

Regular Session, April 20, 2026, 7:00 p.m.
Catawba County Board of Commissioners

Appointments

Catawba County Board of Equalization & Review-Rita Brittain 858 4/20/26

Human Resources

Senior IT Project Manager Addition to Pay Plan 866 4/20/26

Public Comment

Regular Public Comment: Michael McRee 858 4/20/26

Public Hearing Comment: 859 4/20/26

Michael McRee	Payton Hall	Dr. Allen Bandy
Jennifer Canrobert	Sylvia White	Robbie Gonzalez
Tim Hayes	Dr. Jennifer Griffin	Dr. Emily Shaw
Amy Sigmon Walker	Christy Gwyn	Stephanie Calderon
Debbie Bandy	Amanda McGuire	Betti Kirkman
Jerry Willard	Dean Proctor	Joey Heath
Gracie Hedrick	Josh Nixon	Bob Blake
Khristy Womack Smith	Ashley Bandy	Elisabeth Campbell
Aaron Broch	Marty Cotton	Sarah Talbert
Roger Young	Nancy Meek	Jason White
Shelly Hughes	Betty Lohr	Kim Jones
Reverend Marcus Williams	Christina Minish	Savannah Minish
Vanessa Rainey	Morgan Cortez	Angela Allen
Ida Clough	Haskew Smith	Cynthia Thompson Isenhower
Dianne Little	Crystel McMillan	Dr. Anthony Freeman
Reverend David E. Roberts, III	Greg Simmons	Ms. Brown
Aiden Morten	Aliah Escamilla	Stan Williams
Heidi Rice	Monica Harker	Mitzi Cunningham
Jennifer Melon	Sarah Payne	Samantha Harpham
Amie Sanchez	Dana Andreasson	Lauren Guthmann
Anita White	Clancy Maier	Cindy Gattison
Anthony Giometi	Jennifer Greene	Ryan Scarborough
Aniya Arthur	Naomi Sekoll	Leia Gaither
William Blossom	Lynn Evans	Cecilia Gordon
Jayne St. Clair	Larry Barger	Angie Harris Ramseur

Public Hearings

Proposed School Merger Plan 859 4/20/26

Resolutions

Resolution Adopting a Plan for the Merger of Catawba County Schools, Hickory City Schools, and Newton-Conover City Schools (Resolution 2026-10) 860 4/20/26

Tax

March Tax Refunds, Releases and Adjustments 858 4/20/26

The Catawba County Board of Commissioners met in Regular Session on Monday, April 20, 2026, at 7:00 p.m., in the Board of Commissioners Meeting Room, 2nd Floor, Catawba County Justice Center, 100 Government Drive, Newton, North Carolina.

Present were Chair Randy Isenhower, Vice-Chair Austin Allran, and Commissioners Robert C. Abernethy, Jr., Barbara G. Beatty, and Cole Setzer.

Also present were County Manager Mary S. Furtado, Assistant County Manager Paul Murray, Assistant County Manager Adam Lindsay, County Attorney Jodi Stewart, Assistant County Attorney Joshua Teague, and Clerk Dale Stiles.

During this lengthy meeting, Board members stepped out individually for short periods of time that did not affect a quorum and during which the Board took no action:

Commissioner Setzer stepped out at 8:52 p.m., and returned at 8:54 p.m.

Vice-Chair Allran stepped out at 9:12 p.m., and returned at 9:17 p.m.

Commissioner Beatty stepped out at 9:26 p.m., and returned at 9:31 p.m., and

Vice-Chair Allran stepped out at 10:40 p.m., and returned at 10:45 p.m.

1. Chair Randy Isenhower called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m., noting a quorum was present.
2. Commissioner Robert C. Abernethy, Jr. led the Pledge of Allegiance.
3. Chair Isenhower offered the invocation.
4. Commissioner Robert C. Abernethy, Jr. made a motion to approve the Minutes from the Board's Regular Meeting of April 6, 2026. The motion carried unanimously.
5. Recognition of Special Guests:
Chair Isenhower welcomed everyone present.
6. Public Comments.
Michael McRee came forward and requested the outside of the 1924 Courthouse building be cleaned.
7. Appointments.
Upon a recommendation by Chair Isenhower that came in the form of a motion which unanimously carried, the Board appointed Rita Brittain to fill an unexpired term to the Catawba County Board of Equalization and Review, with a term expiration of December 2, 2028.
8. Consent Agenda.
County Manager Mary Furtado presented the following item under the consent agenda. Chair Isenhower asked if any commissioner wished for the item to be broken out of the consent agenda for individual consideration. None was requested.

