



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

June 17, 2026
9:00 AM

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 9:04 am. Present were Chairman Rhett Stringer, Commissioners Tucker Greene, Bobby Mayfield, and Jeff Moran, and Commissioner-Elect Nathan Davis.

DISCUSS 2027 BUDGET

Library

Director of the Chestatee Library Leslie Clark thanked them for meeting to discuss their requests. She said they have three main requests, and she has brought some supporting documentation. The first request is to cover the increase in health insurance, which they have no choice but to stay with the state health benefits program. The second is for materials. The only way they are able to purchase materials right now is through the state allocation of \$0.70 per capita that all counties receive through the Georgia Public Library Service and fundraising. They are requesting \$25,000, which doesn't quite cover what they need, but they are hoping that through book sales, continued fundraising efforts, and the \$25,000 from the state, they will cover the print and digital costs. Jonathan Smith said the materials budget constitutes the only flexible spending item, meaning sometimes those funds get diverted to cover other, more pressing expenses. If the utilities increase and they do not have enough money to cover it, then they use the materials money. The final item is a 3% COLA requested for the employees. Ms. Clark disseminated a document with statistics showing a program increase of 11%. She explained that it was significant because they had to offer less programming. They had to be very strategic in what they were offering because of staffing issues. They were mostly focused on early literacy programs to help kids get ready for school, and programs for the elementary school kids to keep them from the "summer slide", which is a real thing.

Commissioner Moran asked how the study rooms were going, and Ms. Clark responded positively. She said even kids from the college come over and use them because it is a quiet space to study or read. You can rent the rooms for two hours at a time and increase the time if no one is waiting. District 3 Commissioner-Elect Nathan Davis asked about the digital surge and if there is any data showing that someone downloaded the data and did not listen to it. Ms. Clark responded no, they do not have data like that. She explained that not all books are charged per checkout or download. There are a couple of different formats for buying digital materials. It could be timed for 12 or 24 months, a set number of checkouts you have to purchase the book, or one copy will be used, and you own it indefinitely. Different books cost different amounts as well. Mr. Davis asked how many employees they had, and she replied 11. There are two full-

time, two 28-hour, and the rest are part-time employees. They would love to reinstitute full-time, but it costs the library \$35,000 in benefits alone just to offer somebody a full-time position. They just can't afford it.

Chairman Stringer asked how much was allocated for materials last year. Ms. Branan responded with \$15,000. He asked how much they need for materials each year, and Ms. Clark said \$25,000 would be ideal, given what they could raise through fundraising. The most that we have given is \$15,000, and Ms. Branan said last year was the first year we have ever dedicated funds for materials. Chairman Stringer suggested going ahead and adding funds to the budget each year if it is possible. There is no guarantee, but it's the same request every year, and it would be easier on staff to have something in there if it's possible.

Pat Gawthrop said she volunteers there and never knew until she started volunteering how great the library was. She said it was a useful and valuable asset for the community.

Development Authority of Lumpkin County

Director of the Development Authority Robb Nichols distributed his new strategic plan. He explained the plan had not been approved by his board, but it is what he will be presenting to them, and it is a good context to start with. He read aloud their strategic theme for the next five years. The Development Authority is considering a three-year contract with Retail Strategies, subject to approval and funds. The contract period would be 2027 – 2029, with an annual investment of \$50,000 per year, for a total investment of \$150,000. The purpose of the Retail Strategy partnership is to assist Lumpkin County in identifying, improving, and attracting retail businesses that align with the community's market potential and long-term development goals. The expected outcomes are improved retail recruitment, expansion of shopping and dining opportunities, reduction of retail leakage, increased sales tax generation, enhanced quality of life for residents, and support for business attraction or retention plans. Then, once that contract expires in 2030, the plan is to expand the Development Authority staff and hire an economic development project manager. That is subject to approval and funding, and he reminded them that was a few years down the road. The purpose of the economic development project manager position would be to provide dedicated professional capacity to support economic development initiatives and manage increasingly complex projects. As we continue on the county's growth, a detailed strategy will be developed for three years, and then we'll work into that economic development.

