

**HABERSHAM COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
MEETING MINUTES
6:00 P.M., MONDAY, MARCH 16, 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, March 16, 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, County Manager Tim Sims, County Attorney Angela Davis, County Clerk Brandalin Carnes, staff, members of the media, and members of the public.

Chairman Harkness called the meeting to order at 6:04 p.m.

Commissioner Woodall led the Invocation.

Commissioner Akins led the Pledge of Allegiance.

ADOPTION OF AGENDA

Motion by Commissioner Woodall, seconded by Commissioner Mealor, and voted unanimously (4-0) to adopt the agenda as presented.

PRESENTATIONS/ANNOUNCEMENTS:

a. Citizen Recognition: Anthony King

Chairman Harkness recognized Mr. Anthony King for his lifelong contributions to youth athletics and the Habersham County community. Mr. King, a 1974 graduate of Habersham Central High School and former collegiate athlete at Clemson University, has dedicated more than fifty years to officiating football, basketball, and softball. Chairman Harkness noted that Mr. King's service has positively impacted generations of student-athletes through his commitment to fair play, mentorship, and community involvement. He further recognized Mr. King's induction into the Northeast Georgia Sports Hall of Fame. The Board expressed appreciation for his decades of service and lasting impact on the community.

b. Employee Spotlight: Ashlyn Brady (Public Information Officer)

County Manager Tim Sims recognized Ms. Ashlyn Brady for being named the Habersham County Chamber of Commerce 2025 Young Professional of the Year. Mr. Sims highlighted her role in strengthening communication between the County, media, and public, as well as her contributions to improving transparency, enhancing the County's online presence, and supporting community engagement initiatives and events. The Board commended Ms. Brady for her professionalism and dedication to public service.

c. Departmental Recognition: Finance Department

Chairman Harkness and County Manager Sims recognized the Habersham County Finance Department for its continued excellence in financial management. Mr. Sims noted the department's responsibilities in budgeting, financial reporting, and fiscal planning, and announced that the County received the Government Finance Officers Association Distinguished Budget Presentation Award for Fiscal Year 2026, marking the eighth consecutive year of recognition. The Board expressed appreciation for the department's professionalism and commitment to accountability and transparency.

d. Proclamation of March 16th – 20th, 2026 as Government Financial Professionals Week

County Manager Sims presented a proclamation recognizing March 16th through March 20th, 2026 as Government Financial Professionals Week in Habersham County. The proclamation acknowledged the critical role finance professionals play in maintaining sound fiscal management, ensuring accountability, and supporting effective government operations. Chairman Harkness formally presented the proclamation and encouraged recognition of finance professionals for their contributions.

PUBLIC HEARING:

a. First Reading & Public Hearing for New Unified Development Ordinance

Chairman Harkness opened the public hearing and emphasized that no vote would be taken at the meeting. While the second reading of the ordinance and vote was originally intended to occur at upcoming April 20, 2026 Board of Commissioners meeting, he feels that due to the recent resignation of a commissioner and the upcoming election, the Board should delay final action until a new commissioner is seated to ensure full representation of the county. He further emphasized the importance of public input given the significant and long-term impact of the proposed ordinance.

County Attorney Angela Davis outlined the procedures for the public hearing, including time limits for speakers and requirements for public comment.

Planning Director Mike Beecham then presented an overview of the proposed Unified Development Ordinance. He explained that the ordinance has been under development since mid-2024 and has included stakeholder input, professional review, and public engagement.

Mr. Beecham highlighted several key components of the proposal, including:

- Expansion from four to nine zoning districts
- Revised minimum lot sizes ranging from one to five acres depending on district
- Introduction of cluster development options to preserve open space
- Allowance for accessory dwelling units under certain conditions
- Establishment of standards for minor and major subdivisions
- Proposed minimum square footage requirements for homes in subdivisions
- Tree protection requirements
- Updated commercial development standards
- Regulation of data centers, including potential requirements for closed-loop cooling systems and buffering
- Updated standards for telecommunications towers

Mr. Beecham also reviewed recommendations from the Planning Commission, including potential adjustments to minimum square footage requirements, subdivision infrastructure standards, and additional conditions related to data centers and telecommunications towers.

