



# Union County, NC

## Board of Commissioners

### Meeting Minutes

Union County Government  
Center  
500 North Main Street  
Monroe, North Carolina  
[www.unioncountync.gov](http://www.unioncountync.gov)

#### Special Meeting

(Joint Meeting with the Union  
County Board of Education)

Approved: May 19, 2025

Thursday, April 10, 2025

**5:30 PM**

The Union County Board of Commissioners met in a special meeting on Thursday, April 10, 2025, at 5:30 p.m., at the Professional Development Center, 721 Brewer Drive, Monroe, North Carolina 28112, for the purpose of holding a joint meeting with the Union County Board of Education. The topics discussed during the special meeting included matters relevant to the Proposed Fiscal Year 2026 Budget, a Union County Budget Process Preview, and Union County Public Schools Operating and Capital Budget matters.

The following were:

#### **Union County:**

**PRESENT:** Chair Melissa M. Merrell; Vice Chair Brian W. Helms; Commissioner Clancy C. Baucom; Commissioner Christina B. Helms; and Commissioner Gary Sides

**ABSENT:** None

**ALSO PRESENT:** Brian Matthews, County Manager; Patrick Niland, Deputy County Manager; Clayton Voignier, Assistant County Manager; Lynn G. West, Clerk to the Board of Commissioners; Beverly Liles, Finance Director; Jason May, Director, Budget and Grants Management; and Erika Wells, Senior Communications Specialist

#### **Union County Public Schools (UCPS):**

**PRESENT:** Chair Jimmy Bention, Sr.; Vice Chair Matt Helms; Board Member John Kirkpatrick; Board Member Barry Tucker; Board Member Sandra Greene; Board Member Joe Morreale; Board Member Kathy Heintel; and Board Member Sarah May

**ABSENT:** Board Member Todd Price

ALSO PRESENT: Dr. Andrew G. Houlihan, Superintendent; Jonathan Tyson, Chief of School Performance; Susan Rodgers, Assistant Superintendent of Academics; Colon Moore, Assistant Superintendent for Administration & Operations; Tahira Stalberte, Assistant Superintendent of Communications and Community Relations; Kevin Plue, Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources; Jarrod McCraw, Assistant Superintendent for Student Support; Shanna McLamb, Chief Finance Officer; Jay Parker, Chief Technology Officer; Michele Morris, General Counsel; and Donna Mullarkey, Administrative Assistant

**Call to Order:**

At approximately 5:31 p.m., Jimmy Bention, Chair of the Union County Board of Education, called the special meeting of the Board of Education to order and welcomed everyone present.

At approximately 5:31 p.m., Melissa M. Merrell, Chair of the Union County Board of Commissioners, welcomed everyone present and asked for a motion to call the special meeting of the Board of Commissioners to order.

Commissioner Christina B. Helms moved to call the meeting to order. The motion passed by a unanimous vote as follows:

Chair Melissa M. Merrell	Aye
Vice Chair Brian W. Helms	Aye
Commissioner Clancy C. Baucom	Aye
Commissioner Christina B. Helms	Aye
Commissioner Gary Sides	Aye

**Approval of Agenda**

Board of Education Chair Jimmy Bention asked for a motion from the Board of Education to approve the agenda for the joint meeting.

Board of Education Member Joe Morreale moved to approve the agenda, seconded by Board of Education Member John Kirkpatrick.

The motion passed by a vote of eight to zero as follows:

Chair Bention	Aye
Vice Chair Matt Helms	Aye
Board Member John Kirkpatrick	Aye
Board Member Barry Tucker	Aye
Board Member Sandra Greene	Aye
Board Member Joe Morreale	Aye
Board Member Keithy Heintel	Aye
Board Member Sarah May	Aye

Board Member Todd Price was not present.

Board of Commissioners Chair Melissa Merrell asked for a motion on behalf of the Board of Commissioners to approve the agenda for the joint meeting.

Commissioner Gary Sides interjected that prior to a vote by the Board of Commissioners to approve the agenda, he wanted to add two items to the agenda.