Mr. Nichols moved along to the budget. He said the highlighted line was of great concern for him. It is what the Development Authority spends from its fund balance every year. They currently have two sources of income. Since the Development Authority contracts with the Chamber, they were able to reduce the amount of operating expenses because there are a lot of things that the Chamber was already doing that share them. The first thing they did was improve their website. He didn't take a pay raise when he did this. This pays for half of his salary and half of Kendall's salary, but you have all of the staff support, so that more of the money could go into operations. Mr. Nichols explained that the BOC is one of many buckets that he is looking for to get this Retail Strategy, which is a company that has relationships with all these different retailers, brokers, and things like that. The process begins with a public input session, input from the developers, and input from a couple of different focus groups. His idea in the

Gateway Corridor, which they are actively working on for a hotel, is maybe some kind of upscale restaurant, like a Cracker Barrel. He thinks a relationship with a well-respected organization would be much more efficient for us than doing this with our own staff without the connection.

Commissioner Mayfield said that judging by what he has learned from ACCG, Mr. Nichols is correct. They have spent the past ten years preparing the Gateway Corridor with water, sewer, fiber optic, gas, and everything that you need. The missing link is that you have to target the retail that you want in this community, not just wait and see what falls out of the sky. He thinks that is a move in the right direction. Commissioner Moran reminded everyone that they are going to look at the code and Overlay District again. Mr. Nichols responded that it is a rule book as far as he is concerned. Mr. Nichols explained that the reason they were looking for a hotel was because there are 31 ball tournaments scheduled here this year. The biggest complaint that they hear year after year is that there is nowhere to stay, and the families have to go out of town.

Commissioner-Elect Davis asked what the vision was for restaurants in the Gateway Corridor. Mr. Nichols responded they are not looking for fast food drive-throughs; they are looking for a step above, like sit-down restaurants. He isn't thinking five-star dining right out of the gate, but something like a Taco Mac. Mr. Nichols said he wants to be considerate of the restaurants on the Square while preventing people from going to Dawsonville for sit-down meals. Mr. Nichols said that if Gas South can extend the line, then Struxure can expand, and they are good community supporters. Also, once there is sewer and gas in the industrial park, it will bring more opportunities there because that makes it more attractive.

Citizen Katherine James cautioned Mr. Nichols for us not to become like Dawson and Forsyth, and she said we need to maintain a good relationship with the City of Dahlonega. Mr. Nichols responded that he has a good relationship with the City, and he makes sure he is very cognizant of them. He has been working with them every step of the way. He said the reality of it is that if we do not get ahead of development and guide it, we are going to become like Dawson or Forsyth. This is a proactive strategy, so we obtain the kind of development we want at the Gateway Corridor.

Sheriff's Office

Sheriff Jarrard said we can start with contract services. OffenderWatch is a big item that they really wanted to go through. Christina Wise explained it is a sexual offenders data base that is used nationwide, and any agency that has OffenderWatch can communicate. She said it will work within and out of state. For example, if you enter Joe Smith in the system and enter their date of birth, it will say we have a match in Wisconsin that matches the one you are looking at. They will send us access to that person's information, and we can confirm by picture that it is indeed the person. It will allow us multiple years of history for any sex offender coming into our county. Ms. Wise said it's also a huge tool for the citizens. They can go online and sign up with their email address, and they can say, "I want information on all these sex offenders within x amount of radius from my house." So, if I put my name in there and said, "I want it within six miles of my house," anytime any sex offender moves in, moves out, or changes within that six-mile radius, they are immediately sent an email about this. Citizens will know immediately where exactly these sex offenders are within whatever proximity they've set to their home

address, work address, or whatever location they choose. Agencies can talk to one another on this, and we can have this link on our county website, where anybody can access it. Obviously, they're not allowed to see protected personal information.

Ms. Wise added that if the citizen doesn't want to put their email in, they can just put in "I want to know where all the sex offenders are located within zip code 30533." It will come up with a map that pinpoints each and every sex offender in that area. We are the only county in the northern region that does not have OffenderWatch, and we now have 91 sex offenders. The BOC expressed that this could be a useful deterrent for sex offender re-offenses. Chairman Stringer asked for clarification if it had been included, and Ms. Branan responded it was not. The cost is \$9,500.

Sheriff Jarrard said if he had to choose between the in-car camera systems or OffenderWatch, he would choose the OffenderWatch. Deanna Williams said they did a 30 day trial with the in-car camera systems. They are a useful tool to see what we are doing well and what we may need more training with. The total for it is \$96,204 a year, and Axon will replace the cameras if they break. They will take the cameras and send them to be repaired or send a replacement in a couple of days. The cameras cover the back of the cars, so if someone claimed they injured their head on the cage, getting in the camera would have recorded it. We would get a discount because we would be able to bundle it with the taser contract. Captain Roach explained that the requested \$4,000 increase in investigative fees was because they use a lot of technology to recover funds or to locate people. This amount goes up and down depending on the type of cases and the number of cases. They requested an additional \$20,000 in their repair and maintenance budget. Ms. Branan is going to check with Fleet Maintenance to see what they need the additional funds for.