Staff requested the Board of Commissioners approve fifteen (15) releases totaling \$2,592.21, one (1) refund totaling \$15.25, and sixty (60) Motor Vehicles Bill adjustments / refunds totaling \$6,072.58 requested during the month of March.

North Carolina General Statute 105-381(b) states upon receipt of a taxpayer's written request for release or refund, the taxing unit's governing body has 90 days to determine whether the taxpayer's request is valid to either approve the release or refund of the incorrect portion or to notify the taxpayer in writing that no release or refund will be made.

During the month of March Tax Office staff have checked records and verified the legitimacy of fifteen (15) releases totaling \$2,592.21, one (1) refund totaling \$15.25 and sixty (60) Motor Vehicle Bill adjustments / refunds totaling \$6,072.58.

Common reasons for the release of tax bill amounts include change in values and months, change in situs, businesses closing / being sold, clerical errors, taxpayers living in different states during GAP period and request for documentation for tax relief fulfilled. The refund is due to adjusted billing to remove utility trailer

sold in 06/28/2024. The motor vehicle bill adjustments are largely due to pro-ration of tax bill amounts to account for mid-year transfers of ownership, change in values and change in situs.

The consent agenda items came in the form of a motion by Chair Isenhower, which carried unanimously.

9. Public Hearings.

County Manager Mary Furtado requested the Board of Commissioners conduct a public hearing to consider a resolution adopting a plan for the merger of Catawba County Schools, Hickory City Schools, and Newton-Conover City Schools pursuant to NCGS 115C-68.1.

After Ms. Furtado's presentation, there were no questions. Chair Isenhower opened the public hearing. The following citizens came forward and spoke against the proposed school merger plan: Jennifer Canrobert, Sylvia White, Robbie Gonzalez, Tim Hayes, Dr. Jennifer Griffin, Roger Young, Dr. Emily Shaw, Amy Sigmon Walker, Christy Gwyn, Stephanie Calderon, Debbie Bandy, Amanda McGuire, Betti Kirkman, Jerry Willard, Dean Proctor, Joey Heath, Gracie Hedrick, Josh Nixon, Khristy Womack Smith, Ashley Bandy, Elisabeth Campbell, Aaron Broch, Marty Cotton, Sarah Talbert, Nancy Meek, Jason White, Shelly Hughes, Betty Lohr, Kim Jones, Bob Blake, Reverend Marcus Williams, Christina Minish, Savannah Minish, Vanessa Rainey, Morgan Cortez, Angela Allen, Ida Clough, Haskew Smith, Cynthia Thompson Isenhower, Dianne Little, Crystel McMillan, Dr. Anthony Freeman, Reverend David E. Roberts, III, Greg Simmons, Ms. Brown, Aiden Morten, Aliah Escamilla, Stan Williams, Heidi Rice, Monica Harker, Mitzi Cunningham, Jennifer Melon, Sarah Payne, Samantha Harpham, Amie Sanchez, Dana Andreasson, Lauren Guthmann, Anita White, Clancy Maier, Cindy Gattison, Anthony Giometi, Jennifer Greene, Ryan Scarborough, Aniya Arthur, Naomi Sekol, Leia Gaither, William Blossom, Lynn Evans, Dr. Cecilia Gordon, Jayne St. Clair, Angie Harris Ramseur, Payton Hall and Dr. Allen Bandy.

Primary reasons for opposition included request for a thorough third-party feasibility study with additional data, concerns with current plan's method of seating the 9-member interim Catawba Valley Board of Education, lack of voter referendum on merger, and the potential loss of funding for specialized programs and staff.

Larry Barger came forward and spoke in favor of the proposed school merger.

With no one further coming forward the Chair closed the public hearing.

Vice Chair Allran expressed his appreciation for the public's attendance, comments, and participation in the hearing this evening. Vice Chair Allran made a motion to pause with the proposed school merger plan and conduct a comprehensive third-party feasibility study. The motion failed to pass, with a vote of 2-3 with Vice-Chair Allran and Commissioner Barbara G. Beatty voting in favor and Chair Isenhower, Commissioner Abernethy and Commissioner Setzer in opposition.

