

**PASQUOTANK COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA  
DECEMBER 16, 2013**

The Pasquotank County Board of Commissioners met today in a work session on Monday, December 16, 2013 in the Community Room at the W.C. Witherspoon Memorial Library.

**MEMBERS PRESENT:**

Jeff Dixon, Chairman  
Joseph S. Winslow, Jr., Vice-Chairman  
Cecil Perry  
Dr. William R. Sterritt  
Gary G. White  
Frankie Meads

**MEMBERS ABSENT:**

Lloyd E. Griffin, III (*Out of Town*)

**OTHERS PRESENT:**

Rodney Bunch, Interim County Manager  
R. Michael Cox, County Attorney  
State Senator Bill Cook  
State Representative Bob Steinburg  
State Representative Annie Mobley  
Karen Jennings, Clerk to the Board

The work session was called to order at 2:00 PM by Chairman Jeff Dixon who thanked Representative Mobley, Representative Steinburg, and Senator Cook for taking time from their busy schedules to meet with the Board and try and guide it through the restructuring process.

Chairman Dixon asked GIS Coordinator Julie Stamper to highlight the process to this point. Mrs. Stamper explained that according to the 2000 Census the county's population was 34,897 of which 40.05% were black. The population increased by about 6,000 people with the 2010 Census and 37.76% were black. The current method of electing Commissioners includes electing one Commissioner from each of four districts and electing three Commissioners at-large. Mrs. Stamper provided a map outlining the four districts which include Northern Outside, Northern Inside, Southern Outside and Southern Inside. She explained that the inside districts closely follow the city's corporate limits. She provided total population numbers for each district and the percentage of blacks in those districts. She stated that the proposed 4-2-1 plan would provide for the election of four Commissioners from each of the four current districts, one Commissioner from the combined inside districts, one Commissioner from the combined outside districts, and one Commissioner at-large. She said under this proposal, the Southern Inside district would remain the minority district with a black voting age population of 66.47% and the new inside super district would have a black voting age population of 50.84%. Mrs. Stamper advised that this seems to be the most effective way to create a second minority district.

County Attorney Mike Cox provided a history of the 1980's litigation. He explained that in 1985 the Board of Commissioners agreed to the current structure of the Board and the General Assembly enacted a Local Act approving the restructuring. Pursuant to the Consent Order and the Local Act, the Board of Commissioners went from five to seven members with four-year terms. Four districts were created and three at-large seats. According to the federal consent order one district would have at least a 55% minority voting age population. Mr. Cox explained that modifying the structure of the Board could be done in two broad ways. The first way is to meet the statutory requirements and hold a public referendum. Mr. Cox said after consulting with the School of Government the opinion is that the 4-2-1 Plan does not meet the statutory requirements because the super districts would have larger populations than the other districts and all districts must be roughly the same size. Another option is a local act of the General Assembly, or a local act with a public referendum attached. Mr. Cox advised that there is a federal consent order that would have to be amended and this would have to be done through the federal courts. He said in the past it was his understanding that controversial bills were not heard in short sessions of the General Assembly, and 2014 is a short session. He stated that any local bill must be accompanied by a certificate signed by the principle sponsor stating it is non-controversial, and the bill must be approved for introduction by each member of the House and Senate whose district includes the area to which the bill applies. Mr. Cox stated that the county's two Representatives and Senator need to be onboard. He said the Board would like to hear from them what they consider controversial or non-controversial.

Commissioner William Sterritt, who is Chairman of the Governance Committee, explained that the purpose of the committee was to find out from interested citizens if a voting plan could be implemented to allow for more demographic representation on the Pasquotank Board of Commissioners. He stated that four community forums were held over a nine month period of time. He said the committee was not exactly satisfied with the turnout at the forums, but was pleased by the comments that people made. He stated that the Community Relations Commission was very helpful during this process. He said as part of their methodology the Governance Committee did some research to find out the minority representation of the governing bodies in the Albemarle Area. He stated they found that the minority population in Pasquotank County is 38% and there are seven Commissioners on the Board which means that 15% of the Board consists of a minority. He said they also looked at all of the school boards in the area and found that there was better minority representation on school boards than on boards of commissioners. He noted that for the first time he is aware of there are now four minorities and three Caucasians on the Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Board of Education. Commissioner Sterritt explained that the Governance Committee wanted to develop a plan which would allow for more minority representation. He told the legislators that they have the key to open a lot of doors for the benefit of the counties they represent. He asked them to give a lot of heartfelt thought to the request from the majority of the County Commissioners to put forward a bill without a referendum. He said they have the key for progress and unity in Pasquotank County.

