

HABERSHAM COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
MEETING MINUTES
6:00 P.M., MONDAY, JULY 20, 2026
HABERSHAM COUNTY COURTHOUSE
JURY ASSEMBLY ROOM
295 LLEWELLYN ST, CLARKESVILLE, GA 30523

The Habersham County Board of Commissioners held a regularly scheduled meeting on Monday, July 20, 2026 at 6:00 p.m. in the Jury Assembly Room of the Habersham County Courthouse located at 295 Llewellyn St., Clarkesville, GA 30523.

Present was Chairman Bruce Harkness, Vice Chairman Dustin Mealor, Commissioner Ty Akins, Commissioner Kelly Woodall, Commissioner Danny McClellon, County Manager Tim Sims, County Attorney Angie Davis, County Clerk Brandalin Carnes, staff, members of the media, and members of the public.

Chairman Harkness called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Commissioner Woodall led the Invocation.

Commissioner Akins led the Pledge of Allegiance.

ADOPTION OF AGENDA

Motion by Commissioner Akins, seconded by Commissioner Woodall, and voted unanimously (5-0) to adopt the agenda with the following amendments:

- Removal of “New Business” item “c. Discussion on Notice of Rezoning Request Pursuant to Accepted Annexation Petition Submitted by Cook Construction and Real Estate to the City of Baldwin for the Purpose of Rezoning 65.92 Acres Designated as Habersham County Tax Parcels 050 002C; 050 047B; 048 022; 048 022A; and 048 023, comprised of 45 acres in unincorporated Habersham County and 20.92 acres in the City of Baldwin, from a current zoning of LI-Low Intensity (Habersham Count) to HB- Highway Business (City of Baldwin)” from the agenda.

PRESENTATIONS/ANNOUNCEMENTS:

- a. Citizen Recognition: The Honorable William “Bill” Dover

Chairman Harkness recognized the Honorable William “Bill” Dover for his lifetime of service to Habersham County and the State of Georgia. He summarized Mr. Dover’s local roots, military service on the Korean Demilitarized Zone, work as an educator, and ten consecutive terms in the Georgia House of Representatives. The Chairman highlighted Mr. Dover’s contributions to education, conservation-use valuation, tax relief, highway safety, and statewide tax policy, as well as his dedication to helping individual constituents.

The Board presented Mr. Dover with a certificate of recognition, and photographs were taken with the commissioners and his family. Mr. Dover thanked God, his wife Suzanne, his family, and the citizens who elected him. He also thanked the commissioners for their service and acknowledged the responsibilities of public office.

- b. Announcement: National Purple Heart Appreciation Day Recognized on August 7, 2026

County Clerk Brandalin Carnes announced the Purple Heart Appreciation Day luncheon scheduled for August 7, 2026, at Habersham EMC in Clarkesville. Doors would open at 11:30 a.m., with lunch beginning at

noon. Attendees were asked to RSVP through the Commission Office or the County website so staff could obtain an accurate headcount. Chairman Harkness also briefly recognized staff's work on the recent bell unveiling and America 250 celebration, which proceeded despite severe weather.

PUBLIC COMMENTS:

- a. Dale Green: County Government and Department Heads

Dale Green addressed the Board regarding Animal Care and Control. He asked whether the shelter operated as a no-kill facility, questioned the clarity of shelter policies, described a recent disagreement that arose when he visited to ask about surrendering a dog, and expressed concern about shelter management and the cost of the new facility. Chairman Harkness and Vice Chairman Mealor explained that the County works with foster homes and rescue organizations to avoid euthanasia whenever reasonably possible, although euthanasia may still be necessary in some circumstances. Chairman Harkness thanked Mr. Green for speaking and emphasized the right of citizens to address their elected officials. No other public comments were offered.

CONSENT AGENDA:

Motion by Commissioner Akins, seconded by Commissioner Mealor, and voted unanimously (5-0) to approve the consent agenda as presented.

