

**Russell County Commission  
Russell County Commission Chambers  
Meeting Minutes March 9, 2022  
9:30 A.M. EST**

An adjourned meeting of the Russell County Commission was called to order by Chairman Chance Corbett.

The invocation was given by Pastor McGruder with Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Seale.

Commissioner Screws led the Pledge of Allegiance.

**PUBLIC COMMENTS:**

Probate Judge Alford Harden spoke about him speaking with the county attorney on using ARP money to digitize their office records and he will update the Commission as they learn more.

Mr. Alfonzo Moore spoke about his concern of the many accidents on Highway 165 with his main concern being at County Road 39 and Mount Olive. He suggested maybe doing a study for adding a traffic light (or some type of lighting) at the intersection. Commissioner Epps stated that her being over District 5, she knows they have a lot of accidents at county road 39 on 165 because she lives in that area as well. She added that Highway 165 is not a county road, but it's a state road, so the county cannot put a traffic light there. She spoke of the accidents that she observes, and she goes down a lot of times to see when there is one, it's because the person coming out of 39 is not paying attention to what is going down 165. She has spoken to other residents about it, and she's suggested they ask the state to take the turning lane out due to cars on 39 not seeing cars coming down 165. She thanked him for coming and sharing his concern. Chairman Corbett stated that he too has received calls about it and he'll get the Chief Engineer to contact the state to see if there are other options due to the sight distance problem.

Chairman Corbett thanked BEAM Cable TV for covering our meetings and stated that our meetings are on Facebook Live for those that cannot make the meeting, along with The Citizen of East Alabama for covering the meetings and getting the information out to the public. He welcomed our elected officials, department heads, other media, and guests.

County Administrator Paulette Colbert called roll of the Commission. Member's present were Commissioner Ronnie Reed, Commissioner Larry Screws, Commissioner Cattie Epps, Commissioner Rod Costello, Commissioner Gentry Lee, Commissioner Scott Chambers, and Chairman Chance Corbett. Also present was Interim County Attorney Hope Hicks and County Administrator Paulette Colbert who kept the minutes.

A quorum was established by County Administrator Paulette Colbert.

Chairman Corbett stated that the agenda was approved at Monday night's work session on March 7, 2022.

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES:**

Chairman Corbett asked for approval of the minutes of February 23, 2022, Commission meeting. Commissioner Lee moved to approve the minutes. Seconded by Commissioner Costello. All Commissioners were in favor by saying aye. Motion to approve the minutes passed.

**PROCLAMATIONS AND RESOLUTIONS:**

There were no proclamations or resolutions.

**DISCUSSION ITEMS:**

There were no discussion items.

**BUSINESS ITEMS:**

Chairman Corbett presented the EMA Director Committee report. He stated that they were tasked with a search committee for the next EMA Director for Russell County that consisted of himself, Commissioner

Chambers, Commissioner Epps, along with Max Herring in HR, and County Administrator Paulette Colbert. He said a unanimous report from the committee was that the Commission consider hiring Mr. David Martin for that position. Commissioner Chambers moved to hire Mr. David Martin for the EMA Director. Seconded by Commissioner Corbett. Commissioner Lee asked that the last time this position was vacant, and they filled it, didn't they get input from the state? Chairman Corbett was not positive. There might have been one on the committee, at that time, but he knows the state will not give input because it's their policy to not give input. Commissioner Epps stated that she was on the committee and didn't think so. Chairman Corbett added that after a Commission meeting the County Attorney Hope Hicks was present and she sat in the interviews as well. He thanked Commissioner Epps for the reminder. County Administrator Paulette Colbert polled the Commission as follows: Commissioner Ronnie Reed, no; Commissioner Larry Screws, no; Commissioner Cattie Epps, yes; Commissioner Rod Costello, yes; Commissioner Gentry Lee, yes; Commissioner Scott Chambers, yes; and Chairman Chance Corbett, yes. The Commission approved Mr. David Martin as the EMA Director. Commissioner Epps stated that they had learned from the last committee meeting they had, that it was illegal to have a private meeting and it had to be open to the public. She asked was it right, so they know for the next time it comes up? Chairman Corbett stated that for the record, they did have this meeting and interview process open in the Chambers because they actually had somebody come and interrupt them in the meeting that was looking for something else. He stated it was definitely an open meeting. Attorney Hope Hicks agreed that it was conducted in an open meeting, and you would definitely want to because if you are hiring anybody that would be a department head that's going to file with the Ethics Commission, those would have to be considered in open meetings like an Engineer, EMA Director, County Administrator. Ms. Hicks said all of those jobs will need to make sure to do in open meetings. Commissioner Costello asked if they would need to advertise the meeting? Ms. Hicks agreed and stated that putting it on the regular Commission meeting agenda would be proper advertisement.