Chair Merrell stated that this is a special called meeting, and the agenda has been published. She explained that she spoke with the County Attorney today, and the Board would be following the agenda that was published in the notice for the special meeting.

Commissioner Sides requested that the two items be added to the agenda of the Board of Commissioners' regular meeting of April 14, 2025.

Chair Merrell stated the requests could be made at a future meeting.

Chair Merrell moved to approve the agenda as published and called for a vote on the motion, which passed by a vote of four to one as follows:

Chair Melissa M. Merrell	Aye
Vice Chair Brian W. Helms	Aye
Commissioner Clancy C. Baucom	Aye
Commissioner Christina B. Helms	Aye
Commissioner Gary Sides	Nay

**Opening Comments/Introductions – Board of Education Chairman/Board of County Commissioners Chair:**

Board of Education Chair Jimmy Bention stated that it was a pleasure to have the Commissioners present for tonight's meeting.

Board of Commissioners Chair Melissa Merrell stated that it is wonderful to be back home with the Union County Public Schools. She called the first item on tonight's agenda for the 2026 Union County Budget Process Preview.

Brian Matthews, County Manager, introduced Jason May, Director, Budget and Grants Management.

Mr. May stated that he had been requested to explain the County's budget preview and budget process. He provided a PowerPoint presentation and addressed two of the revenue streams, with the first being the Ad Valorem taxes. He explained the bifurcated tax rate.

He commented on the process that takes place before revaluation. He stated that when going into a revaluation year, the budget team reviews the ad valorem tax base growth on an annual basis over the past four years, determines an average, and runs through a normal process to determine an ad valorem organic growth rate and adds it to the tax base. He said that the rate

is a little under four percent. Mr. May stated that the tax base is the number that is used to calculate the revenue-neutral tax rate.

Mr. May displayed a slide showing the current bifurcated tax rate:

Current Bifurcated Tax Rate	
Tax Rate	
UC General Fund	16.32
UC Debt Fund	1.75
UC Education Fund	37.42
UCPS+Charter Schools	36.45
SPCC	0.97
UC Education Debt Fund	2.92
UCPS	1.94
SPCC	0.98
UC Economic Development Fund	0.39
Total	58.80

He also displayed a slide showing the FY 2026 Ad Valorem Organic Growth:

FY 2026 Ad Valorem Organic Growth		
FY 2026 Organic Growth in Ad Valorem Revenues		
	Tax Rate	Organic Growth
UC Education Fund	37.42	\$8,837,933
UCPS+Charter Schools	36.45	\$8,608,837
SPCC	0.97	\$229,097
Education Debt Fund	2.92	\$689,652
UCPS	1.94	\$458,193
SPCC	0.98	\$231,458

He stated that the County is in the process of creating a budget for FY 2026, and the numbers are changing rapidly.

Mr. May discussed sales tax as a second revenue stream. He displayed a slide showing the Sales Tax – Mid-Year Projection:

# Sales Tax – Mid-Year Projection

Union County Sales Tax History (FY 2025 Projected)					
Fiscal Year	Adopted Budget	Revised Budget	Actual Collected	Over/Under Budget	% of Budget Collected
FY 2018	\$ 44,713,531	\$ 44,713,531	\$ 43,070,620	\$ (1,642,911)	96.3%
FY 2019	\$ 48,745,636	\$ 48,745,636	\$ 45,818,820	\$ (2,926,816)	94.0%
FY 2020	\$ 48,475,636	\$ 48,745,636	\$ 48,720,847	\$ (24,789)	99.9%
FY 2021	\$ 46,556,839	\$ 51,994,023	\$ 56,259,871	\$ 4,265,848	108.2%
FY 2022	\$ 53,540,363	\$ 55,598,613	\$ 66,286,686	\$ 10,688,073	119.2%
FY 2023	\$ 67,669,664	\$ 67,669,664	\$ 69,967,843	\$ 2,298,179	103.4%
FY 2024	\$ 81,081,605	\$ 81,081,605	\$ 71,136,224	\$ (9,945,381)	87.7%
FY 2025	\$ 72,833,751	\$ 72,833,751	\$ 72,564,266	\$ (269,485)	99.6%

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He emphasized that sales tax growth is the most difficult to project and is reliant upon consumer spending. He stated that the budget department is projecting revenue that will be received 16 months from now and said it is even more difficult to project with all the economic uncertainty that has been introduced into the system over the last several weeks.