Ms. Williams said she had purchased the in-car printers with a grant. They will be applying for the grant again when it becomes available. If they do not get it, they may come to ask for the funding for the software. She said that they asked for more minor equipment because there is a mandate coming in July 2027. They will have to purchase some handheld devices that you will use to scan the driver's license, and it will give them all the driver's history. The cost of the hardware is \$10,320, and there is no cost for the software. She said that there may be some grants available for this, but she is not sure yet.

Captain Brown said they need more money for uniforms for Court Services. Ms. Branan suggested increasing a little at a time, and they could buy some this year and then some after the first of next year. They requested an increase in the minor equipment for more targets and CPR dummies. The Sheriff said he has been told that if a contract does not involve budgets and nothing gets paid for, then it does not have to go before the BOC, and he can sign it. Ms. Branan responded that Council has advised that if it's a contract, then it's a contract and must go before the Board for approval. Staff will get clarification from counsel, but suggested to the Sheriff that if Council said it was okay, he should let them see it first before signing anything.

Sheriff Jarrard said he sent an email yesterday asking for two additional positions because Lumpkin County is not receiving the same amount of service from Georgia State Patrol that the County once did. He said that it has come to his attention that Dawson County is not working as

many of their wrecks, and so whenever they have multiple accidents, they have been sent to Dawson County and Forsyth County more than here. He said he was not upset with the Georgia State Patrol; he is just telling them that Dawson County and Forsyth County are using up that resource more. The response time from GSP for us to an accident is getting up to an hour. It is our policy to work the accident if the response time is longer than 20 minutes. Sheriff Jarrard is requesting two traffic units, one that works the accidents on the north side of the county and one that works the accidents on the south. The Sheriff said he tried to talk to them to work something out, and it doesn't look like it's going to work out. It doesn't look like we are going to get the assistance that we once did, and he cannot help that. He said he wants them to know that this is not from anything that we have done; it is just Dawson and Forsyth sucking up all of the resources. Sheriff Jarrard discussed an accident that occurred over the weekend at Iron Mountain Park, where GSP was requested, as they have been in the past; however, this time, they declined to work because they were not doing private property accidents anymore. Chairman Stringer said he would work on the issue before a decision was made.

Sheriff Jarrard informed the BOC that he is currently checking on other options for health insurance for his employees instead of the county insurance. He said that Banks County does this, and he has reached out to them to see how it works and for more information. Chairman Stringer said that he understood, and he would like to meet with him about it once he had more information on it.

Clerk of Courts

Clerk of Court Rita Harkins is requesting that dues and subscriptions to be increased from \$670 to \$1,300 total. She is requesting two additional staff positions. She said they are constantly behind on transmitting data because they only have one staff member who submits that information. They have more mandates and more cases. Commissioner Moran asked how much each of the administrative assistant salaries are, and the cost is approximately \$50,000 including fringe.

Coroner

Coroner Mark Cox said he did a comparison with the surrounding counties and last year was the lowest number of cases that he has had since he took office. He said that he considers himself more of a department head than the Coroner's Office. He is expected to work a majority of the cases, and he tries to. There is a lot of administrative work that comes along with the job. There are no standard operating procedures for the Coroner's Office, but they are required for the office to be accredited by the State, so they are talking about that at a higher level. There is a committee that has been created, and a grant that will hopefully get that started. He said he is about on par with the number of coroner's deputies as the surrounding counties. Coroner Cox said he was recently appointed to the Georgia Coroner's Training Council, which is a government organization that reviews complaints about coroners. They are currently reviewing a coroner who is billing case fees and not attending the cases.

Coroner Cox said he would love to move away from the case fees and just be paid a yearly case fee. He did add some time in the budget to cover when they go to a call. He said they have to be within a certain distance to be on call, so that is what he is asking for compensation for. He

discussed transport fees and how the BOC provided a van, so he thinks that covers the fee for the transport, and the GBI transport fee is covered by a contract company. Separate cold storage areas in other counties were discussed. The Coroner said that a lot of the families want to see the body when the incident occurs, and he tries to talk to them and get them to wait until they are at the funeral home, but sometimes the family does not want to wait. He will just clean up the body the best way that he can and let them see it.

