

**Meeting Minutes**  
**January 12, 2021**

**BUDGET PUBLIC POLICY MEETING**

*Due to the State of North Carolina's Declaration of Emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and per NCGS § 166A-19.24, the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners conducted a remote meeting using the WebEx application.*

**CALL TO ORDER**

The Board of Commissioners of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, met remotely for a Budget/Public Policy meeting on Tuesday, January 20, 2021 at 2:32 p.m. with Chair Dunlap presiding.

**ATTENDANCE**

**Present:** Chair George Dunlap  
Commissioner Leigh Altman  
Commissioner Patricia "Pat" Cotham  
Commissioner Mark Jerrell  
Commissioner Vilma D. Leake  
Commissioner Laura J. Meier  
Commissioner Elaine Powell  
Commissioner Susan Rodriguez- McDowell

**Absent Until Noted:** Commissioner Ella B. Scarborough

**INVOCATION/PLEDGE**

Chair Dunlap called the meeting to order, followed by introductions and the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

**21-6586: Food Desert Research**

Adrian Cox, Assistant County Manager, provided information on food deserts in Mecklenburg County, challenges to addressing food deserts, and common strategies.

Mr. Cox reviewed Activity to-date:

- Cross-functional workgroups meeting to examine the problem and possible solutions
- Idea sharing with other jurisdictions including the City of Charlotte
- Discussions with non-profits and for-profit organizations
- Over 20 meetings on this problem since July

Food Desert Defined per the USDA, Treasury, and HHS, food desert:

- Low-income: a poverty rate of 20 percent or greater, or a median family income at or below 80 percent of the statewide or metropolitan area median family income;
- Low-access: at least 500 persons and/or at least 33 percent of the population lives more than 1 mile from a supermarket or large grocery store (10 miles, in the case of rural census tracts).

Mr. Cox reviewed food deserts by Tract:

- Population: 97,059
- Low access\* children age 0-17: 11,286
- Low access seniors age 65+: 4,013
- Poverty rate\*\*: 28%

## Meeting Minutes January 12, 2021

- Total housing units: 36,526
- Housing units without a vehicle: 4,545
- % of households without a vehicle: 12%

\* Number within these tracts living 1 mile or more from a store

\*\* Family income at or below Federal poverty thresholds by family size. (2 people \$17,240)

Mr. Cox stated that this was not a problem unique to Mecklenburg County, as it impacted both rural and urban areas. He presented a chart showing the percentage of households estimated to be experiencing food insecurity, per USDA. He stated there were 41 counties with a higher percentage than Mecklenburg County and 48 lower. He reviewed the average monthly per capital recipients of Food and Nutrition Services by county for North Carolina stating that Mecklenburg County, along with eight other counties, were in a group at 11%. He stated there were 75 counties with a higher percentage than Mecklenburg County.

### Challenges Faced by Residents:

- Lower income households spend a larger share of income on food
- Fresh fruits and vegetables are less available and more expensive in small convenience stores
- Public transit is not a good option for carrying groceries
  - o 12% of households in food deserts do not have vehicles

### Challenges Faced by Retailers:

- Average US grocery retail profit in 2019 was 1%
- Population density and income impact total sales
- Average income in target locations are \$40,033 versus \$77,366 for rest of the County (48% less)
- Product must move to avoid spoilage
- Market shifting to direct delivery
- Competition

### Keys to Success:

- Improve access to Targeted areas
  - o Zip codes cover too large an area and may miss pockets of need
  - o Food deserts are scattered throughout the County
  - o Solutions are needed to address access for those with no vehicle
- Address Cost
  - o Residents with low income need cost-effective options
- Financially Sustainable
  - o Solutions must factor sufficient in flow to offset the cost over the long-term

### Strategies

Peter Zeiler, Economic Development Director reviewed information on economic development grants.

### Recruitment Strategies - Economic Development Grants

- Provide cash grants and tax reimbursements for grocery store operators and developers seeking to build or renovate new retail space to be owned or leased by a full-line grocers.
- Stores must be located in an eligible area (Food Access Opportunity Area), defined by the County as low-income with low-access to food access locations.
- May require minimum square footage for food products, minimum percentage of store dedicated to perishable goods, and/or minimum square footage for fresh produce.