Mr. May reviewed upcoming key dates for the budget:

- ✓ May 15, 2025 – Union County Public Schools budget request submitted to the Board of Commissioners
- ✓ May 23, 2025 – FY 2026 Manager's Recommended Budget will be submitted to the Clerk to the Board of Commissioners
- ✓ June 2, 2025 – Presentation and Public Hearing for the FY 2026 Manager's Recommended Budget
- ✓ June 16, 2025 – Adoption of the FY 2026 Operating and Capital Budget Ordinance

Vice Chair Brian W. Helms stated that in reviewing the sales tax projections, it looks to be getting closer to historical norms based on abnormal activity from 2021 – 2023 while dealing with COVID.

Mr. May stated that Vice Chair Brian W. Helms was correct and referenced the delta between FY 2020 and FY 2022, which increased by \$18 million, which he described as being due to inflation. He commented that going into the FY 2022 budget, everyone was talking about recession and the pandemic and came out of FY 2022 with a 20 percent increase in sales.

Board of Education Vice Chair Matt Helms asked Mr. May to define organic growth.

Mr. May defined it as development, new construction, renovations, retrofits, and so on. Brian Matthews, County Manager, emphasized that organic growth is not based on revaluation of property but represents the normal growth that would be in any given year.

## **Union County Public Schools Budget Proposal:**

Board of Education Chair Jimmy Bention, Sr., recognized Dr. Houlihan for comments.

Dr. Houlihan expressed appreciation to the Board of County Commissioners for meeting with the Board of Education today. He stated he wanted to be on record saying that the relationship between staff-to-staff continues to be extremely positive. He expressed appreciation to Mr. Matthews and the County Management team for the collaboration, support, and ongoing conversations.

Dr. Houlihan introduced Shanna McLamb, Chief Finance Officer for Union County Public Schools, to provide a high-level overview of the Superintendent's budget recommendation. He said that the presentation includes the list of priorities that have been identified and projects the needs of the next fiscal year.

Ms. McLamb presented a PowerPoint presentation of the proposed budget. She reminded that Union County Public Schools is the sixth-largest school district in North Carolina. She stated there are 40,870 students in the current school year. She further said that Union County Public Schools has the number-one highest graduation rate in North Carolina for FY 2023-2024 at 93.3 percent. Ms. McLamb said Union County Public Schools is a very high-performing district and employs over 5,000 people. She noted that over 2,500 of those employed are teachers.

She explained that the State budget is designed to allocate funding based on a three-tiered system. She said that Union County is in tier 3, which means it receives the lowest amount of funding per pupil among all counties in North Carolina. Ms. McLamb stated that there were some teacher supplements this current school year. She pointed out that last year, Union County Public Schools' teacher supplements were at number 50, and with the \$1,050 added to the supplement this current school year, it brought the teacher supplements to number 37. She added that Union County Public Schools has been striving to reach number 10 for several years.

Ms. McLamb shared that there is some uncertainty on the status of the State's budget, as they do not have any numbers on what the salary and benefit increases will be. She explained that the proposed budget has been built on historical and approximate increases received over the previous years. She noted that the proposed budget includes a five percent increase in the benefits and a three percent increase for salaries. Ms. McLamb shared that there are projected increases in enrollment in the charter schools.

She stated that in order for Union County Public Schools to maintain operations and its current status, \$3,967,862 is needed. Ms. McLamb stated that she has built in increases in utilities and insurance costs, charter school enrollment, and salary and benefits.