Chairman Corbett recognized Economic Development Tourism Director Victor Cross with the digital billboard sign contract. Mr. Cross requested to be able to pay \$5,250.00 to Effective Outdoor Advertising for a digital billboard across from Vance Funeral Home on Hwy 431. He stated that they can market our attractions and our events that he works with. He said that Mr. Persons said it originally would cost \$950.00/month and is giving us a break at \$750.00/month, from now until the end of September of this year and we'll look at it next year to see if it's doing what we want it to do. Commissioner Lee moved to approve the digital billboard advertising. Seconded by Commissioner Reed. Commissioner Lee asked Victor if we are on the list for the billboard between here and the Judicial Center because he'd like to be on that one. Victor said it's a different group but he's working on it. Chairman Corbett stated that the reason this idea came up, was because obviously our tourism is funded through the proceeds from hotel, rentals, and other things and that funding is to promote our county. He thinks we need to do a better job and Victor agreed to promote our county for people that are visiting or people passing through. He happened to pass a sign on Highway 80, and it was open, and it said "rent me" or something and then he called Victor and said maybe we can use some of this funding to get on these signs and get our word out. Chairman Corbett discussed more on Alabama tourism he's seen on tv. All Commissioners were in favor by saying aye. The motion passed unanimously. Chairman Corbett stated that this money will come out of tourism funds.

Chairman Corbett recognized Commissioner Epps who presented the Mt. Olive School donation request. Commissioner Epps spoke about the Mt. Olive Intermediate School project for the students dealing with virtual schooling due to the virus. She requested to donate \$2,000.00 out of her project funds towards that project for the intermediate school. Commissioner Epps moved to donate \$2,000.00 from her project funds. Seconded by Commissioner Lee. All Commissioners were in favor by saying aye. The motion passed unanimously.

#### **COUNTY ENGINEER:**

County Engineer Shawn Blakeney spoke about the transfer station that's open twice a month and this month it will be open Saturday the 12th and the 26th at 101 Poorhouse Road. They can bring a copy of their bill and ID for one pickup truck and a small trailer full of bulk trash (not household trash). Chairman Corbett spoke of Mr. Blakeney's employees that have been outstanding helping with this service because he's used it twice himself. Also, the good comments he's received from people and older people on providing service with unloading. Commissioner Screws asked if tires could be brought, and Mr. Blakeney agreed that they could.

**ADMINISTRATOR:**

County Administrator Paulette Colbert had nothing to present.

**CORONAVIRUS RESCUE ACT FUND:**

Chairman Corbett recognized Maintenance Director Leon Watson who presented the request for morgue supply materials for trays, racks, and a lift. Mr. Watson requested the approval to order the four racks, 16 trays, and the body lift requested by the coroner in the amount of \$9,883.00 and to be paid out of the ARP funds if approved. Commissioner Lee moved to approve the request and stated that he thinks it all should have been included in the original order. Seconded by Commissioner Reed. Chairman Corbett asked Attorney Hicks to state for the record that this is an approved expense of the ARP money. Ms. Hicks agreed and said she thinks this will be an eligible government service. Chairman Corbett stated that with these funds that they would have a voice vote. County Administrator Paulette Colbert called the Commission vote as follows: Commissioner Ronnie Reed, yes; Commissioner Larry Screws, yes; Commissioner Cattie Epps, yes; Commissioner Rod Costello, yes; Commissioner Gentry Lee, yes; Commissioner Scott Chambers, yes; and Chairman Chance Corbett, yes. The Commission approved the request unanimously.