Chairman Dixon recognized Dr. Hezekiah Brown to address the Board. Dr. Brown suggested that everyone visualize what it would be like to exchange positions with the other races in the country. He said in order to resolve difficult problems an individual must be willing to walk in another person's shoes and see things from the other person's point of view. He asked that the legislators and County Commissioners listen with compassion and feeling for others who are not like them. Dr. Brown said the Governance Committee that was appointed by the Board traveled throughout Pasquotank County and heard from everyone. He pointed out that the overwhelming majority of those at the forums were in favor of giving a minority the opportunity to serve on the Board of Commissioners. He said this was a referendum because those in favor of the plan showed up and those who did not show up voted for it. He stated that evidence showed that the vast majority of those who showed up were in favor of the Board of Commissioners developing a plan that would be inclusive of all minorities on the Board of Commissioners. He said some Commissioners ignored the report of the Governance Committee and voted down the 2-2-2-1 plan. He stated that the idea of a referendum was never presented until long after the Board of Commissioners voted for the 4-2-1 plan by a four to three vote. Dr. Brown said if a public referendum is held, it will cause irreparable damage to the community in regards to race relations. He stated that individuals will not be campaigning on issues that will be important to the community, but will be campaigning on race which is the most divisive thing that can happen. He said the County Commissioners have put the legislators in a difficult position.

Mr. George Hague thanked the legislators for their work in Raleigh. He said race relations is a sensitive area and he does not like the way that every race in Pasquotank County has been painted with a broad brush saying they are racists. He stated that he does not believe in the year 2013 that some people are still fighting and saying the majority is racist. He said if a gentleman of color of the caliber of Judge Clarence Thomas or J.C. Watts ran, they would get his conservative vote. He said he does not think Pasquotank County is more racist than the State of Louisiana which elected a minority Republican governor with a white majority vote, or than the State of Florida which elected a minority Republican senator with a white majority vote, or than the people of South Carolina that elected a minority Republican representative to the U.S. Congress with a white majority vote. He added that he believes the issue is more about politics than about race.

Mr. John Woodard stated that this is a very divisive issue and everyone has a point of view. He asked how it can be said that the vast majority of citizens in Pasquotank County are racist if a referendum is not held so the people can speak. He said something as monumental as a change of the government should be put before the citizens of the county. He stated that it astounds him that people who supposedly represent the interests of the downtrodden are so willing to throw out a democratic process that allows everybody to vote for or against the issue.

Chairman Dixon asked for comments and direction from the legislators. Representative Annie Mobley thanked everyone for the information they have shared with her. She said her concern is that she is not sure she has heard enough to be able to make a decision. She asked if this is a plan the Commissioners have voted on.

Chairman Dixon responded that the Board voted 4-3 to move the 4-2-1 plan forward without a referendum. He said the Commissioners found out later that if a referendum were attached, it would have to be decided by legislators. He asked direction as to whether each legislator would support the plan without a referendum or whether they believe a referendum should be held.

Representative Mobley said she would support what the Commissioners voted for.

Senator Bill Cook stated that he is 68 years old and remembers evil things between the races years ago, but also remembers some good things, such as a man who said, "I have a dream" to several hundred people. He said he does not know how we got here and it saddens his heart that after all these years we are still talking about black and white issues. He pointed out that we now have a black President. He stated that when he votes it has nothing to do with color, but with whether a person shares his conservative views. He said all of his life he has heard about black and white issues and he thinks it is time to get beyond it. He said some people on both sides of the issue are still stuck in the 1960's. He asked that everyone work together. He said as far as he can tell this is a local issue and is controversial. He stated there was not a unanimous vote of the Board of Commissioners and without some sort of unanimity of opinion, the chances of getting a local bill are not good. He pointed out that there is clearly opposition and if everyone wants to do something, they should get together and find a common ground on which everyone can agree. He said picking sides and black and white issues must be stopped. He added until there is some common ground, this will probably not go very far.

