

MINUTES
Cheshire County Commissioners Meeting
Wednesday, May 6, 2020
County Hall Pursuant to Emergency Order #12 Pursuant to Executive Order 2020-04
This meeting will be conducted electronically.

Conference Call Information
Phone Call-in Number: +1 646 558 8656
Meeting ID: 409 748 8803
Building

Present: Commissioners: Charles Weed, Jack Wozmak, and Robert Englund
Staff: County Administrator Coates, Director of Finance Trombly, Maplewood Facilities Director Harrison, HR Director May, and Assistant County Administrator Bouchard.
Guests: County Treasurer and Keene City Counselor Terry Clark.

At 9:37AM Commissioner Weed opened the meeting and a roll-call of the Commissioners attending the meeting was conducted by County Administrator Coates. Commissioners Weed, Englund, and Wozmak responded as "present".

Commissioner Weed then moved to conduct this meeting as an emergency meeting under the relevant provisions of NH RSA 91-A, and consistent with the recommendations contained in Executive Order 2020-04 Order 12 issued by Governor Sununu. Commissioner Englund seconded the motion and upon roll-call vote the motion passed unanimously.

Emergency Order #12 Pursuant to Executive Order 2020-04
Temporary modification of public access to meetings under RSA 91-A
Pursuant to Section 18 of Executive Order 2020-04 it is hereby ordered, effective immediately, that:

1. Pursuant to Executive Order 2020-04, paragraph 8 provides: "State and local government bodies are permitted and encouraged to utilize the emergency meeting provisions of RSA 91-A to conduct meetings through electronic means while preserving, to the extent feasible, the public's right to notice of such meetings and ability to observe and listen contemporaneously."
2. Pursuant to Emergency Order #2 issued pursuant to Executive Order 2020-04, gatherings of fifty people or more are prohibited.
3. To implement these orders and recommendations, the requirement in RSA 91-A:2, III (b), that a quorum of a public body be physically present unless immediate action is imperative, is waived for the duration of the State of Emergency declared in Executive Order 2020-04.
4. To further implement these orders and recommendations, the requirement in RSA 91-A:2, III(c), that each part of a meeting of a public body be audible or otherwise discernible to the public "at the location specified in the meeting notice as the location of the meeting," is waived for the duration of the State of Emergency declared in Executive Order 2020-04 so long as the public body:
 - Provides public access to the meeting by telephone, with additional access possibilities by

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- video or other electronic means;
- Provides public notice of the necessary information for accessing the meeting;
- Provides a mechanism for the public to alert the public body during the meeting if there are problems with access; and
- Adjourns the meeting if the public is unable to access the meeting.

Coates then outlined the rules of the meeting;

1. Public has an opportunity at the beginning of the Commissioners Meeting under “Public Comment” to speak. Community input will not be allowed after that point, unless recognized and allowed by the Chair of the Commissioners.
2. All votes will be Roll Call and when recognized, we are asking that you re-state your name and yes or no
3. If you have a question or motion that you would like to ask to put forward, please state the following, “Mr. Chair, Commissioner (your name) has a question or motion”.
4. If you are having issue hearing the call, please text or call the County Administrator at 603-313-9002.
5. Please mute your phones so background noise won’t interfere with the meeting.
6. This meeting has been posted on our website so that the community, department heads and media can listen into the meeting.
7. This meeting is utilizing a Zoom Platform so listeners can join us via audio or audio/visual.

Commissioner Weed then recognized Sheriff Rivera who discussed that the Dispatcher Center phone system has failed and although it was temporarily repaired it is just limping along and it must be replaced as an immediate need. Coates said that some monies from a previously approved funding of \$10,000.00 will cover most of the cost and another \$5,000.00 from the IT department will enable the installation to take place on a priority basis.

Following discussion of options and the possible loss of the system again, Commissioner Wozmak moved to waive the bidding process because of the emergency situation and because of a long-term existing relationship with the existing vendor who is will work with dispatch to provide the lowest cost option that meets the need of the department. Commissioner Englund seconded the motion. And upon vote the motion passed unanimously.

Commissioner Wozmak then moved to authorize the purchase of the phone system for \$18,500.00 with \$10,000.00 from the previously approved capital budget line item and \$5,000 from the IT department and the remainder to come from the Sheriff’s department operating funds. Commissioner Englund seconded the motion and upon roll-call vote the motion passed unanimously.

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Commissioner Wozmak then discussed the need to review the status of the capital maintenance costs for the County radio transmitters that are due or overdue for economic and operational replacement. He said that because the system is aging and may fail in the near term it is important to plan now for the costs and to establish a replacement schedule.