Chairman Corbett recognized Maintenance Director Leon Watson who presented the Ladonia pavilion wi-fi & electrical materials request. Mr. Watson requested the approval of the hotspot equipment to go at the Ladonia pavilion in the amount of \$1,800.00, plus the electrical materials estimated at \$3,285.39 totaling \$5,085.39 to power that hotspot at the Ladonia pavilion and to be paid for out of the ARP funds. Commissioner Chambers moved to approve the request. Seconded by Commissioner Lee and he stated that in the future as they approve these pavilion requests to house the electronic equipment, that they need to include all of it at one time, so we don't have to piece meal it. Attorney Hicks stated that this will be an eligible government service. Commissioner Costello asked if these pavilions we're building have any type of camera system setup for security? Mr. Watson stated that he is not aware of any at this time and that the engineer's department actually handled erecting that pavilion. Chairman Corbett stated that they are planning to put some at the Crawford Gazebo only for securing the area and not for monitoring, but he said it is a good question because it's something they could do with that wi-fi access there. Commissioner Corbett added he thinks it would be good for security and not to monitor people. Chairman Corbett said that if the sheriff's office has a report of any damage or anything, they can go back and retrieve the data and not actually have someone actively monitoring it. Commissioner Reed asked if we could add it to the current motion, but it was discussed that they need to get the cost and come back. They asked Ms. Hicks and Mr. Watson to research the cost to adding it to the facilities if they have wi-fi access. Chairman Corbett mentioned to the commissioners that they need to consider putting wi-fi in county-owned places for our children, especially if we get into a pandemic situation again. County Administrator Paulette Colbert called the Commission vote as follows: Commissioner Ronnie Reed, yes; Commissioner Larry Screws, yes; Commissioner Cattie Epps, yes; Commissioner Rod Costello, yes; Commissioner Gentry Lee, yes; Commissioner Scott Chambers, yes; and Chairman Chance Corbett, yes. The Commission approved the request unanimously.

**HUMAN RESOURCES:**

Information was in Commissioner's Packets.

**COUNTY ATTORNEY:**

County Attorney Hope Hicks reminded the Commissioners that they agreed to have an earlier work session on April 11, because it gives her and Tina time to get information from the charitable organizations and to get their documentation on whether they're an eligible entity, and then they'll go forward with getting their losses or information, and if it is an eligible use for the money that they're wanting to spend. She said they should have it by April 11<sup>th</sup>. Chairman Corbett stated that he's received calls from agencies asking about the status, so we need to consider at some point on how we're going to communicate with them towards the end, and if we're wanting to actually have them come speak to us about anything in their application packets. He said there's nothing to take action on today, but to think about it. Commissioner Lee moved to change the April 11<sup>th</sup> work session to 4 pm. Seconded by Commissioner Costello. All

Commissioners were in favor by saying aye. None opposed. The Commission passed the motion unanimously.

**COMMISSIONER DISCUSSION:**

Commissioner Reed stated the coroner was present and they had questions for him concerning some things he was requesting. Chairman Corbett spoke to Coroner Sumbry about some questions they had for his request and how it related to the ARPA funding. Chairman Corbett stated that the request of the morgue trailer was in before the addition to the morgue was approved. Mr. Sumbry stated that the morgue trailer itself is to better serve with the bodies and, he didn't think at that time we'd be getting a new morgue and it's certainly one of those things we can put on the back end, if need be. He would like to prepare for the unexpected because we never know whenever a tornado will be hitting Russell County, and we were actively involved when it happened in Beauregard and helping them assist in removal. Commissioner Lee asked doesn't the whole state of Alabama, and maybe even Georgia too, if we have an incident here, participate too and send equipment to help aide? He just hates to have a \$75,000.00 trailer sitting there and not being used. Mr. Sumbry stated that they'd find a way to use it such as if we have any type of training with the schools, like we always do, and we always help one another. Also, the state does have the equipment but if more than one county gets hit with a tornado, they are going to handle those areas that are closely affected, and we may be on our own for a while or may not even get help at that time. Chairman Corbett stated Columbus could help across the state line and Lee County has a morgue trailer, as well, and purchased it under Homeland Security Funds probably 12 to 15 years ago, and he knows they've deployed it across the state and beyond. Chairman Corbett stated that they have the answer, but they are not making decisions on the funding right now and if they have any more questions, they'll make sure they bring them to him.

Chairman Corbett spoke about the CDBG-CV Grant and one of the projects was to put in a new septic system at the old courthouse in Seale and that one of the issues was that the property, where the fuel lines were going to end and terminate, were on the property across Church Street, where the old jail use to be in the 1800's in Seale. He said that they found in doing the research that it is the board of education property, so they reached out to Dr. Coley and Chairman Corbett answered to the board on the project and said they have made the decision to sign the letter of easement (utility easement) for us to put that project in place. He discussed the increase of rentals and events after building the courthouse restrooms and the courthouse elevator. He added that the committee has also allowed the school systems to utilize the old courthouse for proms and other events. He hopes the Commission continues to allow them to do this based on the partnership that we have ongoing.

