

GOVERNMENT

W.A.T.C.H.

Local Government Meetings

Thursday, Aug. 29 through Thursday, Sept. 5

- 6 p.m., Tuesday, Sept. 3, Jackson County Board of Commissioners, Commissioners Boardroom, Justice Center.
- 6 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 3, Forest Hills town board, Jackson County Recreation Center.
- 5:30 p.m., Tuesday, Sept. 3, Jackson County Tourism Development Authority strategic plan presentation, Jackson County Library Community Room.
- 5:15 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 4, Webster Board of Commissioners, Webster town hall.

State certifies new voting equipment

By Beth Lawrence

After a series of delays, the State Board of Elections has certified voting equipment from three vendors.

The approval came on Friday. The systems – Clear Ballot: ClearVote 1.4, Elections Systems & Software (ES&S): EVS 5.2.2.0 and Hart InterCivic: Verity Voting 2.2 – are already being used in other states.

The move will allow counties with aging equipment or machines that have been decertified to update their systems. Jackson County is one of the counties using machines that were no longer approved by the state.

“We had already put our name in with ES&S, Elections Systems & Software vendor, who we currently have voting equipment from, for scanners,” said Lisa Lovedahl, director of the Jackson County Board of Elections.

The certification will also allow local boards of elections to come into compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act, which requires that accommodations be made to assist differently-abled individuals to conduct their daily lives. The ADA compliant measures will be in place by the 2020 elections.

The county also added easy vote ballot marking devices similar to the decommissioned systems. The new ballot marking systems will bring Jackson County into ADA compliance, Lovedahl said.

The new system allows voters to mark ballots electronically and print a paper ballot that will be read and tabulated by a scanner. Most counties will continue to use hand-marked paper ballots fed into tabulators at the polling place as the primary voting method, the state elections board said.

Elections systems already in place and certified by the state are still certified.

“We are a big state,” said State Board Chair Damon Circosta. “We have offered counties a selection of vendors who meet state and federal requirements of increased security and reliability, while giving election administrators on the front line of democracy flexibility to choose what is best for their communities.”

The change comes as a result of state laws banning touch-screen and direct-record-electronic devices (DREs), which do not create a recordable paper ballot, which takes effect Dec. 1.

“The 2020 election will be the first time in decades we have an election where every voter will cast a paper ballot,” Circosta said.

ADA compliant voting devices “allow voters to enlarge font sizes, change screen contrast, hear their choice read and even use their own accessible device, such as a sip and puff, to independently cast a secret ballot,” the State Board of Elections said in a press release.

A sip and puff is assistive technology used to send signals to a device, such as a wheelchair, using air pressure by inhaling or exhaling on a straw.

Newly certified equipment was put through the state’s testing process, including a mock election. The tests verify that equipment is secure and works correctly according to state guidelines. Local boards of election are also required to test equipment in at least one precinct. Equipment retailers and county boards of elections must also host demonstrations of the voting machines and test it in at least one precinct during an election.

“We’re going to do a test election in the November municipal election,” Lovedahl said.

The new ballot reader and ballot marking system will cost the county about \$700,000. The Board of Elections kept the county apprised of the situation with the old electronic voting machines, leading the county to set aside money to cover the cost of new equipment.

If testing goes well, the county will release the funds to cover the cost of new machines in preparation for the 2020 elections, Lovedahl said.

N.C. State Transportation map for 2019-20 available

The 2019-20 North Carolina State Transportation Map is now available free of charge.

The map is funded and produced by the N.C. Department of Transportation. It is distributed by VisitNC, a unit of the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina.

The new map can be ordered online at visitnc.com/statemap or by calling 1-800-847-4862 (VISIT NC). Maps are also available at welcome centers, rest areas and NCDOT offices across the state.

North Carolina has one of the largest highway systems in the nation and the new map details the more than 106,975 miles of public roads that span the state. That includes nearly 80,000 miles of state-maintained roads.

A full-size .pdf of the map is also available at www.ncdot.gov/travel-maps.



BETH LAWRENCE/THE HERALD

Gov. Roy Cooper (right) listens to Megan Beck (left) and Andrew Allen tell how the Finish Line grant helped them continue their education.

Gov. Cooper visits with Finish Line Grant recipients at SCC

By Beth Lawrence

Gov. Roy Cooper visited Southwestern Community College on Thursday to speak with the beneficiaries of his Finish Line Grant program.

Four recipients of the grant told the governor about their degree programs and the reasons they applied for the funds.

The program is designed specifically for students at the state’s 58 community colleges. The grants were made available for the 2018-19 school year and will be available again for 2019-20.

Cooper got the idea for the funds when he met with faculty from Western Carolina University.

He learned of a student who was working and attending school but needed car repairs. She was to the point of choosing whether to pay for the repairs or her tuition. The school helped her find the funds to pay for the repairs.

“We all got to thinking there’s got to be some kind of scholarship (for) people who are getting their degree and on their way toward completion that can help push them toward the end,” Cooper said.

The grants are funded by federal money through the Workforce Development Board.

Cooper’s idea was to find money for students at community colleges and universities, but due to funding rules the money could only be used for community college students.

He pointed out that it sometimes takes “just a little bit of money” to either stand in the way of or help people reach their educational goals.

