MINUTES OF THE PUBLIC HEARING OF THE REDISTRICTING COMMITTEE
OF THE BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS OF GUILFORD COUNTY

July 28, 2011, 5:30 p.m.
Greensboro, North Carolina

The Redistricting Committee appointed by the Board of Commissioners, held a duly noticed public hearing on July 28, 2011 at 5:30 p.m. in the Commissioners Meeting Room located on the second floor of the Old County Courthouse in Greensboro, NC.

PRESENT: Chairman Melvin “Skip” Alston, Vice Chairman Linda Shaw; Commissioners Kay Cashion, Kirk Perkins, Bruce Davis

ALSO PRESENT: Representative Alma Adams, Brenda Jones Fox, County Manager; Sharisse Fuller, Assistant County Manager/Human Resources Director; Mark Payne, County Attorney; Effie Varitimidis, Clerk to Board; Crystal Maurer, Deputy Clerk to Board; Stephen Dew, GIS Department; Jeff Fowler, Security Director, Amber Snowden, County Attorney’s Office; Joe Killian, News & Record; David Nivens, High Point Enterprise; other members of the press

OTHERS PRESENT: Joanne Wittenborn; Ernie Wittenborn; Keith Brown; Jim Lewis; Jeff Hyde; Ed Whitfield

I. WELCOME/OVERVIEW

Chairman Alston called the meeting to order. He explained that the purpose of the meeting was to hold a public hearing to obtain input from the public regarding all redistricting plans which have been submitted to the Redistricting Committee for its consideration before the committee made its recommendation to the full Board.

Chairman Alston explained that the General Assembly had today circumvented the committee’s efforts by adopting its own redistricting plan for the Guilford County Board of Commissioners. He said that this action by the General Assembly goes contrary to what the General Assembly had told the Board approximately 30 days before, when they had indicated that they were going to allow the Board the opportunity to draw its own district lines. He said that he had spoken to Senator Phil Berger, the President of the Senate, the night before, and Senator Berger told him that the reason he introduced this Local Bill was that he had received some calls from Guilford
County citizens and some of the County Commissioners who said that they had concerns and that they did not think that the Board’s process was being conducted fairly.

Chairman Alston said that he thought that the committee’s process had been a fair one, since the committee meetings had been made open to anyone, and the committee had chosen to hold a public hearing to obtain input from the public before a map was adopted, which was not required. He said that the committee had hoped to make a recommendation to the Board on Thursday, August 4, after they had heard input from the public on all proposed maps.

Chairman Alston said that the General Assembly’s actions mean that the committee will now not be able to make a recommendation to the Board. However, he said that the Board will still hold its meeting on August 4th to discuss what their next steps and options might be. He explained that the Bill passed by the General Assembly also took away the County’s right to hold a referendum on an alternative redistricting plan to be placed on the ballot in an upcoming election. He said that the Bill took away the right of Guilford County to hold a referendum until 2017.

Chairman Alston said that the Board has no choice, given that the Bill is now law, but to submit the plan passed with the Bill to Department of Justice. He expressed his disappointment with the General Assembly for taking this action without informing Guilford County representatives and for not allowing the citizens of Guilford County any input into the process.

Commissioner Shaw commented that she had previously submitted a map to the committee on behalf of the State Republican Party and would now like to withdraw that map in support of the map adopted by the General Assembly.

Commissioner Cashion also expressed her disappointment in the General Assembly’s actions. She said that she had felt that the committee had been following the instructions of the law enacted on June 17, 2011 by the General Assembly, and had established an open and fair process. She said that she feels those efforts have now been wasted, and she feels it is wrong that the citizens of Guilford County have been denied the option of a referendum.

Commissioner Davis said that he shares the committee’s disappointment in the actions of the General Assembly. He said that he feels to first offer the citizens of Guilford County the opportunity to be involved in the redistricting process, and then to take that opportunity away is a travesty. He said that he feels that the work of the committee was an open and fair process. He said that he would like to know what options the Board has moving forward.