Commissioner Epps discussed the Care Act money and after a long conversation on Zoom, she wondered if she made a mistake on not voting for the association to oversee the Care Act money we will be getting because in some of the information she's received, the Care Act money does help the community to build, but her understanding is that it's primarily used for the areas of the county that has potential for growth but the county doesn't have funding to do, such as water and sewage. She thinks it's been discussed with the attorney on building a building, but her understanding based on the information she's received, it's also for renovating a building. For Russell County, one area they were targeted on the program was the Hurtsboro area, which has a lot of old buildings that are not in use and could possibly be used for renovation of that town to get growth in that area. Also, another area they targeted was the Fort Mitchell area where there's potential of so much growth because of building there and the residential growth that has happened there. She said she asked them if it had anything to do with traffic count? If traffic isn't there, when you build there, it gives the opportunity for growth, then the traffic will automatically come because businesses and industry will come out to the area. She spoke about studies they have done in the area and the other areas that was the Ladonia area. According to what they are saying is that the Ladonia area is already a growing area, so she said you don't need a traffic count or anything. She said that an engineer can go on a map and tell you where everything is, in the different areas, in the different counties, and she understood and asked a question if a surge can be put in an area? If there's a growing area and you have a thriving business already and that business is close to a sewer system, then we might be better to use the money for areas that can have the opportunity for growth. Not one that is already growing. So, she thinks that maybe they should look at this because we are making a decision where the money is going, but if the association had handled this, and had given them the opportunity to have, then they would have been the

one giving us where it should be and where it could be, and we could use this money for these areas. In her opinion, she thinks the attorney has been very good in giving them the information but she understands if the association (who they would have hired to do this), they would have done the research for us to tell us why we could properly use this money and how it could be used in the areas of the county where the growth is coming and where the growth will come. She said, because if you put a sewer system out doesn't mean that company is going to come the next day, but you are there because of the growth in that area and some companies will come in. She wanted them to think about that, as a commissioner, as they go into their work session coming up on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April. Chairman Corbett stated that this was brought up two different times to the Commission and the vote was not to go with the ACCA, but it wasn't for them to manage it, it was more for us to get advice from them and to get guidance. He didn't disagree that they probably should have done that, and they have a lot of water under that bridge now. He said it was pointed out to him, by 2 or 4 parties, that they wouldn't have agreed to do the vehicle in the sheriff's office. They wouldn't have agreed to several projects, but it has come to light now with the final rule, that those items are acceptable. He asked Ms. Hicks what her thoughts are on it? Chairman Corbett said that the ACCA gave us two deadlines and they told us the second time that this will be it, if you don't do it by then, so they brought it to a vote, and it failed, and he doesn't know that they would accept us anyway. Attorney Hicks stated that would be her first thing is that the last conversation she had with Mr. Brassfield is that the enrollment period was over. If it's reopened and something the Commission wants to look at, by all means, it's something the Commission can look at. Ms. Hicks takes no pride in doing this or not doing this and she is more than happy for the ACCA and their Investing in Alabama County's Program to give all of the help they can give and that you're willing to pay to get it because it's a paid program. Ms. Hicks stated that she doesn't mind doing some checking to see if the program is open for enrollment again, but her understanding is it is not. Commissioner Epps stated that she thinks she (herself) made a mistake for not voting and she didn't say to go back and do it again. She spoke about looking closely at how they are spending it, and where we are spending it because every area, they talk about spending it in is important. Ms. Hicks suggested maybe the Commission have a discussion in implementing a plan (what has been mentioned before and by Commissioner Screws) what the priorities are and a plan so that they are not nicked and dined, not that all the things the money has been spent on isn't worthwhile things, but spending \$10,000.00 here and there being spent without a true plan, you may regret how the money has been spent as you get further down the road and a big project comes along that you think really would be beneficial to the county. She suggested that maybe April 11<sup>th</sup> we have the conversation about this, the charitable entities again and then another work session to start at 3 instead of 4 about what the Commission plans, and thoughts are so that you do have a good spending plan in place. Commissioner Lee spoke about the sewage that has been spoken about for about 26-27 years and they've missed several opportunities but this might be the only opportunity we have where we don't have to come up with county money to look at it and so they need to remember that when they start spending this money. Commissioner Epps stated to Ms. Hicks that a question that was asked if they could spend this money on purchasing land for a sewer. Commissioner Epps said there was not a straight yes or no answer but there's a good possibility as long as it's part of the project, then they probably could use that money, but she wanted to ask Ms. Hicks. Ms. Hicks said she has it noted from the work session the other day to verify it and she cannot see how it wouldn't be allowed if you can invest in a water, or sewer, or broadband infrastructure that you have to have land to do these things. So, she believes it would be, but she will get that question answered for Commissioner Epps.