Chair Isenhower made a motion to approve the resolution adopting a plan for the merger of Catawba County Schools, Hickory City Schools, and Newton-Conover City Schools pursuant to NCGS 115C-68.1. Chair Isenhower noted he has put considerable time and effort into educating himself on this issue, including reading the school merger studies completed in Columbus County, Davidson County, and Buncombe County, which were all driven by different community dynamics and demographic factors than those present in Catawba County. Chair Isenhower emphasized that, based on State Department of Public Instruction enrollment projections, continuing with three separate systems with differing enrollment trends will perpetuate operating and capital inequities between the systems. Commissioner Setzer expressed his appreciation for those in attendance, encouraging people who cared enough about the issue tonight to remain engaged in the issue moving forward. Commissioner Abernethy indicated he was ready to vote on the motion on the floor, and Chair Isenhower called for a vote. The motion carried 3-2, with Chair Isenhower, Commissioner Abernethy and Commissioner Setzer voting in favor of the resolution adopting a plan for school merger, and Vice-Chair Allran and Commission Beatty voting in opposition.

The following resolution applies:

April 20, 2026, MB#57

RESOLUTION NO. 2026-10
RESOLUTION ADOPTING A PLAN FOR THE MERGER OF CATAWBA COUNTY SCHOOLS, HICKORY
CITY SCHOOLS, AND NEWTON-CONOVER CITY SCHOOLS

WHEREAS, NCGS §115C-68.1, entitled Merger of Units by the Board of Commissioners, provides a statutory framework for a board of county commissioners to merge two or more school administrative units in the county into a single countywide unit; and

WHEREAS, there are currently three (3) school systems located within Catawba County, Catawba County Schools, Hickory City Schools, and Newton-Conover City Schools; and

WHEREAS, the Catawba County Board of Commissioners ("Board") has reviewed the proposed school merger plan ("Merger Plan") attached hereto as Exhibit A and incorporated herein by reference; and

WHEREAS, the Merger Plan describes, among other matters, the proposed structure and governance of the merged unit, the proposed effective date, and the transition steps to implement the merger; and

WHEREAS, the Board finds it to be in the best interest of the residents of Catawba County and the students served by the three (3) school systems to approve the Merger Plan, consistent with NCGS 115C-68.1; and

WHEREAS, the Board made copies of the proposed Merger Plan available to the public online and in the County Clerk's office; and

WHEREAS, the Board advertised and held the required public hearing on April 20, 2026; and

WHEREAS, the Board desires to memorialize its approval of the Merger Plan and to authorize County officials to take actions necessary to carry out the intent of this Resolution.

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CATAWBA COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS that the Board hereby approves the Merger Plan pursuant to NCGS §115C-68.1, substantially in the form presented to the Board and incorporated by reference into this Resolution as Exhibit A.

Adopted this the 20th day of April, 2026, by a vote of 3-2.

Exhibit A is hereto attached:

**Plan for the Merger of Catawba County Schools,
Hickory City Schools, and Newton-Conover City Schools**

Pursuant to NCGS §115C-68.1, the Catawba County Board of Commissioners ("the BOC") adopts and submits to the North Carolina State Board of Education this Plan for the Merger of Catawba County Schools, Hickory City Schools, and Newton-Conover City Schools units ("Merger Plan").

Section 1. Name of the Merged School Unit.

The administrative unit resulting from the merger of Catawba County Schools, Hickory City Schools, and Newton-Conover City Schools ("the Boards") shall be known as the Catawba Valley School District ("CVSD"). The governing body of the merged school unit (the "Merged Board") shall be known as the Catawba Valley Board of Education ("CVBOE").

Section 2. Effective Date of the Merger.

The merger shall take effect on July 1, 2028 ("Effective Date").

Section 3. Establishment and Maintenance of Catawba Valley Board of Education.

Transition Period. There shall be a transition period beginning with approval of this Merger Plan by the State Board of Education and ending with the Effective Date of merger. The purpose of this transition period is to plan for and execute the transition from three (3) school systems to a merged system in a smooth and planful manner.

On the first Tuesday following approval of the Merger Plan by the State Board, the BOC shall meet to designate members of the CVBOE. Following this appointment, the first organizational meeting of the CVBOE will be held on the first Monday of the month and on each succeeding first Monday of each month, or more often as determined by the CVBOE. The period of time between approval of this Merger Plan and July 1, 2028, hereinafter referred to as the "Interim," shall be for the purposes of planning and preparing.