She highlighted the proposed local operating – additional needs, which total approximately \$14 million and include: program continuation, inflationary increases specifically for the facilities department and technology, long-term substitute costs, staff recruiting and retention, and program expansions.

Ms. McLamb addressed the operating capital needs. She explained that the operating capital is for continuous improvement to maintain the schools' facilities, classroom technology needs, as well as any aging vehicles or fleet needs. These requests include: facilities (building projects/roofing/painting/equipment); transportation (service vehicles/activity buses); school nutrition – replacement equipment in cafeterias; technology – student and teacher laptop lease payments; band uniforms and equipment – Piedmont High School. She stated the total operating capital request is approximately \$29 million.

Ms. McLamb said that between the operating capital and local operating budget, the County provides approximately \$150 million to the schools. She stated that this request has an increase of approximately \$27.7 million.

Commissioner Sides asked Ms. McLamb if she knew if any supplement increases had been requested by surrounding counties.

Ms. McLamb responded that it is a little early to have this information, but she has not seen any proposed increases at this time.

Dr. Houlihan said they saw a phenomenon last year of having to be much more competitive with the State of South Carolina. He stated there is a bi-partisan support in the South Carolina General Assembly to raise the beginning teacher pay to \$50,000. He shared that for the first time in a long time, there were a significant number of Union County Public Schools employees who had left to go to work in South Carolina.

Board of Commissioners Vice Chair Brian W. Helms stated that he understood that the General Assembly awarded Union County Public Schools and Union County a significant amount for a natatorium. He asked if those dollars could be allocated to other capital projects.

Ms. McLamb said it is her understanding that \$8 million was allocated to the school district for athletic facilities. She added that she did not know the status of using those funds for other projects. She noted that those dollars have to be expended by October.

Board of Education member Kathy Heintel interjected that the \$8 million was not enough dollars for the natatorium project, and it would cost \$150,000 per year to maintain it. She noted that in the budget, it designates funding for athletics.

Board of Commissioners Chair Merrell said it was her understanding that Union County Public Schools informed Representative Willis that it does not have the land and does not know where it would locate a natatorium.

Brian Matthews, County Manager, asked Ms. McLamb if she had an estimate of what the payment would be for the charter schools for the upcoming fiscal year.

Ms. McLamb estimated that payment would be \$13.5 to \$14 million.

Board of Commissioners Chair Merrell and Board of Education Chair Jimmy Bention, Sr., asked if any members of their respective boards had any further questions.

Commissioner Sides asked if it were appropriate to offer comments at this time. He prefaced the comments by stating that his comments were his own comments, and he did not seek to represent any of the other Commissioners or the County Commission as a whole.

He stated that he assumed that Union County Public Schools Facilities Committee had prioritized the painting, roofing, and equipment needs. He said he thought it would be difficult to receive the full amount that the schools are proposing. Commissioner Sides suggested that the schools be prepared to rank the “must-haves” to the “want-haves.” He added that, personally, one of his highest priorities is the increase in teacher supplements. He asked that in preparing the budget that County staff, if necessary, look at the approach that has been used for County employees and law enforcement of a phased-in approach with some amount at the beginning of the fiscal year and either the remainder or another partial phased-in amount in the first quarter or the final amount that would be available in the budget for increasing the supplement at the beginning of the last quarter of the year. He said he would encourage staff to offer it if it is not feasible to do a full supplement at the beginning of the fiscal year, and it is possible to phase in so that by the end of the fiscal year, it is a \$2,000 increase in supplement.

County Manager Matthews expressed appreciation that Dr. Houlihan had commented about the relationship between staff. Mr. Matthews said it really is a good working relationship. He said that County staff understands and knows that the schools have some needs and challenges that they were going to face. He stated that Board of Commissioners Chair Merrell points out regularly, as she should, that a big chunk of the schools’ budget goes to charter schools. He commented that with organic growth, Union County Public Schools will see approximately \$8 million in additional funds for operating expenses. He noted that the amount is \$10 million less than what Union County Public Schools has indicated is needed. Mr. Matthews said the gap is \$10 million plus, and, obviously, the Board of Commissioners will have to discuss how to accommodate that gap. He stressed that amount is not capital but is on the operating side. He pointed out that there are some positives because there is a gain of \$8 million in organic growth, which is larger than normal for a year. Mr. Matthews said staff will work with Dr. Houlihan to determine what can be accomplished with those funds and then talk with the Board of Commissioners about what it wishes to do beyond that amount.