Commissioner Epps brought up the personnel manual and Ms. Hicks stated that she's personally the hold up on it right now. She has notes on it from the last meeting and she has made some of those revisions, and she's updated Mr. Herring and Mrs. Colbert. Ms. Hicks says she has three other segments that she needs to write for it, and she should be able have it for them the next couple of weeks.

Commissioner Screws brought up to Ms. Hicks again, if he's correct, in the president's address last week he said that they were hiring people to look at the misuse of this money, so he asked again for the in-house folks (department heads) to give the Commission a proposal, so that they'll have something that the Commission can look at opposed to just saying that the Commission is going to approve it. He stated that they've approved two things this morning that he didn't see a proposal for, and he feels it's going to get us into trouble. He thinks they need to get something in writing, and this is the plan, and we approve this money from this plan that was given to us. Ms. Hicks stated that it would be better documentation for the files and what is being approved is for government services and she thinks they're eligible uses. She thinks

where they developed the form that was sent out to outside entities, and Mrs. Colbert had some inside department heads use it because we don't have anything else, she thinks they could modify that form so that if you have in-house departments wanting to use the ARPA money, then, they could fill it out so that we have some sort of continuity of how to do it, so she will adjust the form. Commissioner Screws stated that he doesn't think they need to approve anything else until the form is completed and given to the Commission so that they're able to read what is being said and then you can make your vote based on that. He knows they've approved the pole barn for Ladonia, but they should have had a proposal or outline of what it is going to be used for. He said it, and he's not taking anything away from him, but the Commission has nothing in writing. Ms. Hicks said she should be able to get an in-house form to Mrs. Colbert this week so that anybody that's asking for that kind of money can have access through her office to the form. Chairman Corbett stated that maybe it could be presented to the Commission before the early work session that they'll be talking about these funds again. Ms. Hicks agreed. As they continued the discussion, Commissioner Epps spoke about not wanting to see the county get in trouble because the failure to follow rules and regulations that they are having to do. Chairman Corbett added that, on the record, there is no rule or regulation that they are not following, and they are following them very well. Commissioner Epps agreed but she just wanted to make sure that Russell County does not come under scrutiny in later years, saying they did not do what they were supposed to do. So, if we start now and get it correct, then, there will not be a problem. She spoke more about a letter she received on her personal taxes and not everything is for free. Commissioner Reed stated that he was glad they didn't go with the Association County Commission because then the Sheriff would not have been able to get that big truck for his project, and there are so many things they can do but the association would have limited what things that they would be able to do with the money. Ms. Hicks stated the association is clearly doing the very best job that anybody could possibly do in helping guide and steer people through this, and she has reached out to them a time or two and they've been exceptionally helpful to her. Like herself, she's trying to be conservative on the advice she gives to the Commission to make sure we never get Russell County into any trouble. Ms. Hicks said she felt like the use of the trailer and because of the ways it can be used for law enforcement, for COVID, for any pandemic type of situation that she felt it was an eligible use. They might not have agreed with her at the time, but she thinks with the final rule, she thinks they would have approved it but we're a step ahead and we've already gotten it in motion. Commissioner Corbett thanked Ms. Hicks.

#### **ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

- Ft. Mitchell Pioneer Day: April 9, 2022 from 9 am to 3 pm ET at Ft. Mitchell Historic Site, Hwy 165
- Crawford Market Days: Coming April to November on the 3rd Saturdays, 8 am to 1 pm ET
- Extension Office Pond Mgmt. Workshop -May 5<sup>th</sup> at Old Seale Courthouse  
-Registration 8:30 am EDT, Class Begins 2:00 pm EDT
- East Alabama Chamber of Commerce: 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday Clean Up, March 12, 2022 at 9-11 AM ET  
-Meets at Phenix City Garage on 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. & 14<sup>th</sup> Street
- Bunco Bash Tournament: Tuesday April 12th at 5:30 pm at 2400 Dobbs Drive, PC Ala. 36870
- Regional Emergency Preparedness Day: May 7, 2022, at 10:30 am to 3:00 pm ET  
-Smith Station Government Center

Commissioner Lee moved to adjourn the meeting. Seconded by Commissioner Reed.

Meeting was adjourned.