- a. Consider/Approve Minutes of June 15, 2026 Board of Commissioners Meeting
- b. Consider/Approve Minutes of June 29, 2026 Special Called Meeting
- c. Consider/Approve Minutes of June 29, 2026 Executive Session
- d. Consider/Approve Amendments to the Habersham County Airport Minimum Standards for Commercial Aeronautical Services
- e. Consider/Approve Professional Services Agreement with Leftover Pets, Inc. for Provision of Comprehensive Veterinary Services to the Habersham County Animal Shelter

REPORTS:

- a. County Manager's Report: Tim Sims, County Manager

County Manager Sims gave the Commission an update regarding the work of the various departments under his direction. The Board requested several follow-up items.

Chairman Harkness asked that a future report identify the revenue derived from recyclable materials. He also requested confirmation regarding the Local Maintenance and Improvement Grant paving program. Mr. Sims explained that roads are prioritized through a condition-rating system, with the lowest-rated roads receiving priority. The County had received approximately \$1 million in additional State support, approximately \$918,000 in regular LMIG funding, and related SPLOST funds, allowing an estimated \$2.3 million in paving work during the year. Work was expected to begin within one or two weeks.

The Chairman asked whether Yellowstone's mowing zones corresponded to commissioner districts. Mr. Sims said the zones appeared to be road-maintenance quadrants rather than commission districts and agreed to verify the arrangement. Chairman Harkness asked staff to consider aligning or cross-referencing the zones with commissioner districts so commissioners could more easily track completed and upcoming mowing work.

Commissioner Danny McClellon requested that airport fuel reports show the County's fuel acquisition cost, not merely gallons sold and retail price, so the Board could evaluate net revenue. Commissioner Ty Akins asked that reports also include year-to-date totals and year-over-year comparisons. Mr. Sims agreed that staff would provide the additional information.

APPOINTMENTS:

RECREATION ADVISORY BOARD

3- Year Term Ending 12/31/2026

1. Joe Elam (Resignation)- Commissioner McClellon's Appointment

Motion by Commissioner McClellon, seconded by Commissioner Meador, and voted unanimously (5-0) to approve appointing Casey Lizama to serve this unexpired term ending December 31, 2026 on the Recreation Advisory Board.

OLD BUSINESS:

a. Consider/Approve and Vote on Proposed Unified Development Ordinance

Planning Director Mike Beecham presented the proposed Unified Development Ordinance (UDO), which would replace the County's 1992 Comprehensive Land Development Ordinance. He explained that the prior regulations allowed one-acre subdivisions across extensive portions of the County and allowed data centers by right in certain districts without a public hearing. The UDO was intended to provide better control over the location and type of development while guiding growth toward areas with adequate roads, water, sewer, and other infrastructure.

Mr. Beecham stated that the UDO had been discussed at 16 public meetings. Following public concerns raised at the March 16 hearing, the Board delayed action, held additional town halls and an open house, and revised the proposal. Major revisions included:

- Removing the proposed Conservation Subdivision District and its five-acre minimum lot size;
- Removing the proposed derelict-vehicle provisions;
- Requiring a special-use permit and substantially more supporting information for data-center applications;
- Allowing immediate family members to create up to three one-acre lots, regardless of zoning district, when the plat is designated for immediate-family use;
- Defining major subdivisions as four or more lots and minor subdivisions as three or fewer lots;
- Reducing the minimum home size for new major subdivisions from 1,800 to 1,200 square feet;
- Clarifying definitions and adding cross-references within the permitted-use table; and
- Prohibiting recreational vehicles from being used as short-term rentals.

The updated ordinance expanded the number of zoning districts from four to eight to better separate agricultural, residential, commercial, and other uses, while retaining three acres as the largest minimum lot size. Mr. Beecham reported that many property owners requested Agricultural zoning after meeting with staff. He said public support increased as residents gained a clearer understanding of the proposal and could review their property on the qPublic map. Commissioner Woodall asked whether that change in public sentiment had continued, and Mr. Beecham said most residents appeared supportive after staff explained the purpose and details of the ordinance. Commissioner Akins stated that the lengthy review process had resolved his questions. Chairman Harkness stated that the new ordinance responded to residents' requests to preserve the County's rural character and better manage growth. He noted that property owners would retain the ability to seek rezonings, variances, or other relief through the established process.