Chairman Alston said that he thinks that the Board has some options, which can be discussed with the County Attorney at the Board meeting to be held on August 4 at 5:30 p.m. He said that there are options above and beyond the State government that can have some say on the issue as well. He said that the General Assembly’s map still has to be submitted and approved by the Justice Department, who will have the final say before the map is enacted.
Commissioner Shaw then stated that she understands where the Democratic members of the committee are coming from; however, the Republicans have been in the same position for many years. She said that two wrongs do not make a right, and expressed her hope that the Board accept the map enacted by the General Assembly and move forward and try to do what is best for the citizens of Guilford County.

II. SPEAKERS FROM THE FLOOR

Ernie Wittenborn, 3809 Waldenbrook Road, spoke in support of the Bill passed by the General Assembly and urged the Board to embrace the law and move forward with its implementation. He said he believes that it will increase citizen participation in the political process and lead to more dynamic and diverse representation for the citizens of Guilford County.

Jeff Hyde, 1117 West Cornwallis Drive, said that he hoped that the Commissioners’ redistricting process would place citizens interests before political interests. He said that he believes that the bill passed by the General Assembly protects citizen interests by keeping communities intact. He said that he also believes that the General Assembly’s map is balanced in terms of political parties, increasing competitiveness in districts and preventing a single party from dominating the electoral process.

Jim Lewis, Greensboro, applauded the committee on its commitment to transparency in the redistricting process. He encouraged the Commissioners and the media to do everything possible to help explain the redistricting process and how the new law changes current Commissioners district.

Joann Wittenborn, 3809 Waldenbrook Road, said that she has been attending Commissioners meetings for over a year. She expressed her dissatisfaction with the cumbersome manner in which the Commissioners go through the agenda at each meeting. She said that she agrees with the decision of the General Assembly to reduce the size of the Board, because she and others believe it will increase the speed and openness of Commissioners’ meetings. She encouraged the Commissioners to move forward in enacting the General Assembly’s map.

Keith Brown, 3728 Pembrook Terrace, High Point, said that his map was one of the 5 original maps submitted to the committee for consideration. He explained that his goal in making that map was to preserve communities with like interests in the same district. He thanked the committee for the opportunity to be involved in the redistricting process.

Ed Whitfield, 709 Park Avenue, said that he was involved in the initial communications with the Justice Department which led Guilford County to have district elections rather than all at-large. He said that, despite the contentious relationship among members that sometimes may exist, the district plan provides citizens with someone who lives relatively close to them that represents
them and that they know is responsible for their interests. He said that the purpose of the Voting Rights Act was not to take power away from people in local areas and give it to the federal government. He said that the purpose was to extend the franchise to people in local areas so that citizens would be able to participate fairly in the democratic political process without regards to race. He expressed his displeasure with the Bill passed by the General Assembly.

III. CONCLUSION

Chairman Alston said that the next step would be to hold a Commissioners meeting on August 4 to confer with legal counsel and discuss the next steps moving forward in the redistricting process.

Commissioner Davis said that he hopes that the map enacted by the General Assembly will be made available for public viewing on the County’s website, so that Guilford County citizens can see how they will be impacted. He expressed his particular displeasure in the way that the City of High Point was separated into three districts in the map enacted by the General Assembly.

Chairman Alston instructed staff to have the General Assembly’s Bill and the map enacted posted on the County website. He said that he had invited Senator Phil Berger to come to the meeting to explain his motivation in introducing the Bill to the General Assembly, but Senator Berger declined the invitation. He recognized the presence of Representative Alma Adams and invited her to speak to those present about her impressions of the map that had been adopted.

Representative Adams thanked the committee for the opportunity to speak. She said that the map passed by the General Assembly was passed without the support and without the knowledge of the Guilford County Delegation. She expressed her disappointment that the General Assembly had taken away the opportunity for Guilford County citizens to have input in the redistricting with their own representatives.

Chairman Alston thanked Representative Adams for keeping him informed as to what was going on in the General Assembly as well as for her efforts on behalf of the citizens of Guilford County.

There being no further business, the public hear was adjourned by unanimous consent at 6:35 pm.

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Chairman, Board of County Commissioners

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Recorder (Legal Department)