

**FRANKLIN COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS  
WORKSHOP  
COURTHOUSE ANNEX, COMMISSION MEETING ROOM  
JANUARY 5, 2021  
1:30 P.M.  
MINUTES**

**Commissioners Present:** Ricky Jones-Chairman, Bert Boldt, II-Vice-Chairman, Joseph Parrish, and Jessica V. Ward

**Commissioners Absent:** Noah Lockley

**Others Present:** Michael Shuler-County Attorney, Michael Moron—County Coordinator, and Jessica Gay-Deputy Clerk to the Board.

**Call to Order**

A. Public Notice

To comply with CDC and Government social distancing requirements, the general public will not be allowed in the commission meeting room for this meeting; therefore, this Board of County Commission regular meeting will be conducted via livestream and Zoom. **Those wanting to view the meeting can use the livestream link (<https://facebook.com/forgottencoasttv/>)** or go to Forgotten Coast TV's **Facebook** Page. The livestream feed will promptly start 5 minutes before the meeting commences. **You do not need a Facebook account to view Facebook live.** Those wanting to participate during "Public Comments" should use the Zoom log-in/call-in information provided below. There is a link to a list of videos and Getting Started Resources on the main "Agenda and Minutes" webpage for those unfamiliar with Zoom. If you are experiencing any issues with the livestream or Zoom, call (850) 653-9783 extension 373 for assistance. Any person who wishes to appeal a decision made by the Franklin County Board of County Commissioners, with respect to any matter considered at the meeting, must have a record of the proceedings. He or she may need to ensure that a verbatim record of the proceedings is made.

B. This meeting is being held via Zoom and all attendees are muted by default. To join via computer, use the link on the meeting date and time: <https://zoom.us/j/94236348231> If you do not have speakers or a microphone on your computer or prefer to call, you can dial in for audio. Call (301) 715-8592 or (312) 626- 6799 or (929) 205-6099 and enter ID 942 3634 8231#.

If you would like to speak during the public comment portion of the meeting, you have the following options:

Online - select the "raise your hand" icon.

Phone - press \*9 to raise your hand, \*6 to unmute to submit verbal comments.

Public engagement is important to us, and meeting remotely is still a new process. We appreciate everyone's understanding.

Chairman Jones called the meeting to order.

Mr. Moron stated there were no public comments.

Mrs. Debra Belcher the CDBG Administrator addressed the Board to discuss possible projects that can be funded from the Hurricane Michael CDBG Disaster Recovery funds and DEO's CDBG Grant related to COVID-19.

Mrs. Belcher said there are two grant applications with deadlines of February 15<sup>th</sup> for assistance to businesses that were in place at the time of Hurricane Michael or at least properties that were commercial places of employment at the time of Hurricane Michael with a minimum of three properties and a minimum amount of \$250,000. Mrs. Belcher said that she does not have a project at this time and that she is waiting on clarification from DEO. In other DEO projects, you can't just give business owners money.

Mrs. Belcher said that she does not think any buildings qualify. Mrs. Betty Webb suggested purchasing one property where the building was destroyed during Hurricane Michael. Mrs. Belcher said that she does not know if the owners are interested or if there is an issue with the bank. Mrs. Webb suggested the property with the idea that the County may want to acquire the property for future parking and access for a boardwalk. However, this would take a property off of the tax roll and someone would need to maintain it. Commissioner Parrish noted that is only one property and there is a minimum of three. Mrs. Belcher said that most people who had damage from Hurricane Michael have already completed their repairs. The buildings are all at ground level and beneath the flood level.

Chairman Jones asked if it had to be three adjoining properties or could it be separate properties. Mrs. Belcher explained that the Board would have to define the area and that it could be three businesses in one building or three buildings that are not necessarily occupied now but were at the time of Hurricane Michael.

Commissioner Ward asked if Mrs. Belcher could verify the area that she was talking about purchasing. Mrs. Belcher did not want to say because the owners have not been contacted and the information that she has is that they may be behind on their mortgage. Mrs. Belcher confirmed that it is a commercial property that was damaged during Hurricane Michael.

Commissioner Ward asked if the three commercial properties have to be side by side. Mrs. Belcher said they do not as long as we can draw them in our commercial area. She noted that the problem is getting three properties and reaching the \$250,000 minimum.