## Meeting Minutes January 12, 2021

- Other considerations: Size of capital investment, jobs retained and/or created, average wages and benefits, overall financial picture of applicant(s), development strategy and timeline, environmental review, and development effects on nearby community and businesses.
- Potential partnerships with municipalities to match cash grants and tax reimbursements to increase financial support for new stores.

### Potential Grant Parameters:

- Cash grant to support initial capital costs for store operator or developer. Example formula: \$10 County grant for every 1 square foot grocery store.
- Tax reimbursement to provide additional support during the stores' operation to ensure sustainability for the store operator: 90% of annual incremental County ad valorem taxes paid reimbursed over 10-year period.

### Outside Examples:

- New York City Economic Development Corporation – Food Retail Expansion to Support Health (FRESH)
- Government of the District of Columbia – Supermarket Tax Incentives

### Considerations

#### Pros:

- Brings food options to communities by lowering the costs of owning, leasing, developing, and renovating supermarket retail space.
- Could add a tool to the toolbox for potential recruitment

#### Cons:

- Tax reimbursement may not provide substantial impact to store profitability
- Clawback provisions may be difficult to implement
- May not address affordability of healthy foods
- Each store only serves one area of the county

#### Feasibility:

- Although North Carolina Statute 153A-376 authorizes local governments to engage in community development programs for the benefit of low- and moderate-income persons, authority to engage in this specific activity must be further explored.

### Recruitment Strategies - Land Banking Considerations

Jacqueline McNeil, Real Estate Manager reviewed land banking considerations.

#### Pros:

- Creates incentives for grocers to bring a store to the local community
- Helps to underwrite the cost of delivering a grocery store to the marketplace
- Could significantly off-set site specific development costs

#### Cons:

- Premature purchase of a site may mean that the site purchased may not be the ideal location for that sub-market
- Does not allow or substantially limits grocer and neighborhood participation in the process
- Could potentially use a significant portion of funds before the ideal strategy is vetted and agreed upon

#### Feasibility:

- This is not a recommended approach because of the lack of flexibility that a potential development would face with an existing site
- An alternate land strategy would be for the County to assist in the purchase of land once a grocer has been selected an acceptable location has been identified.

## Meeting Minutes January 12, 2021

### Alternative Delivery Strategies – Mobile Grocery Stores

- Grocery store on wheels
- Can be run by a for-profit, non-profit, or private/non-profit partnership
- Different from pantries in that there is no needs-based referral
- There is a wide spectrum of markets that have been set up in different cities.

#### Pros:

- Serves multiple areas
- Provides another option to brick and mortar
- Flexibility to change routes to go where needed
- Not likely to cause gentrification

#### Cons:

- Could require ongoing subsidy to effectively serve areas in need
- Design and fabrication can take up to a year
- Community acceptance is unknown

#### Feasibility:

- This option could be piloted in partnership with a non-profit or for-profit grocer
- The greatest challenge is consistently sourcing food for sale

### Alternative Delivery Strategies – Virtual Markets

- Online grocery shopping and delivery without a physical store for customers
  - Dark stores or Micro fulfillment
  - Ex. Farmstead
- Not a 3rd party shopping/delivery service from an existing store (i.e. Instacart)
- Delivery directly from a warehouse/fulfillment center to the home
- Eliminates cost of retail store from the supply chain, but adds cost of delivery
- Growing trend in the market accelerated by the pandemic
- Meal boxes or full groceries

#### Pros:

- Addresses last-mile challenge to bring food to the home
- Can serve a wide radius from a single distribution hub
- Preselected boxes could be tailored to provide healthy options

#### Cons:

- Users must have internet access
- Does not create a sense of place
- Options can be limited
- Typically cost more

#### Feasibility:

- Mostly an emerging for-profit model
- Could address access issues in the future if cost could be addressed
- Acceptance of SNAP benefits are needed
- Farmstead is open to a partnership to extend services

