

Harnett County 2019-20 Legislative Priorities

February 4, 2019

1. Assist Harnett County in Expanding Broadband Access to Underserved Areas (State/Federal)

Lack of access to high speed Broadband is a significant barrier to economic growth for a community, and limits educational opportunities and outcomes for residents. We ask for assistance in developing infrastructure and providing broadband to underserved areas within the county, either through legislation or funding. The County is currently completing a Broadband Survey of residents' current and desired level of Broadband access to share with providers in hopes of attracting them to expand service.

2. Address Disparities Related to Impact Aid Funding for Military-Connected Students (Federal)

Due to the way Counties are currently funded for military-connected students, Harnett County receives considerably less in federal funding per student than do surrounding counties. We believe that the funding provided for military-connected students should be the same, regardless of where they attend school, and we seek additional funding to support the education of these students and reduce the burden on the County's taxpayers.

3. Support County Efforts to Expand Natural Gas Capacity (State)

Access to natural gas is a basic requirement for many industries and businesses looking for sites to locate new facilities. Despite population growth in portions of Harnett County, a lack of access to natural gas has prevented the commercial and industrial growth that would normally accompany this growth. We ask for assistance in identifying ways to expand natural gas capacity throughout the county through public-private partnerships.

4. Allow Counties to Enact Impact Fees to Support Public Education (State)

Harnett County is among the fastest growing counties in North Carolina, and with that growth comes additional demand for public services. The County's median home value in 2017 was \$144,700, which does not generate enough tax revenue to pay for the services the home's occupants will need. At present, approximately 3,700 new homes are at some stage of development in Northwest Harnett County, which will create a significant burden on our school system. We request legislation that would allow the County to enact a fee on new development to assist in funding public education in the county.

5. Give School Systems Flexibility in Establishing their K-12 Calendars (State)

Allowing flexibility in establishing their K-12 calendars would give school systems the ability to align the K-12 calendar with local community colleges, which would allow for more opportunities for high school students to take advantage of opportunities for higher education. The Harnett County Board of Commissioners voted last year to provide free tuition for high school students in Harnett County who meet certain requirements to attend Central Carolina Community College.

6. Grant County Boards of Commissioners the Ability to Construct Schools (State)

The Harnett County Board of Commissioners asks for the authority to construct schools, to allow the County strategically plan for growth and to reduce existing and future issues with school overcrowding.

Additional Priorities

Authorize Use of Recreation Fees for Construction (State)

Harnett County requests legislation that would grant the County the ability to use recreation fees, which are currently received from new development in the County, for construction of recreational amenities as well as land acquisition. At present, counties can only use this revenue for land acquisition while municipalities are allowed to use them for both construction and land acquisition.

Assist Harnett County in Funding its Veterans Treatment Court Program (State/Federal)

Harnett County's first-in-the-state Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) celebrated its fifth anniversary in November. In its first five years of existence, the Harnett VTC has helped many veterans in Harnett County and the greater region who have struggled with substance abuse and other issues connected to their military service build fulfilling and productive lives back home. The VTC is one of four currently operating in North Carolina, and accepts any qualifying veteran from across the state who has the ability to travel to the court's weekly sessions. The court substantially expanded its reach in 2016 when it was awarded a three-year grant from the federal government (SAMHSA and BJA). The grant allowed for the hire of three full-time and three part-time staff, and paid for much needed treatment services including one-on-one counseling which the veterans would not be able to receive from the VA. The grant will run out in October 2019, and without additional federal or state support, the entire expense of maintaining this program will fall to the County. We ask for additional support for this program that provides invaluable services to veterans in Harnett County and across the State of North Carolina.

Assist Counties with Efforts to Install Additional Gauges on Rivers and Waterways (State)

During Hurricane Florence, Harnett County experienced significant issues with river flooding, which prompted evacuation orders along two rivers (the Cape Fear and Lower Little). Additional evacuations may have been warranted, but County officials had no way of knowing how high those rivers were going to crest due to a lack of gauging equipment. River gauges are only installed on the Lower Little River and on the Cape Fear River at the Lillington bridge. We request assistance in the purchase and installation of additional river gauges at additional strategic points including on the Upper Little River and on the Cape Fear River near Raven Rock State Park and the bridge in Erwin.

Assist Counties in the Cleanup of Rivers and Waterways (State)

Aside from the Cape Fear River, many of Harnett County's waterways contain significant debris, which makes it difficult to travel the rivers. Clearing the rivers and waterways would make rescue efforts safer for emergency responders, and would provide additional opportunities for recreational tourism. In North Carolina, property owners along the river are responsible for cleanup. There are also numerous factors to consider including environmental impacts and possible disruption of animal life cycles. We ask for assistance from N.C. Emergency Management, DENR, or another appropriate agency in coordinating river cleanup efforts across the state. Priorities in Harnett County include the Lower and Upper Little rivers, followed by the Black River area.