- A. Interim Board of Education Members. Upon approval of this Merger Plan by the State Board of Education, the Catawba County Board of Commissioners shall appoint the CVBOE, to consist of nine (9) members as follows: (a) two (2) members of the existing Catawba County Board of Education; (b) two (2) members of the existing Hickory City Board of Education; (c) two (2) members of the existing Newton-Conover City Board of Education; and (d) three (3) at-large members who shall be residents of Catawba County ("the Interim Members"). If any member of any existing Board of Education is offered an appointment by the BOC for a dedicated seat and declines to serve, then the BOC may appoint any resident of Catawba County who lives within the district for which the appointment was declined. The Interim Members shall be appointed as follows:

Seat 1: Catawba County Schools Seat A

Seat 2: Hickory City Schools Seat A

Seat 3: Newton-Conover City Schools Seat A

- Seat 4: Catawba County Schools Seat B
- Seat 5: Hickory City Schools Seat B
- Seat 6: Newton-Conover City Schools Seat B
- Seat 7: At-Large A
- Seat 8: At-Large B
- Seat 9: At Large C

- B. The term of office of the Interim Members of the CVBOE shall extend beyond the Effective Date of the merger and shall continue until successors have been duly elected, qualified and sworn in as provided below.
- C. Procedure for filling a vacancy on the CVBOE. If a vacancy occurs in the membership of the CVBOE prior to the merger on July 1, 2028, the remaining members of the CVBOE shall fill the vacancy by majority vote of the members remaining, present, and voting. The replacement board member shall serve the CVBOE until the vacancy is filled by election.
- D. Planning Period.
 - 1. The CVBOE will hire an attorney to advise the CVBOE on establishing policies, practices, hiring and consolidating staff, and acting as general counsel for the CVBOE during the Planning Period.
 - 2. The CVBOE will establish policies, review staffing structures of existing school districts and create an organizational and classification system to place current school district employees in positions for the CVBOE beginning July 1, 2028.
 - 3. The CVBOE will hire a Superintendent, who will be in place no later than July 1, 2028.
- E. Catawba Valley Board of Education – Board Composition.
 - 1. On July 1, 2028, the Catawba County Board of Education, Hickory City Board of Education, and Newton-Conover City Board of Education shall cease to exist, and any members' unexpired terms shall expire at that time.
 - 2. The CVBOE shall consist of nine (9) members elected for staggered terms in partisan plurality elections. The initial districts shall be constructed, to the extent practical considering electoral boundaries, so that one (1) member shall be elected from each of the seven (7) county-wide high school attendance districts. Two (2) at-large members shall be residents of Catawba County. All members shall be elected on a county-wide basis. The seats shall be drawn as follows:

- Seat 1: Fred T. Foard High School Attendance District
- Seat 2: Hickory High School Attendance District
- Seat 3: St. Stephens High School Attendance District
- Seat 4: Bunker Hill High School Attendance District
- Seat 5: Newton-Conover High School Attendance District
- Seat 6: Bandys High School Attendance District

Seat 7: Maiden High School Attendance District

Seat 8: At-Large

Seat 9: At Large

3. The first election for the CVBOE will occur in November 2030, at the same time as the general election for state and county offices. The members elected at that time shall take office on the first Monday in December following the election, or as soon thereafter as practical.
 4. Elected members shall be elected to four-year terms. To establish the staggering of board member terms, members appointed in 2026 shall serve staggered terms as provided below beyond the Effective Date of the merger.
 - i. In November 2030, seats 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9 of the CVBOE shall be up for election.
 - ii. In November 2032, seats 2, 4, 6, and 8 of the CVBOE shall be up for election.
- F. Compensation: Members of the CVBOE shall receive compensation and reimbursement of expenses pursuant to NCGS §115C-38.
- G. To the extent that the method conflicts with NCGS §115C-35, NCGS §115C-37, or with any local act concerning any of the units being merged and consolidated, the Merger Plan and consolidation shall prevail.

Section 4. Authority, Powers, and Duties.