Mrs. Belcher said she did point out to DEO that the businesses would not get the money and the local government would be in charge of construction. Mrs. Belcher told them that she did not think this was a good idea and suggested the County work with the procurement process, work with the business owner to determine the scope of work, send out for bids, accept bids, but the contract is with the property owner and DEO. Mrs. Belcher said she does not know if DEO would accept these terms. She stated that she doesn't think it is a good idea for the County to be hiring contractors to do work on people's property.

Chairman Jones asked for the deadline. Mrs. Belcher restated the February 15<sup>th</sup> deadline and noted that we would have to advertise and hold a public hearing before the application deadline. Chairman Jones said he thought that we would have a hard time finding a project to fit these guidelines and meet the deadlines.

Commissioner Parrish stated that there is a lot of issues within the applications such as the call back of funds or payment of income from the property. Mrs. Belcher discussed the provision of duplication of benefits, where if a property owner received this money, first they will check to see what the business has already received for instance from FEMA or insurance. If that money has been invested in the building that would be fine, otherwise they would have to contribute funds to the project. Mrs. Belcher explained subrogation, stating that if they get additional money in the future for the same purpose, they would have to give those funds to DEO. Mrs. Belcher said she would not think they would get any money for the same project.

Chairman Jones said it seems to him like there is money available but no way to get to it. Mrs. Belcher said it's not an economic development grant nor a commercial revitalization grant, it's a disaster recovery grant that wants to be those two things. She said you have to tie everything to Hurricane Michael. Chairman Jones said he is fully convinced businesses in the county could benefit from the grant. However, to get it all together and hold a public hearing doesn't seem possible.

Commissioner Parrish said it makes it hard for a small county because we don't have reserves nor the ability to fall back on. He said there is a very small pool to draw tax revenue from and we do not have the reserve that larger counties have which puts us at a disadvantage at times. Commissioner Parrish said in small communities you scale back and do what is necessary and there are no thirty to forty million dollar reserves which kind of handicaps us so to speak.

Mrs. Belcher asked if it was the Board's consensus that we do not pursue this grant any further. Due to time constraints, requirements, and deadlines, the Board agreed to not pursue this grant further.

Commissioner Boldt noted the release date from DEO for this document was December 17, 2020, and reiterated the deadline is unapproachable. Commissioner Parrish said it should have been out a long time ago since Hurricane Michael was two years ago.

Mrs. Belcher explained the grant is tied to low and moderate-income benefit, has a minimum of \$200,000 and a maximum of \$1,000,000. The pre-applications will be due March 15<sup>th</sup>. A webinar is supposed to be scheduled but it has not been done yet. The pre-application cycle opens February 1<sup>st</sup> with the deadline to submit pre-application on March 15<sup>th</sup>.

Mrs. Belcher said she has specific technical questions submitted to DEO one of which is regarding the warehouse the warehouse-type building that the county has which Mrs. Pam Brownell had suggested. Mrs. Belcher said the building was damaged by Hurricane Michael and she would assume the County had insurance to pay for the damages but there was probably a deductible. Mrs. Belcher explained that Mrs. Brownell had suggested making rehabilitating repairs and using it for storage of COVID related materials. The question for DEO is if the County is overall not 50% or above below Low and Moderate Income National Objective will this project be eligible. Mrs. Belcher said we can declare it an urgent need and meet one of the national electives.

Mrs. Belcher said she thought they are going to let us hand out money to people who document they are income-eligible for things such as rent assistance.

Mrs. Belcher the senior center may be eligible since senior centers are presumed to benefit low to moderate-income. Mrs. Belcher suggesting work relating to your HVAC system at the senior center.

Chairman Jones asked if it was possible for the County to do something with fiber optic to expand and improve our broadband services and could we use some of the funds to pay for consulting to help us draw up the plans needed to do this.

Mrs. Belcher said if you use an area that is primarily low to medium income, it may be a possible idea. She said she did not know if there would be questions about if they have internet or who is going to pay for the internet. Mrs. Belcher said we could check to see where it is available and look at it that way. We know where there are lower-income areas in Franklin.

They are saying planning only grants but I think you would have, I don't know if the project planning grants. They have not made that clear. In a CDBG grant normally if you need planning, you put that in the grant. We can check what low-income areas might need fibrotic cables.