Master Agenda Item #761: Bruce Harrison was then recognized to discuss the bids for a Maplewood lawn mower that were received. He said that a public RFP was issued and published in the local newspaper and three local companies were also contacted. He said that only one company responded to the bid request. He said that after negotiation with the bidder they were able to get the price down from \$11,000.00 to a final bid of \$8,500 which is \$1,000.00 over allocated funds of \$7,500.00. He said that he also has \$2,500 in the operating budget for equipment purchase if he were authorized to spend the monies. Commissioner Weed then asked if any other alternatives were available and he spoke of postponing any capital purchases. A discussion about the options was held at some length and a number of concerns were discussed about that taxpayer dollars be preserved whenever and wherever possible due to the current pandemic and the potential impact on revenue realization for the towns and county in the coming months.

Treasurer Clark suggested that planting wild flowers in the lawn area might be an approach to help keep the mowing activities down at a lower level. A further discussion of the issue of the potential for staff and residents possibly contracting Lyme disease from the abundant tick population this year was covered and the preventative maintenance of shorter grass at the facility was reviewed.

Following further discussion Commissioner Weed moved to authorize the purchase of the mower for \$8,500.00 using previously allocated capital funding and \$1,000.00 from the Maplewood equipment purchase budget. Commissioners Wozmak seconded the motion and upon roll-call vote the motion passed unanimously.

Coates then introduced HR Director May who discussed the search for candidates for the Superintendent of the Department of Corrections position that is about to open due to the retirement of Superintendent Van Wickler. May said that eleven resumes have been received thus far, with seven external and four internal applicants.

Commissioner Wozmak suggested that a larger regional search should be conducted and that the time frame be extended to be able to obtain more qualified applicants. Following discussion May will place ads in the larger metropolitan areas in the next week. A national search option was then discussed and some other resources to post the position were reviewed.

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Coates was then recognized for the Weekly Operations Report:

Coates then addressed a letter from National Association of Counties (NACO) concerning the national outreach being conducted to support the funding of municipalities and counties that have a population of less than 500,000 who were left out of the previous Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act that was enacted to provide financial resources needed to fight COVID-19 pandemic.

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Minority Leader McCarthy:

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread economic hardship in New Hampshire. In addition to the loss of jobs and shuttering of small businesses, the sharp economic downturn brought on by the virus is expected to produce a significant reduction in state and local tax revenue. Unfortunately, this shortfall could force cities and towns across our state to drastically curtail essential services and lay off workers at the worst possible time for our communities. For the sake of the citizens we serve, we therefore respectfully request that you provide robust funding for local governments in the next COVID-19 response package and take action to ensure that small to mid-sized municipalities and counties can access direct federal assistance.

The increased costs and severe decline in revenue stemming from the pandemic are already forcing local governments in our state to grapple with tough choices. A recent survey of 127 towns and cities in New Hampshire (54%) estimated that COVID-19 related expenses have collectively exceeded \$7.6 million over the past five weeks, with that number expected to rise to \$27.2 million by the end of this year. These costs cover everything from overtime pay, equipment, and emergency response for police officers and firefighters to increased demand for social services and welfare services. In addition, the estimated financial impact to counties is \$13 to \$17 million over the next 6 months. Absent a dramatic increase in aid from the federal government, we will be forced to contemplate deep budget cuts that will undermine the safety, security and well-being of the communities we serve.

Unfortunately, our ability to meet the challenges posed by COVID-19 is significantly hindered by a provision of the CARES Act that bars communities with populations below 500,000 from accessing direct federal aid. No unit of local government in our state currently exceeds this arbitrary threshold – Hillsborough County, the largest county in New Hampshire, has a population of only 406,000. Because of this unfair and unnecessary limitation, all of New Hampshire has effectively been cut off from direct federal support for local communities at a time when our budgets have come under unprecedented strain.

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But even more troubling is the loss in revenue that towns and cities are experiencing and will continue to experience. Although CARES Act funding and other funds like FEMA can be used for expenses directly related to COVID-19, no current funding source addresses revenue replacement for local governments. According to the survey, 58% are already experiencing revenue declines—and the worst is yet to come, as property tax payment delinquencies are expected to increase significantly, further straining municipal budgets. The effects will be long-term and significant, leading to further cuts in public services and public sector employment in the months to come. Borrowing is an option for some towns and cities, but borrowing brings with it new costs for municipalities and their taxpayers as well. However, even the municipal bond market has been severely impacted by this crisis, and may not even be available to all localities.

For these reasons, we strongly urge you to provide direct relief to struggling local governments of all sizes commensurate with the scale of the dire fiscal, economic, and public health challenges we face. Indeed, without generous assistance from the federal government, counties and municipalities across our state will find it increasingly difficult to provide the services that keep our residents healthy and safe. Simply put, it would be completely unacceptable for the federal government to stand idly by as local governments across our state and our nation are forced to lay off first responders, health care professionals, sanitation workers, educators, and other critical public employees in the midst of a pandemic and a crushing economic downturn.