Regarding data centers, Mr. Beecham pointed out that the existing zoning map included areas where a data center could be developed by right without a public hearing. Under the new UDO, a proposed data center would require a special-use permit from the Board of Commissioners. He explained that the Board had considered whether data centers could be prohibited outright, but Georgia law generally does not permit a local government to ban an otherwise lawful land use. The County therefore added extensive safeguards to the application and review process. A data-center applicant would be required to submit approximately four pages of supporting information, and all required materials would have to be complete before staff would schedule the special-use hearing. Mr. Beecham described these requirements as guardrails intended to give the County significantly more information and control when evaluating any future proposal.

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Akins, and voted unanimously 5-0 to approve the Unified Development Ordinance as recommended by the Planning Commission.

b. Consider/Approve Proposed Zoning Map

Planning Director Mike Beecham addressed the Commission, informing them that it is necessary to have a separate vote on the proposed zoning map that is associated with the new UDO they just adopted.

Motion by Commissioner Akins, seconded by Commissioner Woodall, and voted unanimously 5-0 to approve the proposed zoning map as presented.

NEW BUSINESS:

- a. Consider/Approve an Intergovernmental Agreement Between Habersham County and the Municipalities of Alto, Baldwin, Clarkesville, Cornelia, Demorest, Mt. Airy and Tallulah Falls for Imposition of the Floating Homestead Local Option Sales Tax (FLOST) Also Known as the Property Tax Reduction Local Option Sales Tax (PTRLOST)

County Manager Sims explained that House Bill 581 authorized a referendum on a one-percent Floating Homestead Local Option Sales Tax (FLOST). If approved by voters, the tax would run for five years, and all proceeds would be used to roll back property-tax millage rates. The County had worked with the municipalities for more than a year, and all cities supported and had approved the intergovernmental agreements. Revenue would be distributed based on each jurisdiction's share of the property-tax digest.

Mr. Sims clarified that the rollback would apply to all property, not only homesteaded property. Based on the current first-year estimate, the FLOST was projected to produce an approximately 3.608-mill rollback, including for property within municipalities. Vice Chairman Mealor moved to approve the FLOST intergovernmental agreements and authorize Chairman Harkness to execute them. The motion was seconded.

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Woodall, and voted unanimously (5-0) to approve the Intergovernmental Agreement between Habersham County and the municipalities of Alto,

Baldwin, Clarkesville, Cornelia, Demorest, Mt. Airy and Tallulah Falls for imposition of the Floating Homestead Local Option Sales Tax (FLOST) also known as the Property Tax Reduction Local Option Sales Tax (PTRLOST) and Authorize the Chairman to Execute the Agreement.

- b. Consider/Approve Resolution Calling for Election to determine whether a special one percent sales tax shall be imposed for five years within Habersham County to reduce ad valorem property taxes (FLOST/PTRLOST), to approve and authorize the Chairman to execute an Intergovernmental Agreement to regulate and implement the FLOST, and for other purposes

Mr. Sims presented a resolution calling for the proposed FLOST to be placed before voters on November 3, 2026. He explained that the County intended to complete its action and transmit the necessary information by July 27. Although the applicable deadline was August 5, staff had established an earlier target of August 1 to ensure the referendum information could be submitted to the State and published in the newspaper on time. Following the Board's approval, the Board of Elections and Registration would hold a specially called meeting the following week to approve the election call and forward the required materials for placement of the question on the November ballot.

During discussion, Vice Chairman Mealor asked how the property-assessment limitation operated. Mr. Sims explained that the State floating freeze limits the annual increase in taxable value to the lower of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) or three percent. For example, if CPI is below three percent, the lower CPI rate applies; if CPI exceeds three percent, the increase is capped at three percent. Mr. Sims noted that Habersham County already offers a more protective local base-year freeze for qualifying property owners who have filed for the applicable homestead exemption. Under the County exemption, increases in assessed value are offset by corresponding increases in the exemption, resulting in a zero-percent increase in the taxable value used for the County portion of the tax bill. That local protection does not apply to the school-system portion of the bill. Mr. Sims stated that property not covered by the County's local homestead freeze would be subject to the State CPI-or-three-percent limitation. He further explained that legislation enacted in 2026 made participation mandatory for municipalities and school systems after many school systems had previously opted out because the original legislation did not adequately address their funding concerns.