Assist Counties with Storm Mitigation Planning and Implementation (State/Federal)

Like many other counties in North Carolina, Harnett County has seen significant impacts from multiple powerful hurricanes in recent years in terms of flooding, damage to property, and loss of revenue and income. We ask for assistance from State and Federal agencies as we work to plan for and implement mitigation strategies to make sure the County is better prepared for future severe weather events.

Provide Funding to Help Counties Implement School Security Measures (State/Federal)

Few schools across the state were built with modern security needs in mind. The cost to modify schools to address present-day threats is substantial. Harnett County Emergency Services has surveyed each of the County's schools and presented recommendations for safety priorities. We ask for additional funding to assist the County as we seek to implement these recommendations and make our schools safer places for teachers to teach and students to learn.

Support the County's efforts to Enhance the Harnett Regional Jetport (State)

Harnett Regional Jetport is an economic engine for Harnett County. Over the past decade, the County has extended the runway, improved and expanded the apron to allow for the airport's expansion. Harnett County is preparing to make additional investments into the jetport in the form of an additional apron expansion and a new \$3.7 million terminal. We ask for any assistance that may be available to offset these costs or to make additional enhancements in the future.

Support County's Efforts to Correct Boundary Issues (State)

Last year, Harnett County worked with Wake and Chatham counties and the N.C. Geodetic Survey to identify its correct boundaries with these counties. Technology has allowed for more precise measures of boundary lines, which allows counties to correct discrepancies and adjust boundary lines to their correct locations. This clears up issues related to taxing, voting, fire production, and other county services for residents living along the boundaries. Harnett County is preparing to embark on a similar process with Johnston and Sampson counties, however reduced funding for the N.C. Geodetic Survey will push this process out several years into the future. We request additional funding (approximately \$100,000 to \$150,000 for contractors to allow these projects to be completed sooner.

Address Issues with Motor Vehicle Gap Billing (State)

The Tax & Tag Together program dramatically increased counties' collection rates on motor vehicle property taxes, however drivers who are delinquent on their taxes are allowed to begin their new registration period upon payment, creating a gap between the initial expiration date and the new start date. County tax offices may bill for this gap, however it creates confusion for taxpayers and can be difficult to collect. The result is lost revenue for county governments. The Harnett County Tax Office requests requiring the new registration period to begin when the previous one ended, or finding another solution that will allow for the inclusion of this gap period within the Tax & Tag Together program to increase collections. (In 2018, the Tax Office sent out 1,685 gap bills, with 916 of those tax bills requiring force collection. The total taxes owed for the gap bills was \$53,630.88 with an unpaid total of \$39,074.96.)

Continue Support of Construction of Four Lane Highway into Wake County (State)

Harnett County does not currently have a four-lane highway into Wake County, which is a significant barrier to growth and economic development. U.S. 401 is a natural candidate to be widened to four lanes. The County has worked to find ways to fund this project through NCDOT and our various planning organizations with little success, and asks for any additional assistance that may be available.

Lower NCDOT Road Takeover Threshold to 75 percent Buildout (State)

When a property is developed into a subdivision, the County requires the developer to build the roads to NCDOT specifications with the intent that NCDOT will assume maintenance of the roads soon after most of the building is done. As it stands, NCDOT requires that 75 percent of homes in a subdivision be occupied before the developer can petition to have the roads taken over. This sometimes results in the developer pulling out of the project before the roads can be taken over, which creates issues for homeowners in the subdivision. Harnett County currently has at least 30 subdivisions that would have been in better situations if the NCDOT takeover threshold were changed to 75 percent buildout.

Allow Counties to use E-911 Funds for E-911 Needs Other than Equipment (State)

Harnett County currently has E-911 funds which can only be used to purchase equipment, however the county has fulfilled all existing equipment needs. Harnett County asks for the flexibility to use leftover E-911 funds for personnel, training and other needs connected to the use of E-911.

Preserve Funding for Local Health Departments (State)

Over the last several years, county health departments have seen funding reductions from the state, which has made operation more difficult. We request preservation of funding levels for county departments of public health.

Restore State Aid Funding of Public Libraries to Pre-2011 Levels (State)

We request the restoration of state aid funding of public libraries to the pre-2011 level of \$15.7 million, as well as the elimination of special provisions that distribute state aid outside of the equitable formula developed by the State Library Commission.

Provide Local Governments with Liaison for Utilities Providers (State)

There are times when County and municipal governments have had issues that required immediate assistance from some of our utility providers and have had difficulty getting a prompt response. This has negatively affected local businesses and residents. We request assistance, potentially in the form of a liaison who could assist local governments in working with these providers to address emergency issues as quickly as possible.

Reinstate Funding for Drug Treatment Courts and Mental Health Courts (State)

As discussed earlier, Harnett County has seen tremendous success from its Veterans Treatment Court. We believe similar success could be experienced by other residents who may have served our nation's military. We request legislation to reinstate funding for Drug Treatment Courts and Mental Health Courts.