fees. Chairman Dockery said he thought that was fair, and that it would be dangerous to give him a \$35,000 salary with just a verbal agreement for him to do half of the cases. They suggested having a base salary of \$15,600 along with increasing the case fees. That way, if he works half the cases, he will make the \$35,000 he is requesting. Commissioner Stringer said he explained to the Coroner that he believes he will do half of the cases, but what about when we eventually have a new coroner and a new Board? They also agreed to deduct \$8,500 from the coroner services that had been added to the budget based on a \$100 per day call fee that was in the House Bill that did not pass. The recommended budget was \$84,674.

The discussion then turned to the Sheriff's budget. Staff's recommendation was \$20,000 for materials, and he requested \$25,000 for ammunition. They requested a \$5,000 increase to ammunition due to the increase in personnel. Chairman Dockery said there are valid justifications for some of the items, but he doesn't think we should commit to anything until we receive the digest. Commissioner Stringer said if the ammunition is a true need, then they could get there without increasing that amount. There was a change to telephone charges, increasing them by \$10,000, and Commissioner Stringer asked why there was such a large increase. Ms. Branan said that could be because they are charging something to the Sheriff that was previously charged to another department, like Fleet Maintenance. It could have been the charges for the vehicle tracking that were charged to Fleet, and now they are charging it to the Sheriff because it was for his vehicles. She said she would look into it and let them know.

Ms. Branan said the budget committee did not recommend the purchase of the ticket printers. It was a big request, and the other items they requested totaled \$12,400 and were included in the minor equipment. The Sheriff provided a list of minor equipment that totaled \$39,000. The printers and driver's license scanners for 30 cars were \$26,600. So she took the \$39,000 minus

the \$26,600, and that's where she got \$12,000. Commissioner Stringer said he does not think it is unrealistic to ask for the printers. Chairman Dockery said they did agree that \$750 for the bike patrol could be used somewhere else.

Chairman Dockery had made a note that they requested an increase to purchase new uniforms because the old ones were getting worn out in court services. The Sheriff said they also needed an increase to replace the vests they have. Ms. Branan said they were replaced by a grant that reimburses them 50%. Chairman Dockery explained that they said that they would only replace the plates, and the increase was to replace the outside vest cover. Ms. Branan replied that they have not spent any money from their budget this year to date on uniforms from the court services. They have \$8,000 in there for this year. Chairman Dockery said the Sheriff did say they were planning to use what was in there for this year. Last year, Ms. Branan said they spent \$460, and they had \$5,000 to spend. She asked if they needed to replace them all at the same time. She suggested they replace what they can this year and replace the rest next year. There will be a meeting in July with the Board once they have received the digest.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 12:13 pm.