Representative Bob Steinburg stated that he recently had the opportunity to meet with Commissioner Sterritt, Dr. Hezekiah Brown, Mr. Ernest Sutton, and the County Attorney. He said they had a wonderful meeting that was very candid and forthcoming, and he left the meeting with a lot to think about. He explained that since that time he has also taken the opportunity to talk with various individuals to try to get their thoughts on whether or not to have a voter referendum on this issue. He said his sense from the very beginning was that something of this magnitude that is a divisive issue within the Pasquotank County Board of Commissioners deserves all of the people having an opportunity to weigh in. He noted that no one should just assume because there is going to be a voter referendum that people are not going to support this and it would be racist to assume the outcome. He said at the end of the day Pasquotank County belongs to the people and they are the ones who should be given the opportunity to make this decision. He added that he is not against this initiative, but he cannot support it as it is currently being presented without a voter referendum.

Commissioner Cecil Perry thanked the legislators for coming to today's meeting. He stated that he is probably the one most responsible for calling attention to this situation. He said he can assure that racism is not what it is all about. He explained that he was working in the public schools when they first integrated. He said desegregation is a process whereby people get to know one another and then they integrate. He stated that what has happened in Pasquotank County as the result of desegregation has not worked because there is only one African American County Commissioner at this time. He said he thought in the beginning when he asked the Commissioners to help him find a way to increase the number of minorities on the Board that they could all get together without involving any others. Commissioner Perry stated this is not about black or white, but about making the community a better place to live. He said there have only been three African American Commissioners and the population is approximately 40% African American. He stated that voting in the community is done by districts. He said he has heard some people say that black people do not run and women do not run. He pointed out that white women have had 100% success and are not a part of the Board because they do not want to be. He said every black woman who ran failed. He stated that the Commissioners need to talk with one another to get their ideas together in order to move forward. Commissioner Perry added that he thinks it is very unfortunate that this community with a 40% minority population only has one African American sitting on its governing board.

Vice-Chairman Joe Winslow said this process has been going on now for three years and he is emotionally and physically worn out from discussing this issue at length. He stated that the 4-2-1 plan has been reviewed and was voted down twice, and then forums were held on the 2-2-2-1 plan which was then voted down. He said as a Commissioner he cares for and represents everyone here and does not care what color they are. He noted that when Rev. Charles Foster was the Mayor of Elizabeth City, he was his Mayor and he did not care what color he was and could sit down and talk to him. He said he does not know what it will take to get to that point, but he is not sure it is percentages. He stated that he does not know how to proceed as it appears the 4-2-1 plan does not meet the parameters of the law.

Commissioner Frankie Meads noted that he is the other minority on the Board and thanks to Representative Steinburg and Senator Cook he is not the minority today.

Commissioner Gary White thanked the legislators for coming and meeting with the Board of Commissioners today.

Chairman Dixon asked for direction from the legislators on how to proceed.

Senator Cook stated that unanimity is needed and the members of the Board need to come together on this issue and find some common ground where all agree. He said this is a dead issue unless there is a unanimous vote of the Board.

Representative Mobley advised that during her time in the House of Representatives anytime a local issue has come up the first question is always, "Is there opposition?" She said she believes this issue is too controversial to even attempt to present it at this time.

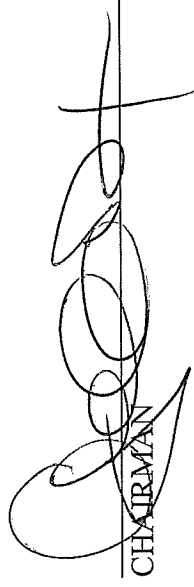
Representative Steinburg said when hearing the statistics on the number of people participating in the public forums around the county and weighing in on this particular issue, there was a very, very small sample of the population who participated and he would not consider it hard and fast data. He stated that he has received a tremendous number of calls and emails from people who were very concerned about this issue and who did not necessarily express support for or against the issue, but did say unequivocally that they felt a referendum would be in order. He said this has helped to shape his thinking as well. He suggested the Board take a stand and let the voters decide whether they agree or not.

Representative Mobley noted that one of the things she senses in this setting is sensitivity. She suggested that the Board consider sensitivity training. She said it all has to do with listening to one another. She pointed out that it was said everyone needs to place themselves in another person's shoes and that is what needs to happen. She said this does not need to be looked at as a black or a white issue, but as a fairness issue. She asked that everyone think about being a little more sensitive to the feelings of others and being careful about what they are saying.

Chairman Dixon thanked everyone for attending today's meeting and again thanked the legislators for taking their time to meet with the Board.

The work session was adjourned at 3:10 PM.

  
CLERK TO THE BOARD

  
CHAIRMAN