### Alternative Delivery Strategies – Grocery Co-op

- Grocery Store owned collectively by independent members of the community
- The purpose is not to accumulate profit but benefit the membership
- Democratically controlled
- Member/owner fees provide capital
- Membership can receive benefits and discounts
- Established to provide local and organic options to a community or to serve an area that is underserved

## Meeting Minutes January 12, 2021

### Pros:

- Community owned ensures that focus is on improving lives of neighbors not profit
- Greater investment by the community

### Cons:

- It can be difficult to obtain enough member equity to establish and operate a store in low-income areas
- Once a co-op is open, sufficient revenues are required to maintain operations

### Feasibility:

- To be successful establishing a store, a co-op needs a large number of participating community members, and an engaged customer base
- A co-op would also require a business plan that demonstrates long-term sustainability

### Alternative Delivery Strategies – Food Access Innovation Grant Program

- Develop a grant program to solicit partnership on innovative approaches to food deserts (ex. mobile and virtual markets)
- The goal is to improve access and/or cost for groceries in specific defined food desert tracts
- Could help to identify and promote new delivery methods to food deserts
- Initial design could focus on one-time or pilot programs based on available funding
- Award based on
  - Expected results in terms of access, cost, and long-term sustainability
  - Ability to expand to serve residents throughout the County
- Prepare for the potential to have no viable awards

### Food Security Initiatives – SNAP Expansion Through Super SNAP

Mamie-Eleanor Harris, Health Department reviewed SNAP Expansion Through Super SNAP.

- Partner with Reinvestment Partners to expand its Super SNAP food as prescription program model in Mecklenburg County grocery stores such as Food Lion and Compare Foods
- Clients can spend up to \$40 per month as an additional benefit on WIC-approved fruits and vegetables.
- The USDA Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) unequivocally demonstrates, “financial incentives at the point of sale to SNAP participants increases the consumption of fruits, vegetables and healthy foods.”

### Pros:

- Quick launch and low overhead by Reinvestment Partners (5%)
- SNAP clients can choose which produce they prefer to purchase with the benefit
- Benefits are available immediately upon enrollment
- Clients can be enrolled by care/case managers at participating agencies
- Enrollment is a one-time, five-minute process

### Cons:

- Food Lion is currently the only participating retailer. Additional due diligence required to include other retailers, such as Compare Foods.
- Clients must obtain a Food Lion loyalty card to participate (enrolling staff can sign clients up virtually)

### Feasibility:

- All Food Lion stores are immediately ready to participate

## Meeting Minutes January 12, 2021

- Program model conforms to the Healthy Opportunities Pilots fruits and vegetables prescription model for ongoing funding
- Expansion into Mecklenburg County poses no conflict of interest with state or federal USDA funding

### Food Security Initiatives – SNAP and Double Up Bucks at Farmers Markets

- Stretching SNAP dollars at farmers markets increases access to healthy food and better health
- Increase the number of SNAP recipients getting fresh fruits and vegetables at farmers markets.
- Increase the number of markets accepting SNAP and Double Up Bucks in FY21 from 10 to 15
  - o Mecklenburg County has tripled the number of farmers markets accepting SNAP from FY18 baseline studies and expects an additional 50 percent increase in FY 21
- Increase the amount of Double Buck incentives by removing matching \$20 cap
- Initiate pop-up farm produce stands in food deserts by adding SNAP Double Up Bucks and produce vouchers for food insecure non-SNAP eligible clients
- Across the nation, Double Bucks has consistently demonstrated an increase in the purchase of fruits and vegetables in food insecure settings

#### Pros:

- Strong support from Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS), American Heart Association, and other organizations
- Evidence demonstrates that increased SNAP use at farmers markets leads to greater support for local farmers
- Local farmers support pop-up produce stands in food deserts

#### Cons:

- Reach and effort is limited by current funding
- COVID-19 has made markets harder to reach
- Mecklenburg County has half the farmers markets accepting SNAP as the national average

#### Feasibility:

- Strong partnerships with Food Policy Council, City of Charlotte, market managers and farmers
- Marketing and educational campaigns support successful scaling of SNAP Double Bucks and pop-up produce stands
- Double Up Bucks has been shown to increase the purchase and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables

### Food Security Initiatives – Refrigeration Pilot for Healthy Corner Stores

- Lack of refrigeration units for fresh produce and healthy foods is a barrier for some corner stores
- Provide refrigeration units to select healthy corner stores and promotional signage to all stores.
  - o A requirement for obtaining refrigeration units would be that the healthy corner stores only use them for healthy food items.
- Provide incentives for fresh fruits and vegetables
  - o “Healthy food incentives increase the consumption, purchase and sales of healthy food especially fruits and vegetables.”