Motion by Commissioner Woodall, seconded by Commissioner Akins, and voted unanimously (5-0) to adopt the resolution calling for a special election on November 3, 2026 to determine the imposition of a one percent floating homestead local options sales tax (FLOST), to approve the FLOST intergovernmental agreement (IGA), and to approve and authorize the Chairman to execute said agreement.

- ~~e. Discussion on Notice of Rezoning Request Pursuant to Accepted Annexation Petition Submitted by Cook Construction and Real Estate to the City of Baldwin for the Purpose of Rezoning 65.92 Acres Designated as Habersham County Tax Parcels 050-002C; 050-047B; 048-022; 048-022A; and 048-023, comprised of 45 acres in unincorporated Habersham County and 20.92 acres in the City of Baldwin, from a current zoning of LI-Low Intensity (Habersham Count) to HIB-Highway Business (City of Baldwin)~~

This item of business was removed during the adoption of the agenda.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Commissioner Akins thanked Planning Director Mike Beecham, Planning staff, the Planning Commission, and everyone who worked to complete the Unified Development Ordinance. He acknowledged that the new ordinance might not be perfect in every respect but said it corrected a major weakness in the previous regulations, which allowed subdivisions to be developed in many areas without review by either the Planning

Commission or Board of Commissioners. He noted that the effort had taken approximately two to two-and-one-half years and began with the County's Comprehensive Plan meetings.

Vice Chairman Mealor also thanked Mr. Beecham and specifically recognized his accessibility throughout the UDO process. He stated that Mr. Beecham consistently answered his telephone calls and responded promptly to emails, including a question sent the night before the meeting that was answered first thing the following morning. Vice Chairman Mealor said that level of responsiveness spoke highly of Mr. Beecham's service.

Commissioner Woodall expressed support for Animal Care and Control Director Madi Nix and shelter staff. He acknowledged that animal-welfare decisions are difficult and that, although the County seeks to protect and place every animal it reasonably can, some animals cannot safely be adopted. He cited the shelter's partnerships with foster homes and rescue organizations, recalling that he once transported approximately 30 puppies to Alabama as part of an effort that ultimately sent them to New York for adoption during the Christmas season. He said Ms. Nix had handled the difficult responsibility of managing both adoptable and non-adoptable animals professionally, had participated in fundraising when County resources were limited, and had not requested more than the shelter needed. He also thanked Vice Chairman Mealor for helping identify an organization that could provide lower-cost spay-and-neuter services and noted that rising veterinary costs make such assistance important for many families.

Commissioner McClellon stated that he had no additional comments.

Chairman Harkness thanked Mr. Beecham, Planning staff, County management, the commissioners, and the County's approximately 500 full- and part-time employees. Referring to the earlier public comments, he clarified that allowing a citizen to criticize the County without an extended response did not mean that he was unwilling to support County employees. He said citizens have the right to address and criticize their elected officials and that commissioners understand such criticism to be part of public service. At the same time, he emphasized that the County has many dedicated employees performing important work. The Chairman noted that the County is responsible for approximately 500 roads, including more than 100 unpaved roads, and has approximately 34,000 registered voters. He estimated that the population was approaching 60,000 and stated that the Board was working to manage and control growth in accordance with the direction received from voters. He concluded by thanking County staff, citizens, guests, and members of the media for attending and participating.

~~EXECUTIVE SESSION~~ No executive session was needed at this meeting.

ADJOURN

Motion by Commissioner Akins, seconded by Commissioner Mealor, and voted unanimously (5-0) to adjourn the meeting at 7:08 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

By: _____
Bruce Harkness, Commission Chairman

Attest: _____
Brandalin Carnes, County Clerk