Chairman Jones asked if the funds could be used to have plans drawn up for something to change the internet capabilities in our County. Chairman Jones said he believes this would change the direction for our County.

Mrs. Belcher can explore how broadband services might qualify for the program. Mrs. Belcher said it was her understanding that broadband is available on Highway 98 and it's just a question how far out it is. Chairman Jones said it is his understanding that the fiber optic cables have been laid on Highway 98 throughout the County but there is disconnect in the connection from the highway to the homes. Mr. Moron said some companies will not run in certain areas for various reasons. Chairman Jones said helping the broadband would help schools, healthcare, and businesses. Chairman Jones said if we can't get the money to do the work, maybe we can get someone to draft a plan for us to use to complete the project.

Mrs. Belcher said she can look into that idea. She said one thing to think about is the overall trend of people using their phones instead of computers. She said she thought that the providers may want to do their studies to be willing to continue. Mrs. Belcher said one good thing is this is a pre-application, but the flip side is if we say this is what we want to do, and then we decide not to we may not be able to change direction. Mrs. Belcher said she would ask DEO if we can apply for multiple projects.

Chairman Jones said people are using their phones more but not for what we are talking about doing. They are using other devices, not just cell phones. Chairman Jones said he thought we should ask for whatever we think we can get and then if we have to scale back we do.

Commissioner Boldt asked if another way of looking at this would be to focus this grant towards our public schools, throwing a blanket over a larger population. Mrs. Belcher said a lot of applications she has had to defend to the general public, why we are only serving low-income people since we are all paying taxes and need it. One of the answers she has given is that it helps free up money for another area, the flip side on that is you have to tell DEO who you are servicing and they would have to be low to moderate-income. I would have to do a little strategizing to find the best approach to qualify and compete.

Chairman Jones said he thinks we need to find a way to get it done. He thinks it would be a great benefit to the community.

Commissioner Boldt asked if we are going to pursue all of the options on the table. Mrs. Belcher said she is going to pursue all items approved by the board. Mrs. Belcher said she wasn't sure if the County wanted to get into any business assistance or personal assistance. Mrs. Belcher asked if anyone had a plan B in addition to broadband.

Mr. Moron said he did not know of anything besides the broadband and he said he wasn't sure without knowing more if the County would want to get into any business or personal with the stipulations.

Mrs. Belcher said the property at Bay City work camp may be a possibility if you have insurance money that you are going to use to repair Hurricane Michael damage but it still needs improvements. You could use the funds to get it in a decent climate controlled condition and use it to store Covid supplies. Mr. Moron agreed that we need to explore the work camp project. Chairman Jones noted that he thought it would be more than just a roof. Mr. Moron noted that it would need to get power, a roof, and an HVAC system. Commissioner Parrish asked if more modifications can be made to the building. Mr. Moron said yes it was a warehouse before. Mrs. Brownell suggested to use as a warehouse, but a better climate-controlled situation. Mrs. Belcher asked if the County had insurance on the building. Mr. Moron said more than likely it fell under our blanket policy but he does not know what was spent or what wasn't spent. Mr. Moron said Mrs. Griffith would have this information.

Mr. Moron said he agrees with the broadband and work camp. Mrs., Belcher was directed to come back in two weeks with specific items for the Board to take action on. Commissioner Parrish asked Mrs. Belcher to bring back specific answers as to what can we do with this building and how can we expand broadband. Commissioner Boldt asked if we could look at a health aspect as to where this money could be spent. Commissioner Boldt suggested creating access to a health product like a pharmacy-based at Weems East, something to compliment the spirit of this money. Mr. Moron said this is a question Mrs. Belcher would need to have with the current hospital CEO. Mrs. Belcher said this is short term money, not something we can continuously pay for. Chairman Jones said we could do telehealth with broadband. Commissioner Ward noted broadband is a hot topic, especially now with COVID, and it is how a lot of people talk to their doctors. Mr. Moron directed Mrs. Belcher to meet with Mr. Walker at Weems and report back to Commissioner Boldt with ideas that come up in the conversation. Mrs. Belcher will bring back specific items for the Board to vote on at the next meeting.

**Adjournment**

There being no further business to come before the Board, the meeting was adjourned at 2:09 p.m.

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Ricky Jones – Chairman

Attest:

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Michele Maxwell – Clerk of Courts