

**CASS COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE**

November 16, 2023

Vice-Chair Laylin called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m. in the Commission Chambers on Thursday, November 16, 2023. Chair Jones offered the Invocation. Commissioner Locke led the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America.

Clerk/Register Monica McMichael called roll:

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Ryan Laylin, James Lawrence, Joyce Locke, Jeremiah Jones, Mary Howie, Samuel Barrera, Roseann Marchetti and RJ Lee.

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: None.

STAFF PRESENT: Administrator Matthew Newton, Finance Director Jennifer Rentfrow and Deputy Finance Director James Tito.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Public comment occurred.

ADDITIONS/DELETIONS TO THE AGENDA

None.

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

Commissioner Marchetti moved, seconded by Chair Jones, to approve the November 16, 2023, Cass County Committee of the Whole Agenda. Motion to approve the agenda carried by voice vote.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Commissioner Barrera moved, seconded by Commissioner Lee, to approve the October 19, 2023, Committee of the Whole Meeting Minutes. Motion carried by voice vote.

PRESENTATIONS

None.

COMMITTEE REPORTS

Commissioners Jones, Marchetti and Howie shared Committee Reports.

DISTRICT REPORTS

Commissioners Marchetti and Howie provided District Reports.

ADMINISTRATOR'S REPORT

Administrator Newton shared the Administrator's Report. He introduced Tricia Smith as the new Public Defender Administrator. He went on to recognize County GIS Director Erika Espeland who was presented with a county challenge coin by Commissioner Marchetti.

FINANCE REPORT

Financial Director Jennifer Rentfrow offered the Finance Report.

COUNTY PARTNERS

Conservation District representative Korie Blyveis stated that the Spotted Lantern Fly was sighted in northern Indiana. She asked anyone who spotted the fly not to kill it but rather catch and deliver it to the Conservation District. Ms. Blyveis then informed board members of the Conservation District Annual Meeting set for November 28, 2023.

Road Commission Managing Director Bob Thompson informed commissioners that the Road Commission recently experienced a ransomware attack. Because the County I.T. Department put protective measures in place, no data was lost. The County I.T. Team worked around the clock from just after the attack on a Friday until 4:30 a.m. the following Monday to restore all data. Mr. Thompson informed the board what a superb I.T. Department the county had.

Gerry Bundle, County Transportation Authority Director, provided an update on cost-saving measures the authority had implemented and asked that the board consider their request for funding.

ELECTED OFFICIALS

Sheriff Behnke, Judge Carol Bealor, Prosecutor Victor Fitz and Drain Commissioner Jeff VanBelle shared updates with the board.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

None.

NEW BUSINESS

A. Appointments

- i. Reappointment of Sandra Asmus to the Cass District Library Board for a term expiring 12/31/2026.
- ii. Reappointment of Don Delong to the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission for a term expiring 12/31/2025.
- iii. Reappointment of Linda Preston to the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission for a term expiring 12/31/2025.
- iv. Reappointment of John Harsh to the Board of Public Works for a term expiring 12/31/2026.
- v. Reappointment of Kent Clark to the Road Commission to a term expiring 12/31/2029.
- vi. Appointment of Victor Fitz to the Opioid Settlement Advisory Committee.
- vii. Appointment of James Wierman to the Opioid Settlement Advisory Committee.
- viii. Appointment of Richard Palmisano to the Solid Waste Planning Committee for a term expiring 12/31/2025.
- ix. Appointment of James Plukas as the DOC Representative of the Community Corrections Advisory Board for a term expiring 09/30/2027.

Commissioners agreed to move Item A to the next regular board meeting for approval.