Mr. Cox moved the discussion back to the issue of a salary. He said a \$40,000 salary would be ideal, but he would be good with \$35,000 if that would be approved. If he could get everyone on a salary, they could help each other out more. He said that there are a lot of coroners who are getting power stretchers for loading. He has priced them, and they range from \$72,000 for the higher-cost Stryker ones to \$18,000 for the lower-cost versions. He would like to purchase one of those. Commissioner Mayfield asked if that would allow one person to load it or if it would still require two people. The Coroner responded that it would still require two people to load it, but it would transport with just one person. He doesn't need a brand new one; he can take a hand-me-down. Commissioner Mayfield agreed the case fees needed to be removed and go to a straight salary. Chairman Stringer said that \$15,000 is their call time, which is \$5,000 each plus the case fee. The Coroner said that with him working the majority of the cases, the \$5,000 would be a huge pay raise for the deputies. Ms. Branan will reach out to counsel to see what options are viable.

Staff

There was a lunch break from 12:55 pm to 1:37 pm.

Chairman Stringer began with the library requests and said he thinks they are all on board with covering the COLA and the health insurance. He suggested they consider setting aside an amount for that each year, along with an allocation for materials. He said they could discuss \$15,000 each year because that's what they had started giving them last year. The library may need to look at its fund balance again. Commissioner-Elect Davis said he would like to see some data on how many times people download the material and do not really listen to it. Chairman Stringer reminded him that some of the material was paid for by a subscription and not by the download. Mr. Davis asked for data on individual digital subscriptions and the criteria for selecting materials to purchase each year. Mr. Ours, the County Manager, said he will ask for the criteria used when culling books from circulation. Dahlonga Nugget Reporter Keith Murden has heard some people have complained that they get rid of books too quickly. They get rid of books that are within a certain timeframe, and maybe they need to keep books a little longer. Commissioner Greene asked why the health insurance had gone up so much over the past few years, and they explained that it was all part of the state increase. It was the same as what had happened for all state employees. Ms. Branan will get a copy of their fund balance to give to the BOC.

Chairman Stringer said the Development Authority is asking for a \$25,000 increase to be able to look for retail to populate the Gateway Corridor. Commissioner Mayfield thought it was a reasonable price for that kind of work. Commissioner-Elect Davis said that he understands the reason for looking for retail that is favorable to keep us from looking like Dawson. However, that's a lot of money, so he would like to see more information and a proposal from Retail

Strategies.

Chairman Stringer said he was not in favor of the Sheriff's requested accident unit and moved on to the Offender Watch program. Commissioner-Elect Davis said he was in full support of it. He said there are 91 offenders, and it costs \$9,500, so that is a little more than \$100 per offender. The \$96,000 for the in-car cameras is questionable, only if they have enough funds to cover the cost. Ms. Branan will ask for more information on the repairs and car maintenance. The consensus was to wait until the ID scanner was mandated to see if there would be a grant available to help fund it. If not, they would need to remember that the \$10,308 for the ID scanners would have to be funded from the fund balance. The court uniforms could be funded by splitting the cost between this year and next year.

Regarding the Clerk of Court's request for two additional positions, Chairman Stringer said that the data just does not support the request. Commissioner Mayfield thinks the amount of paper might justify one position. Commissioner-Elect Davis asked if maybe someone who worked part-time would suffice. Commissioner Mayfield said that because they deal with such sensitive material, it may be very difficult to find someone to work part-time. The sense he got from being down in their office is that they feel overwhelmed because of the amount of paper there is. Ms. Branan will ask the Clerk if she is willing to take a part-time position.

Chairman Stringer said he does not support a power lift for the Coroner. They discussed whether he could try to find a used one or a grant for one. Ms. Branan is going to get clarification on whether or not we can get away from case fees and go to just a salary. If the case fees can go away, then they are in agreement to go to a \$35,000 salary for the Coroner, a \$7,500 salary for the Chief Deputy Coroner, and a \$5,000 salary for each of the Deputy Coroners. So, the total increase over the current budget is \$3,000.

Chairman Stringer discussed recording videos of Commissioner meetings. Commissioner Mayfield said if the meetings were to be videoed, they needed to be done right from the beginning. It would need to be done with good equipment and the software that works with the agendas and agenda packets. The consensus was not to move forward with streaming the meetings, so there was no need to add the cost to the 2027 budget. Ms. Branan presented what had been included in the budget as presented, which had been requested by the departments. Then she presented a list of position requests that were not included in the budget. They did not include a merit, but they did include a COLA of 4%.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 3:26 pm.

Date

Chairman
Lumpkin County Board of Commissioners

Attest:

Melissa Witcher
Clerk, Lumpkin County