Extensive discussion occurred between staff, the Board, and legal counsel regarding implementation, legal limitations, and potential impacts of the ordinance.

County Attorney Angela Davis invited those in favor of the Unified Development Ordinance to address the Commission. There were none present who wished to do so.

County Attorney Angela Davis invited those opposed to the Unified Development Ordinance to address the Commission. Multiple citizens addressed the Commission expressing concerns primarily related to property rights, affordability, and economic impacts associated with the proposed ordinance.

Ms. Tina Free spoke regarding the importance of maintaining access to affordable housing and shared her personal life experience to illustrate how housing opportunities can shape long-term outcomes. She described overcoming significant hardship, including growing up in poverty and leaving home at a young age, and credited access to attainable housing as a key factor in her ability to build stability for herself and her family. Ms. Free emphasized that affordable housing should not be viewed as a negative but rather as an opportunity for individuals to improve their circumstances. She urged the Board to carefully consider how increased regulations could limit those opportunities for future residents.

Mr. Bruce E. Palmer, who wanted to make it clear that he was not the former County Commissioner by a similar name, expressed concern regarding the practical impact of the ordinance on individual property owners. He explained that he currently owns approximately five acres and had considered building an additional residence on his property for rental use, short-term lodging, or potential family use. Mr. Palmer stated that while the ordinance may appear reasonable in concept, it could create unintended restrictions for everyday property owners who have made long-term plans based on existing regulations. He emphasized that changes to lot size requirements and development standards could place property owners in difficult positions and urged the Board to consider how such changes affect residents at an individual level.

Mr. Zane Stewart stated that while he supports reasonable subdivision regulations, he has concerns about the proposed increase in minimum lot sizes. He described the proposal as potentially overreaching and expressed concern that it could negatively impact property rights. Mr. Stewart noted that for many residents, land ownership represents their most significant asset, and additional restrictions could limit their ability to utilize or divide their property. He also questioned how the proposed ordinance would address housing affordability and protect property owners' long-term interests.

Mr. Henry Lovell expressed concern regarding increasing property taxes and the cumulative impact of additional regulations. He stated that rising costs are already placing a burden on property owners, particularly long-time residents, and that further restrictions could make it more difficult for individuals to either maintain or sell their property. He emphasized the importance of considering how regulatory decisions affect those on fixed incomes or those attempting to manage generational land holdings.

Mr. Joshua Bramlett provided detailed comments regarding the broader economic implications of increased regulation. He stated that each regulation carries a cost, which is ultimately passed on to residents through higher housing prices and reduced economic flexibility. He expressed concern that additional restrictions could negatively impact small businesses, limit housing availability, and place greater strain on the existing tax base. Mr. Bramlett cautioned that while growth management is important, overly restrictive policies could unintentionally reduce opportunity and economic mobility within the county. Following public comment, the Board acknowledged the concerns raised by citizens.

County Manager Tim Sims stated that staff would compile the questions and concerns presented during the hearing and work to provide responses and clarifications prior to the next meeting. He emphasized the importance of ensuring that accurate information is available to the public as the ordinance continues to be reviewed.

Commissioner Woodall stated that the ordinance was developed in response to ongoing concerns from citizens regarding rapid growth, loss of agricultural land, and increasing demands on county infrastructure. He noted that while regulation is not the goal, the cost of providing services to new residential developments—particularly in more rural areas—must be considered. He emphasized that the Board is attempting to balance growth with the County’s ability to provide services in a financially responsible manner.

Commissioner Akins stated that multiple public input opportunities had been provided throughout the development process, including advertised meetings and work sessions. He explained that much of the feedback received indicated concern about unmanaged growth, including high-density development occurring in traditionally rural areas. He emphasized that the Board is not attempting to prevent reasonable use of property, but rather to address ongoing issues related to infrastructure strain, traffic, and service delivery. He acknowledged that while not all citizens will agree with the approach, the current system has presented challenges that must be addressed.

Chairman Harkness reiterated that the ordinance is still under consideration and emphasized that no final decision has been made. He encouraged citizens to continue providing input, either through direct communication with the County Clerk or through future public engagement opportunities. He stated that additional meetings, including a potential town hall, may be scheduled to allow for further discussion and clarification prior to adoption.

