

# Commissioners to vote on exploring Human Services consolidation



The departments of Social Services and Public Health may be consolidating.

BY TODD LUCK  
THE CHRONICLE

Forsyth County commissioners plan to vote on authorizing staff to explore consolidating the departments of Social Services and Public Health. Commissioners are tentatively set to vote on this issue on March 15.

Last year, the county hired Cansler Collaborative Resources to do a study on consolidating the two departments, which mainly involves who runs them. After a presentation by the firm's founder, former N.C. Health Secretary Lanier Cansler, during the county's Winter Work Session on Thurs., Feb. 22, the commissioners decided that they'll vote next month on authorizing staff to figure out how consolidation would work in Forsyth County. The vote does not mean they will consolidate; only that staff is exploring the option.

Currently, the two departments have their own boards, which hire

those department's directors. Consolidation would put commissioners and the county manager more directly in charge of them. Cansler said this is an option they might want to consider since a new state



Witherspoon

law will hold counties directly responsible for their Department of Social Services (DSS). Each county will have a contract with standards and goals for its DSS. If it falls short, there will be corrective action plans. If that doesn't work, the state may temporarily take over the department. The county will have to pay the state back for the benefits received by anyone who is enrolled in Medicaid that's



Former N.C. Health Secretary Lanier Cansler makes a presentation to Forsyth County commissioners.

not eligible. "How do you avoid potential takeover, potential loss of funds, etc?" asked Cansler.

He said consolidation would mean the county would have the power to fire a DSS director who is mismanaging the agency. The existing DSS board, which already has two commissioners on it, actually did fire DSS Director Debra Donahue last month for what it said was mismanagement. Cansler also

said there may be greater efficiency in services from consolidation.

The Cansler study said that combining the boards of the two departments into one Human Services board would be the best option. The department would be headed by a Human Services Director, which the county manager would hire with the board's advice and consent. The State Human Resources Act would be optional, so Human Services employ-

ees could be under the same policies as other county employees instead. County Commissioner Chair Dave Plyler, who is on the DSS board, said he'd support consolidation if it can make the service

for some time," said Martin. "I kind of look at things, 'What's the worst thing that can happen? What's the biggest downside?' and quiet frankly I don't see one."

Commissioner Richard Linville wasn't ready to approve consolidation but did support having staff explore the option. Commissioner Fleming El-Amin, who chairs the DSS board, said he also wasn't sold on the concept, but was okay with exploring it as long as it included what it takes for DSS and Public Health staff to meet new state standards.

Commissioner Everette Witherspoon was the only hard "no" to consolidation, saying he was cynical of Cansler and felt that consolidation won't solve the issues at DSS.

"It sounds good politically, but the problems at DSS are the under funding and staffing of DSS," said Witherspoon.

# Commissioners talk taxes, turnover and debt

BY TODD LUCK  
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The consequences of tax reform, a county sales tax, employee turnover and enhancing Safe on Seven were some of the topics discussed during a Winter Work Session held by Forsyth County commissioners last week.

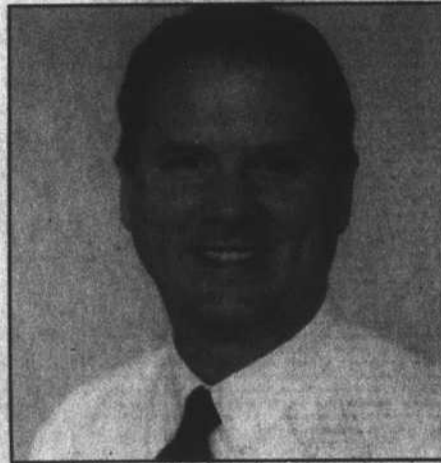
## The effects of tax reform "Tax reform is not our friend."

That's how Forsyth County Chief Financial Officer Paul Fulton began his presentation on the effects of tax reform on the county's debt. Tax reform, passed by Congress last year, lowers the corporate tax rate and eliminated the corporate Alternative Minimum Tax, both of which lowers the demand by corporations for tax-exempt municipal bonds, like what the county uses for bond referendums and capital projects like the new court house. In addition, the Federal Reserve has announced that there will be numerous rate hikes in the next two years. This will make the borrowing rates go up, so the county will pay more for its future borrowing.

## A county sales tax?

Budget Director Kyle Wolf told commissioners about Article 46, a state statute that gives counties the ability to charge a one-fourth of a cent sales tax. This would have to be approved in a voter referendum on an even numbered year and would not apply to groceries or gas. The county could apply the money to whatever it chooses.

Staff estimated the tax would bring in \$12.7 million with 33 percent or \$3.3 million being generated by non-Forsyth



Wolf

County residents.

County Commissioner Don Martin liked the idea, saying that new in-county generated revenue could be used to lower the property tax rate by 2.3 cent, which is the same amount that taxes are scheduled go up in the next budget to pay for court facilities debt leveling. However, commissioners Everette Witherspoon and Fleming El-Amin called it a regressive tax that would give property owners a break while everyone paid more, including many lower income people who don't own houses. They didn't believe residents would vote for such a tax.

Martin said some of the \$3.3 million could be used for teacher pay incentives. He believed voters would approve it because polls show voters are willing to support taxes that raise teacher pay.

Commissioner Chair Dave Plyler was the only commissioner who also said he thought it was a good idea, so the commissioners decided to table the discussion and move on.



Robinson

## Why are county workers leaving?

Human Resources Director Shontell Robinson told commissioners that the turnover rate in the county remains higher than its peers.

The county had a 18.45 percent turnover rate last fiscal year compared with the City of Winston-Salem's 11.08 percent. Guilford and Mecklenburg have about 10 percent and Wake has 11.92 percent.

The highest turnover for the county is in Emergency Services, where it's 24 percent with most of it coming from Emergency Medical Services.

"The majority of them is from the EMS division and they are losing a lot of employees, not really for pay," said Robinson. "A lot of them will actually leave for lower pay, but a lower workload, in some of the other counties."

The Sheriff's Office had the second highest turnover at 19.12 percent. Robinson said that changes in pay and

work conditions at the Detention Center has caused a 12 percent increase in work satisfaction and 10 percent increase in those planning to stay there. She also said that the Sheriff's Office is working to fill vacancies in both patrol and detention divisions, with 32 positions left to fill. This is down from 78 vacancies in February 2017.

The average pay of county workers is \$44,558.59 and includes health, basic life and dental insurance as well as a 401k contribution. Robinson said 17.24 percent of employees are paid above their market range.

She said they'll be doing an employee survey to try to determine why the turnover rate is that high.

## Safe on Seven enhancement

A study by county staff of court services suggested changes to Safe on Seven, a one-stop service center for domestic violence victims, that was formerly housed on the seventh floor of the Hall of Justice and is now in the Behavioral Health Plaza on Highland Avenue.

Staff looked at the national Family Justice Center model being used in Greensboro. It provides multiple services for domestic violence victims, but also features adult and child protective services with full time staff. Family Services, which is one of the partners in Safe on Seven, is studying the model to see if it should be adopted locally.

County staff recommended using a combination of state and county dollars to fund positions for Safe on Seven, including navigators to help victims navigate services, and turning the coordinator into a program manager position under the county.

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