B. 2024 Holiday Schedule

Monday, January 1, 2024 – New Year’s Day

Monday, January 15, 2024 – Martin Luther King Jr. Day

Monday, February 15, 2024 – President’s Day

Friday, March 29, 2024 – Good Friday

Monday, May 27, 2024 – Memorial Day

Wednesday, June 19, 2024 - Juneteenth

Thursday, July 4, 2024 – Independence Day

Monday, September 2, 2024 – Labor Day

Monday, September 11, 2024 - Veteran’s Day

Thursday, November 28, 2024 – Thanksgiving Day

Friday, November 29, 2024 – Day after Thanksgiving

Tuesday, December 24, 2024 – Christmas Eve Day

Wednesday, December 25, 2024 – Christmas Day

Tuesday, December 31, 2024 – New Year's Eve Day

Commissioners agreed to move Item B to the next regular board meeting for approval.

C. Remonumentation Contract Update

Because a surveyor changed firms, an update to the current contract was necessary. The change would update the firm of Surveyor Mikel Currier from Jones, Petrie, Rafinski to Stephenson Land Surveying.

Commissioners agreed to move Item C to the next regular board meeting for approval.

D. 2024 Remonumentation Grant

A motion to approve the 2024 Remonumentation Grant in the amount of \$44,599.

Commissioners agreed to place Item D. on the next regular board meeting agenda.

E. FOC Program Services Coordinator

The courts requested to replace the FOC Bench Warrant Officer with an FOC Program Services Coordinator. The coordinator would carry out the enforcement duties previously handled by the Bench Warrant Officer along with added duties of attempting to decrease incarceration and bench warrants to save the county money.

The position would be a new CCIEA paygrade 7 with an approximate annual cost for wages and fringes of \$70,000 (FOC receives 66% reimbursement through the FOC IV-D Grant).

Commissioners agreed to move Item E. to the next regular board meeting.

F. Child Support Secretary/Criminal Secretary

Prosecutor Fitz requested the board return the Child Support/Criminal Secretary to a full-time position. The position would be funded by a DHHS Contract as well as CCDET funds; therefore, there would be no impact to the county general fund.

Commissioners agreed to move Item F to the next regular board meeting agenda.

G. Step-Level Retention Increase

Administrator Newton asked the board to renew the Resolution Authorizing Step Level Retention Increases. The resolution would allow the County Administrator to make full use of the compensation schedule when a Department Head or Elected Official determined it was necessary to attract or maintain an acceptable level of talent.

Judge Bealor spoke in support of the resolution.

Commissioners agreed to move Item G to the next regular board meeting for approval.

H. Jail System Upgrades

Overall costs for all three projects will be approximately \$500,000 after grant funds were applied. The CCDET Fund was discussed for use to complete the project. Final cost figures would be provided at the next regular board meeting.

Board members agreed to move Item H. to the next regular board meeting.

I. Organizational Meeting

Approve January 4, 2024, at 5:00 p.m. as the date/time of the 2024 Board of Commissioners Organizational Meeting.

Board members agreed to move Item I. to the next regular board meeting agenda.

J. Discussion – Committee of the Whole Process/Function

Commissioner Marchetti opened discussion on streamlining the Committee of the Whole after several lengthy meetings. After discussion, the board decided that the Chair would direct which meeting on which to place presentations after receiving a synopsis of what the presentation would include.

Clerk/Register Monica McMichael shared agendas from past Committee of the Whole Meetings. The agendas included discussions items only, no reports. Discussion followed.

Commissioners agreed to remove the following items from the Committee of the Whole Agenda:

- 9. Presentations
- 10. Committee Reports
- 11. District Reports
- 12. Administrator's Report

13. Finance Report
14. County Partners
15. Elected Officials

The Finance Report would be included in the packet.

Item J. would move to the next regular board meeting agenda.

K. CCCD – SESC Funding Request

The Cass County Conservation District requested \$76,000 in funding after the county allocated \$10,000 in the FY 24 Budget.

Vice-Chair Laylin stated he wished for the Soil Erosion Program to return to the county. Drain Commissioner Jeff VanBelle spoke regarding the Soil Erosion Program. He thought the county did not contribute enough money to the program. He did caution the board, however, that the program would most likely not generate revenue or break even. Financially. He added his thoughts on the State EGLE Department and that they were pushing beyond what the law required.