- A. On the Effective Date of the merger, the CVBOE shall assume authority for administering and operating all public schools in Catawba County.
- B. On the Effective Date of the merger, the CVBOE shall exercise all statutory powers granted and delegated to county and city boards of education including all powers, rights, privileges, and immunities conferred by the North Carolina Constitution and General Statutes, except as expressly modified by this Merger Plan.
- C. The CVBOE shall meet, organize, and elect a Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson in accordance with NCGS §115C-41.
- D. All vacancies in membership of the CVBOE shall be filled by appointment by the remaining members of the CVBOE. The appointed person must reside in the high school attendance district represented by the seat and will serve until the next election of members of the board of education, at which time the remaining unexpired term of the office in which the vacancy occurs shall be filled by election. Section 3 above addresses the process for filling vacancies that occur prior to the first election of school board members.

Section 5. Transfer of Personnel, Assets, and Liabilities

Upon merger, all employees of the existing county and city school units shall become employees of the CVBOE, subject to the same contracts and terms of employment, and shall continue to perform the same functions until reassigned.

Upon the Effective Date of the merger, all facilities, properties, structures, funds, contracts, deeds, titles, and other obligations, assets, and liabilities of the existing Catawba County, Hickory City, and Newton-Conover City boards of education shall be transferred to the CVBOE.

Section 6. Supplemental Tax.

Upon the Effective Date of the merger, there shall be no supplemental school tax dedicated to any local school administrative unit located within the County. As required by NCGS § 115C-68.1(a), the Catawba County Board of Commissioners shall provide local funding per average daily membership to the CVBOE at a rate at least equivalent to the highest level of any of the three (3) units in the previous five (5) years.

Section 7. Public Hearing.

As required by NCGS §115C-67.6, a public hearing on the proposed merger plan occurred on April 20, 2026. The public hearing was announced at least ten (10) days prior to the hearing.

Section 8. No Referendum.

Pursuant to NCGS §115C-68.1(c), this Merger Plan will not be submitted to a referendum of the voters.

Section 9. Policies and Other Conditions.

- A. Student Assignment. It is the intent of this Merger Plan that students in overpopulated school facilities may be shifted to facilities with capacity within the merged unit. When considering any student assignment change, the CVBOE should give priority to students currently enrolled in high school remaining at their then-assigned high school, so they may graduate from that high school if they choose. Secondary priority should be given to siblings of students currently enrolled in high school, with the express objective of easing the impacts of attendance transitions on families.

- B. Quality and Content of Instructional and Specialized Programs. It is the express intent of this Merger Plan that all students in the merged school system be afforded the highest quality education possible. Accordingly, it is intended that, following merger, the quality and content of each school's offerings be equal to or better than the instructional program offered at that school prior to merger. It is also the intent of this Merger Plan that, for the first two academic years following merger, these specific instructional and specialized programs in the schools be maintained in a manner substantially consistent with these programs as currently offered: Hickory City Schools Orchestra, Hickory City Schools Advanced Placement Academy, Hickory City Schools Career & Arts Magnet, Newton-Conover City Schools Discovery High School, Newton-Conover City Schools Conover

School, Catawba County Schools Agricultural Education, and Catawba County Schools Challenger High School.

- C. Staffing. There will be no reduction in staffing as a result of this Merger Plan for two (2) years following the Effective Date of the merger. Employees may be reassigned to positions to maximize the assets of the merged district.
- D. Contracts. Upon approval of this Merger Plan by the State Board of Education, none of the three existing boards of education shall have the authority to enter into or extend the term of any contract, including but not limited to any central office or administrative employee, beyond the effective date of the Merger Plan without the concurrence of CVBOE. Additionally, any unrestricted fund balances in the Local Current Expense funds of any of the existing boards may not be appropriated by the existing boards without the express approval of the CVBOE. No capital improvements in excess of \$100,000.00 may be made by the existing boards without the express approval of the CVBOE.

The various provisions of this Merger Plan shall be severable. If any section of this Merger Plan is held invalid or unenforceable, such decision shall not affect the remainder of the plan or of the merger.

Commissioner Setzer thanked everyone for attending the meeting as it was an opportunity for all to come together and unite around a shared purpose and commitment to moving forward constructively.

10. Other Items of Business. None.

11. Manager's Report. None.

County Manager Mary Furtado reported to the Board the following addition to the Pay Plan:

The classification of Senior IT Project Manager has been added to the County's classification plan at a pay grade 81 with a salary range of \$73,685.18-\$121,580.55.

12. Attorney's Report. None.

13. Adjournment. No further action was taken. Upon a motion by Commissioner Beatty which unanimously carried, the meeting was adjourned at 11:33 p.m.



Randy Isenhower, Chair
Catawba County Board of Commissioners



Dale R. Stiles
County Clerk