The public hearing was then closed.

This was the first reading and public hearing of the New Unified Development Ordinance. No action was on this item.

- b. Public Hearing on Resolution 2026-03-001 Extending the Limited Moratorium On Acceptance Of Applications For Preliminary Plat Approval For Residential Developments Of Five Lots Or More And Rezoning To The Residential Single Family (Li-R), Residential Multi-Family (Mi-R), And Planned Development (Pd) Land Use Districts**

County Attorney Angela Davis introduced the item regarding the extension of the limited moratorium on acceptance of applications for preliminary plat approval for residential developments of five (5) lots or more and rezoning to the Residential Single Family (LI-R), Residential Multi-Family (MI-R), and Planned Development (PD) land use districts.

Planning Director Mike Beecham addressed the Commission and explained that the moratorium was originally adopted to allow time for the development and consideration of the County’s Unified Development Ordinance. He stated that while substantial progress has been made, the ordinance has not yet been finalized or adopted.

Ms. Davis further explained that the current moratorium was set to expire on March 17, 2026, and that staff is recommending an extension in order to align with the revised timeline for consideration of the Unified Development Ordinance. She noted that due to the current vacancy on the Board of Commissioners and the upcoming election to fill the District 3 seat, the Board has expressed a desire to delay final action on the ordinance until a new commissioner is seated.

Ms. Davis advised that the proposed extension would carry the moratorium through June 16, 2026, which would provide sufficient time for the election process, onboarding of the new commissioner, and subsequent consideration and potential adoption of the ordinance. She further stated that the following additional language should be read into the record for inclusion into the resolution to acknowledge the Board's intent to ensure full representation prior to taking final action:

"Whereas, effective February 13, 2026, Jimmy Tench, former Chairman of the Board and representative of District 3, resigned from his position which will remain vacant until a special election is held in May of 2026 and his replacement is seated and Whereas, given the significance and long term future implications of any potential revisions to the Unified Development Ordinance, the Board desires to delay final consideration and action on the draft revisions to the Unified Development Ordinance until such time as constituents of District 3 are fully represented."

County Attorney Angela Davis invited those in favor of extending the moratorium to address the Commission. There was no one present who wished to do so.

County Attorney Angela Davis invited those opposed to extending the moratorium to address the Commission.

Mr. Henry Lovell spoke in opposition to the extension of the moratorium. He stated that the continued extensions have had a direct impact on property transactions, including a recent contract he had in place for development that was unable to move forward due to the moratorium. Mr. Lovell expressed frustration with the length of time required to reach a decision and emphasized the financial and practical challenges that delays create for property owners attempting to develop or sell land.

No additional speakers were present. The public hearing was closed.

Discussion followed regarding the necessity of extending the moratorium in light of the revised timeline for the Unified Development Ordinance and the importance of ensuring full Board participation in the decision-making process. Commissioners discussed the balance between allowing development to proceed and maintaining the temporary restrictions necessary to complete the ordinance review in a thoughtful and comprehensive manner.

Chairman Harkness reiterated that the intent of the extension is not to delay unnecessarily, but to ensure that all districts are represented when making a decision of significant long-term impact. Commissioners also discussed the possibility of holding additional work sessions or public meetings prior to the next regularly scheduled meeting in order to continue refining the ordinance and gathering public input.

Motion by Commissioner Woodall, seconded by Commissioner Meador, to approve Resolution 2026-03-001 extending the limited moratorium through June 16, 2026, including the additional language read into the record. Motion carries (4-0).

PUBLIC COMMENTS:

Mr. Zach Garvey addressed the Commission and expressed concern regarding the proposed minimum square footage requirement of 1,500 square feet. He stated that when combined with increased minimum lot sizes, such requirements could significantly limit affordable housing options within the county. Mr. Garvey explained that smaller homes often serve as entry points for first-time homebuyers, retirees, or individuals seeking more modest living arrangements, and that increasing minimum thresholds could unintentionally price those individuals out of the market. He suggested that a lower minimum, such as approximately 800 square feet, would provide greater flexibility while still maintaining quality housing standards. Mr. Garvey also raised concerns regarding the expansion to nine zoning districts, stating that a more simplified zoning

structure may be easier for residents and property owners to understand and navigate, while still achieving the County's goals.