Dr. Houlihan expressed appreciation to the Board of Education and the Board of Commissioners. He said that a couple of items remain as priorities to Union County Public Schools, with number one being teacher supplements, which will continue to be a high priority for Union County Public Schools. He stressed that Union County Public Schools has to remain competitive when it comes to teacher salary increases.

He commented that the second item is a reminder that the Board of Commissioners last year allocated one-time funds for building a sustainability plan, coming off of federal ESSR funding specifically for tutoring in the Exceptional Children (EC) program. He commented that a new program was implemented at Parkwood Middle School this year for the Exceptional Children. He encouraged everyone to visit the school and look at what is happening. Dr. Houlihan stated that these are examples of when given one-time funds and trying to determine a way to make those permanent.



He referred to the tutoring program and said that last year, he sent the Board of County Commissioners and the Union County Public Schools Board of Education an interim report that was done by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill that pointed to the fact that this model is certainly generating a high return on investment. Dr. Houlihan stated it is believed that report will be completed by the end of April, if not before. He said that when he receives the report, he will provide it to both boards, because it will be a public policy piece that will be presented to the General Assembly. He added that it would be great to continue advocating at the state level for state funding to make it recurring for districts such as Union County Public Schools, which are choosing to implement a national research-based model that is obtaining results for students. Dr. Houlihan said that would be his request from this meeting with the Board of Commissioners.

Board of Education Vice Chair Matt Helms expressed appreciation to the Board of Commissioners for the meeting tonight and for hearing the schools' budget presentation.

Board of Education Member Morreale also expressed appreciation to the Board of Commissioners for meeting tonight and hearing the presentation. He stated he appreciated the working relationship between the Boards.

Board of Education Member Greene said she shared Vice Chair Matt Helms and Board of Education Member Morreale's sentiments. She stressed the need to consider a supplement for the teachers. She stated one of the biggest reasons people come to Union County is the schools. She further stated there is a difficulty in keeping teachers and emphasized the priority for teacher supplements.

Board of Education Member Tucker said he would second the comments of Board of Education Member Greene, and, obviously, money is a driving factor for talent acquisition.

Board of Education Chair Bention recognized Board of Education Member Heintel and noted that she is the Board's immediate past chair.

Board of Education Member Heintel stated there are numerous needs to keep up the school district. She said they needed to talk with everyone to see what can be done, so the school district does not go down.

Board of Education Member May reiterated the previous comments of the Board members. She expressed appreciation to the Commissioners for meeting tonight. She said it is nice to have three former Board of Education members on the Board of Commissioners.

Board of Education Member Kirkpatrick expressed appreciation to the Commissioners for meeting tonight and stressed the importance of teacher supplements. He commented on the disadvantages that some of the students have in District 1 and the need for the right teachers in the classrooms. He said there are great teachers who are not in the classroom who may be working in other fields, because of the lack of compensation when having a family, it is hard to pursue your passion when having to pay bills. He encouraged the Board of Commissioners to consider not just funding a teacher but to help fund a child's opportunity.

Board of Education Chair Bention asked if any member of the Union County Public Schools staff had comments. He stated that Dr. Houlihan had a couple more comments he wanted to share.

Dr. Houlihan said he wanted to be on record complimenting the Board of Commissioners for working with Sheriff Cathey to secure funding for all schools, ensuring that all schools are one-to-one with one School Resource Officer to every school. He stated he thought Union County is one of the largest counties to reach this accomplishment. He expressed appreciation to the Board of Commissioners for supporting the schools' safety initiatives.