Thank you for your urgent attention to this request and for your leadership during this difficult time.

Coates discussed the numerous calls and meeting he has had with State and Congressional offices to include municipalities and Counties with a population of less than 500,000 in the next tranche of CARES funding being prepared and proposed by congress. He said that the National Association of Counties (NACO) has been very active in this lobbying effort and is asking for support from all counties by signing onto the letter that strongly urges funding for all of the smaller cities, towns, and counties that were left out of the original CARES Act funding.

Following discussion concerning the endorsement of the letter for small municipality and county funding, Commissioner Weed moved to support the letter and was seconded by Commissioner Englund. Upon roll-call vote the motion passed unanimously.

Coates said that the County has received \$458,000.00 from the state as part of the funding that was allocated to the State of NH by the federal CARES act in the amount of \$1.23B. A review of

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how the funds may be used is now underway and Coates will report back on possible projects and/or expenses that may fit the funding criteria.

A review of COVID-19 related expenses was then discussed and the funding resources to help cover some of those expenses was covered.

Coates the said that one of the possible projects for some of the monies that have been received is to establish a Personal Protection Equipment supply unit at the Westmoreland campus. He described the possible modification of an existing structure into a secure storage facility and said the costs to complete the work would not have an impact on taxes and would prevent the extreme shortage of critical equipment in the event that either the COVID-19 pandemic continues or an second wave appears later in the year.

Coates then said that a countywide Zoom meeting for municipalities is being scheduled in the next few weeks to bring towns up-to-speed on a number of COVID-19 issues and to introduce them to possible sources of help in meeting their immediate and longer needs to be able to cope with the expected economic impacts to their communities. He outlined the preliminary agenda as follows:

1. Overview of Cheshire County response to the COVID-19 Pandemic- Chris Coates
2. SWRPC - Five Things Communities Can Do Now to Prepare for Recovery – Todd Horner, Planner, Southwest Regional Planning Commission.
3. County Fiscal Responsibility – Cheshire County Commissioner Jack Wozmak, Vice-Chair, Cheshire County Board of Commissioners, and Cheshire County Director of Finance, Sheryl Trombly
4. Grants and Financial Opportunities Cheshire County Director of Grants Manager Suzanne Bansley

Coates then related that additional funding for frontline law enforcement and Department of Corrections officers has been made available at the rate of \$300.00 a week for full-time and \$150.00 per week for part-time staff. He stated that the rules to implement the program are still be worked out and it will take at least another week or more to fully understand how the program will be applied and who will be eligible to participate.

Coates then discussed that payroll forms for the nursing home staff who qualified under the first round of frontline worker funding for healthcare staff have been sent out so that the staff can be paid the \$300.00 and \$150.00 payment bonuses.

An extended discussion of a number of staff positions at the nursing home and at the department of corrections then ensued. It was learned that a number of County essential employees may not

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fall under the rules for frontline healthcare and law enforcement personnel partially due to their job titles even though they are engaged in providing frontline services.

It was recommended by Administrator Coates that Hemenway Trust funds that the County receives each year could allow the county to supplement the bonus funding for some of these employees as the trust fund was specifically established to meet these types of needs of serving the sick, infirmed and aged population of the county.

After an in-depth review of the options and the important consideration of finding ways to eliminate additional funding burdens on taxpayers as the County deals with the pandemic, **Commissioner Weed moved to authorize the payment of stipends for County employees utilizing State funds first any if any employee deemed to be an essential employee does not qualify under the state rules for frontline staff payments but do meet the county criteria, they could be considered to be compensated by the County under the Hemenway Trust fund on a case-by-case basis. Following discussion, a roll-call vote was taken and the motion passed unanimously.**

In response to a question from the Commissioners concerning the interface with the state on funding deadlines Coates explained in detail and said that The Governor's Office for Emergency Relief and Recovery (GOFERR) committee has numerous deadlines that need to be met and the staff is focused on meeting each requirement as the dates approach.

Old Business: Trombly said that the TAN funds have been deposited in the County account.

New Business: None

Commissioner Wozmak them moved to accept the accept Consent Agenda for the approval of the Weekly Manifest and the Minutes from the April 22, 2020 Commissioners meeting and Commissioner Englund seconded the motion. Upon roll-call vote the motion passed unanimously.

At 11:26AM there being no further public business to discuss, Commissioner Wozmak moved to adjourn until noon and was seconded by Commissioner Englund and upon roll-call vote the motion passed unanimously.

Minutes recorded by:
R. Bouchard, Assistant County Administrator

Reviewed and submitted by:
R. Englund, Clerk