Mr. Blaine Wasden addressed the Commission and spoke about his decision to relocate to Habersham County with his wife. He stated that they were drawn to the area because of its strong sense of community, shared values, and overall quality of life. Mr. Wasden emphasized the importance of preserving those characteristics as growth continues, noting that development decisions should take into account not only economic factors but also the long-term cultural and community identity of the County. He referenced his previous experience living in a more densely developed area and expressed concern about the potential for overdevelopment to diminish community cohesion and increase issues such as congestion and crime. Mr. Wasden encouraged the Board to pursue a balanced approach that allows for reasonable growth while maintaining the qualities that make Habersham County unique, and to ensure that property rights are respected in the process.

CONSENT AGENDA:

Motion by Commissioner Akins, seconded by Commissioner Woodall, and voted 3-1 to approve the consent agenda with Commissioner Mealor dissenting.

- a. Consider/Approve Minutes of February 16, 2026 Board of Commissioner Meeting
- b. Consider/Approve Minutes of February 16, 2026 Board of Commissioners Executive Session
- c. Consider/Approve Minutes of February 24, 2026 Annual Planning Retreat
- d. Consider/Approve Minutes of March 10, 2026 Departmental Budget Review Meetings
- e. Consider/Approve Minutes of March 11, 2026 Departmental Budget Review Meetings
- f. Consider/Approve Minutes of March 12, 2026 Departmental Budget Review Meetings
- g. Consider/Approve New Requirements, Forms and Fees for Tie-Down Spaces at Airport
- h. Consider/Approve Local Share Commitment Letter with Legacy Link for Senior Center
- i. Consider/Approve Agreement to Lease 217 Scoggins Drive to the State Properties Commission for Use by the Department of Veteran Services
- j. Consider/Approve Update to Georgia Fund 1 Resolution to Authorize Investment and Designate Representatives
- k. Consider/Approve Acceptance of Georgia Associations of Chiefs of Police (GACP) Technology Grant GA-2026-GACP-160 for Purchase of Seven Laptops for the Sheriff's Office
- l. Consider/Approve Surplus of Sheriff's Office Vehicles
- m. Consider/Approve Intergovernmental Agreement for Habersham County to Lease Facilities at 125 Ivy St from the City of Demorest for Use as a Fire Station and Related Government Purposes
- n. Consider/Approve Intergovernmental Agreement for Habersham County to Lease, With Option to Purchase, One (1) 2022 E-One/Spartan Pumper Truck from the City of Demorest

- o. Consider/Approve Salary Supplement Increase for Tax Commissioner June Black-Warren.

REPORTS:

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

APPOINTMENTS: None

OLD BUSINESS: None

NEW BUSINESS: None

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Commissioner Woodall expressed appreciation for the public's feedback and participation throughout the meeting. He acknowledged the importance of citizen input in the decision-making process and thanked those who attended and shared their perspectives.

Commissioner Akins stated that he had no additional comments.

Vice Chairman Mealor stated that he had no additional comments.

Chairman Harkness stated that he had no additional comments.

EXECUTIVE SESSION: Litigation, pursuant to O.C.G.A §50-14-2

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Akins, and voted unanimously (4-0) to go into executive session for the purpose of discussing Litigation, pursuant to O.C.G.A §50-14-2

ROLL CALL VOTE:

Commissioner Woodall- aye
Commissioner Harkness- aye
Commissioner Akins- aye
Commissioner Mealor- aye

Motion carries to enter executive session at 7:51 p.m.

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Akins, and voted unanimously (4-0) to leave executive session at 8:22 p.m.

County Attorney Angela Davis attested that the matters discussed in executive session were those allowed under state law as exceptions to the open meetings act and authorizing the Chairman to sign an affidavit attesting to this.

Motion by Commissioner Mealor, seconded by Commissioner Akins, and voted unanimously (4-0) to authorize the Chairman to sign the executive session affidavit.

ADJOURN

Motion by Commissioner Akins, seconded by Commissioner Mealor, and voted unanimously (4-0) to adjourn the meeting at 8:22 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

By: _____
Bruce Harkness, Commission Chairman

Attest: _____
Brandalin Carnes, County Clerk

DRAFT