He noted a request that had not previously been discussed tonight for program expansion in the school nurse program to bring a phased-in approach to ensure that every school has a nurse in every building. Dr. Houlihan said when there was federal funding available due to the pandemic, they were able to support that program, and this is the first year they are back to being short ten school nurses. He shared that they have a five-year plan to bring two nurses back per year. He stated that he wanted the Board of Commissioners to know that it is one of the line items the schools will be requesting.

Board of Commissioners Chair Merrell asked if there were any closing comments from the Commissioners.

Vice Chair Brian W. Helms said that since he has been on the Board of Commissioners, he has been pleased with the progress and relationship between the two Boards. He expressed appreciation to members of both boards for their efforts in improving the relationship.

He expressed appreciation to Dr. Houlihan for mentioning the ESSR funds and the tutoring program. Vice Chair Brian W. Helms shared that he has long been a supporter of this program and said it is a program that has proven results. He added that it is a program for which all, including parents, should advocate. He shared that he thought tonight's meeting had been a very good meeting, and a lot of information had been shared. He expressed appreciation to the Board of Education for hosting the Board of Commissioners.

Chair Merrell echoed the comments of Vice Chair Brian W. Helms stating that it has been a delight to be back with the Board of Education tonight. She expressed appreciation to the Board of Education members for the hard work they do each day to support the best school district in North Carolina.

She expressed appreciation to Board of Education Chair Jimmy Bention and the Board of Education for hosting tonight's meeting. She also expressed appreciation to Dr. Houlihan for his leadership and for leading a great public education resource for the students and parents who depend on Union County Public Schools.

Board of Commissioners Chair Merrell recognized and expressed appreciation to Jason May for his presentation on behalf of the County and to Brian Matthews, County Manager, for attending tonight's meeting to support the Board of Commissioners and for being such a willing partner with the schools.

Commissioner Sides complimented all who were involved with the recent Special Olympics in Union County. He said it has been a true joy to watch the competition of some of those students. He congratulated Dr. Harvey and others involved with the Special Olympics at Sun Valley High School.

He commented that there was an item that he had hoped to discuss tonight, but it was not on the agenda. Commissioner Sides stated that the capital plan for the County next year involves the initial planning and design of a Union County Public Schools Administration Building. He said the County in long-term planning is in need of additional space. He said he hoped they would begin the process of looking at site options to move forward in the next fiscal year with the design, location, and then in the following year, the construction of the Schools Administration Building as per the capital plan. He stated he looked forward to dialogue and the work on the part of the County staff to continue to address this issue and bring it to fruition.

Board of Education Chair Jimmy Bention said he would ditto all the comments the Board members have shared. He expressed appreciation to the members of the Board of Commissioners, County Manager, and staff for coming today. He shared that he was born in Hoke County, North Carolina, but has said to many that Monroe is his newly adopted hometown, and Union County is a place he is proud to be from. He stated it is a great joy as he travels the nation to brag about Union County, North Carolina. He said he is grateful to the Board of Education and the school staff.

At approximately 6:25 p.m. Board of Education Member Heintel moved to adjourn the special meeting of the Board of Education, seconded by Board of Education Vice Chair Matt Helms. The motion passed by a vote of eight to zero as follows:

Chair Bention	Aye
Vice Chair Matt Helms	Aye
Board Member John Kirkpatrick	Aye
Board Member Barry Tucker	Aye
Board Member Sandra Greene	Aye
Board Member Joe Morreale	Aye
Board Member Keithy Heintel	Aye
Board Member Sarah May	Aye

Board Member Todd Price was not present.

At approximately 6:25 p.m., Commissioner Christina B. Helms moved to adjourn the special meeting of the Board of Commissioners. The motion passed unanimously as follows:

Chair Melissa M. Merrell	Aye
Vice Chair Brian W. Helms	Aye
Commissioner Clancy C. Baucom	Aye
Commissioner Christina B. Helms	Aye
Commissioner Gary Sides	Aye