“One of the things I continue to hear about as governor are students who are trying to make a better life for themselves but are one the edge financially,” Cooper said. “It costs money to get an education, but you’ve got to live at the same time. You shouldn’t let a car repair determine whether you get that education.”

The program is designed to help students facing financial constraints that could hamper their education.

Students may apply for up to \$1,000 of assistance per semester.

To qualify, students must have finished at least half of the credit hours required to complete their degree or certificate program.

“They have some unanticipated

financial need that could potentially derail them from being able to continue forward in the program,” said Thom Brooks, SCC’s executive vice president for instruction and student services. “They need to meet a minimum GPA score of 2.0 as well. It applies to certificate, diploma and degree programs, and our occupational training programs as well. We had someone who was in Basic Law Enforcement Training who took advantage of it.”

Andrew Allen of Whittier is one of SCC’s recipients. He is in the physical therapist assistant degree program. Allen learned of an opportunity to perform his clinical education classes at Vidant Medical Center in Greenville. Vidant is a Level I trauma center, so Allen was intrigued at the idea of performing his clinicals in that setting.

“My professor, whenever we first came into the program, explained to us the opportunities that we had. A few of us told her that we were interested, and she made it happen,” he said.

After he was accepted at Vidant, Allen’s plans almost went awry. The hospital is 375 miles from Whittier, requiring Allen to find money for housing and other expenses; he also had to pay his tuition. He had enough money to cover one or the other.

Allen applied for the grant and used it toward his tuition.

“If it wouldn’t have been for the grant, I would have had to probably decline the opportunity to go to Greenville,” he said. “The grant was a blessing. It gave me the opportunity to experience something that there was no other way for me to experience.”

He could have performed his clinicals in the region, but he would not have gained certain experiences available to him at Vidant.

“It’s a great opportunity to get experience in acute care as well as with neuro. There’s no level I trauma center west of Winston-Salem,” Allen said.

North Carolina requires physical therapy assistant students to complete courses in clinical internship I, meeting 200 clinical hours and clinical internship II, for 240 clinical hours.

If Allen has continued success, he will graduate in the spring and will be able to take his licensure exam in July.

The other three students experienced setbacks that many adults working and trying to earn a degree

experience. One student needed car repairs. Jackson County resident Megan Beck is in Southwestern’s radiography program. She told the crowd that she drives 500 miles a week for clinicals alone.

“Scholarships don’t always cover things like car repairs or the unforeseen things that come up at any time,” Beck said.

Her car had a cracked timing belt and faulty water pump.

“Thankfully, I was able to get those taken care of, but they could have gone out and I would not have been able to get to clinic or class, or worst case they could have gone out while I was driving,” Beck said.

Two others needed tires. They had worn out their tires on their commutes to and from school in addition to the driving required for their daily lives.

Each community college works with a local Work Force Development Board to review student applications.

SCC and the Workforce Board helped 101 of Southwestern’s approximately 2,400 students apply for 129 grants totaling \$100,000 in assistance.

The school ranked third in the state for the amount of grants awarded.

Southwestern Commission employee Brenda Millett was on the college’s campus twice a week to help students navigate the application process. Students were sent from the financial aid office to Millet with a checklist of items that would be needed to apply.

The state had given Southwestern an additional \$100,000 for the 2019-20 year.

The governor hopes to make the money part of the state’s regular budget and expand the program to universities as well.

“We requested it in the budget in the general assembly. They did not put it in their budget this time, so we did use this federal money,” Cooper said. “I think with the success of this, particularly with the small amount of money that goes such a long way for these students, I’m hoping that we can have some success next year with the budget.”

Cooper and the General Assembly are in an 8-eight-week standoff over the budget. He vetoed the budget presented to him, because he felt it did not do enough to fund education and healthcare saying that it did not “square with the values of North Carolinians.”

County eyes land purchase for recycling center

By Beth Lawrence

The Jackson County Board of Commissioners voted Aug. 20 to enter into a contract to consider the purchase of two plots of land that may be used as a new staffed recycling center.

The properties on Haywood Road in Dillsboro are approximately 3.67 total acres. The county has offered the seller \$325,000 and has put up \$3,250 in earnest money, County Attorney Heather Baker said.

The next step is the 90-day due diligence phase when the county will fully inspect the property to make sure that it is suitable for the needs of the SRC, perform a title search and have the property surveyed.

The properties sit between the Best Western and the Green Energy Park.

The purchase is being considered as a cheaper alternative to moving the current recycling center to a new spot within the Green Energy Park. The center is being moved as part of plans for a proposed animal shelter and continued efforts to expand the Green Energy Park.

“Initially we were going to move this SRC down here and dig out the side of this mountain, but it was going to cost a half million dollars for a retaining wall down there,” said County Manager Don Adams as he indicated a region on a satellite image of the area. “The Board asked me to start looking at other property to go and see if we

could move it somewhere else.”

Adams said the new property has already been partially graded and has been used to store heavy equipment, so it would likely be suitable for the high traffic and trucks entering and leaving the center. The property also has sewer and water adjacent, so new lines would not need to be run.

The county would have to contain drainage onsite because the N.C. Department of Transportation does not have drainage run through the area. The second tract of property slopes downhill, so Adams believes that would be suitable to handle runoff.

Adams does not have a timeline or cost estimate for moving the recycling center if the purchase moves forward.