Vice-Chair Laylin asked the Administrator's Office to research the dollar amount necessary for the program. The item would move to the next board meeting agenda.

L. Elected Official Salary

The Salary Committee recommended a 3% wage increase for Elected Officials in 2024. If approved, the raise would increase the overall budget by \$13,713.80.

Item L. would move to the next regular board meeting agenda.

M. Discussion – Road Deputies & Detectives Compensation

Administrator Newton opened a discussion on wage increases for road deputies and detectives.

Chair Jones shared the Salary Committee's recommendation of a 10% salary increase and to leave the MERS DC trigger in place. He did state that he had concerns about increasing the budget, though, and was interested in using CCDET funds to incur the increased costs. The Chair stated that he was pro law enforcement; however, he was concerned over the effect on other unions.

Commissioner Barrera stated that Sheriff Behnke approached the salary committee with a problem. The problem was that road patrol was leaving CCSO for other employment that offered better pay and benefits. He stated that commissioners should trust the elected officials.

Administrator Newton discussed opening negotiations with the unions as opposed to only offering salary increases. It would allow Administration to hear what the officers actually wanted.

Sheriff Behnke informed board members that CCSO currently had 24 Road Patrol Officers versus 41 in 2003. He cautioned the board that in 1991 Road Patrol was reduced to eight Road Patrol Officers. The reduction of road patrol led to the elimination of 24-hour public safety coverage in the county.

Since the MERS DC trigger was implemented, eleven CCSO Road Patrol Deputies had left the department to work at other agencies. Sheriff Behnke informed commissioners there were currently two additional officers interviewing at neighboring departments.

Sheriff Behnke went on to explain that the lack of law enforcement was a nationwide issue. Some departments were sending candidates to police academies; however, that process required 7-10 months. Many departments were retaining officers and attracting new officers by increasing salaries and benefits. For instance:

- City of Dowagiac – 13% salary increase
- Ontwa Township/Village of Edwardsburg – 10% salary increase
- City of Niles – initial 6 or 7% salary increase, then 5% increase each year for three years

Sheriff Behnke urged board members to remove the MERS DC trigger as Road Patrol Deputies informed him that it was a major reason for their leaving CCSO.

Vice-Chair Laylin proposed a 5% salary increase with the removal of the MERS trigger. He asked County Administration to obtain clarity on removing the MERS trigger. He went on to specify that all new hires would receive the MERS Defined Contribution Retirement Plan.

Commissioner Marchetti voiced her concern with the offer as there were other county employees, including the non-union employees, who wanted to keep their MERS Defined Benefit Retirement Plan.

Commissioner Barrera suggested the board approve the request as specified by Sheriff Behnke with a 6% salary increase and the removal of the MERS DC trigger. MERS stipulations for new hires were not discussed or agreed upon. Vice-Chair Laylin removed his suggestion of 5% with the removal of the trigger. The item would move to the next regular board meeting agenda.

Commissioner Lee reminded board members to keep in mind the future financial security of the county. He agreed with offering the MERS Defined Benefit to current CCSO Road Deputies; however, he wished to place all new hires in the Defined Contribution MERS Plan.

Miscellaneous

As a member, Commissioner Howie asked Bernie Williamson to speak on behalf of the Historical Commission. The county has had a lease with Cassopolis Public Schools for the Red Brick one-room schoolhouse for the last 20 years. Unfortunately, the potential of the one-room schoolhouse had not been realized due to funding constraints. Currently, groups were working on an agreement where the school district would transfer ownership to the Historical Society in order to take advantage of the Historical Society's 501(c)(3) tax exempt status. They would keep the board apprised of the project.

BOARD MEMBER COMMENTS/ANNOUNCEMENTS

None.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 6:32 p.m.

Approved: _____

Date

Vice-Chair Ryan Laylin

Monica McMichael, Clerk/Register