#### Pros:

- Refrigeration units support increase quantity and quality of fresh produce
- Once a store begins to stock healthy products and has designated equipment for them, owners tend to continue to stock healthy items

## Meeting Minutes January 12, 2021

- Healthy produce incentives increase sales and support affordable, accessible healthy foods in existing retail stores in food deserts
- Administration of coupon incentives is relatively easy and acceptable with retailers

### Cons:

- Cost of restocking and maintenance of refrigeration units
- Store ownership turnover can make sustaining changes in stores difficult
- Produce incentives increase sales but don't greatly increase profit margins for shop owners.

### Feasibility:

- Mecklenburg County is currently working with 21 corner stores in food deserts that meet the "North Carolina Healthy Food Retail Designation"
- Coupon incentives work well in small store settings as they do not rely on a sophisticated POS systems
- Local produce distributors open to discussions with corner store owners
- Including incentive-based policies - e.g. permitting incentives- will bolster activities

## Food Security Initiatives – Edible Landscapes & Community Gardens

- Provide urban orchards and raised garden beds in food deserts and food insecure locations in Mecklenburg County
  - o As urbanization increases, urban and community gardens in food deserts can increase food access<sup>1</sup>
- Increase raised beds in community gardens to provide seasonal produce in food deserts. These beds are versatile, non-permanent, and can be constructed on poor terrain.
- Community gardeners consume more fruits and vegetables than non-gardeners and more closely meet national fruits and vegetables consumption recommendations.

### Pros:

- Local sourcing of materials promotes trust without fear of added chemicals and preservatives
- Raised beds ensure the implementation of gardens in areas with poor arable land, increase access to fresh produce, and enhance ease of gardening
- Footpaths and trails protect and enhance produce accessibility while providing recreation
- Signs and descriptors promote nutrition educational opportunities

### Cons:

- Difficulty of enforcing food safety
- Lack of sustained community support in the maintenance of community gardens and urban orchards

### Feasibility:

- Community gardens and urban orchards already exist in Mecklenburg County
- Strong partnerships and collaborations exist with community members e.g., Parks and Recreation, Trees Charlotte, NC Cooperative Extension
- Grassroots backing ensures a low-cost option for low-income individuals and families to have access to fresh produce

## Food Security Initiatives – Online Food Systems Directory & Map

- Rivendell Carolinas seeks to launch FoodRoute, a food system online map/resource directory
- The directory will include the COVID-specific information for food resources
- It would integrate data and resources collected from more than 85 data partners over two years.

## Meeting Minutes January 12, 2021

- Funding will support the maintenance of the directory’s technical platform and a marketing and communication campaign. Funds will also go towards keeping Mecklenburg County data updated and current.

### Pros:

- Rivendell Farms’ existing food resources map incorporates 135 data points in Mecklenburg County (34% of data across the region) and is translated into Spanish. The map has been used 210 times over the past 60 days
- Rivendell Farms’ existing farms and farmers markets map incorporates ten data points in Mecklenburg County (12% of data across the region) and has been used 120 times in the past 60 days.

### Cons:

- Need for consistent data management to keep information timely and current
- Dependent on accurate and consistent data reporting from partner agencies and organizations
- Data quality can be impacted by low or no reporting

### Feasibility:

- Implementation is feasible with current data; sustainability will require funding support for maintenance of the technical platforms
- Marketing and communication campaign will expand knowledge, awareness, and utilization

### Budget: \$388,500 (6 months)

#### Super Snap - \$270k

- Food as prescription – \$256K
- Approximately 1,100 SNAP clients per month.

#### Double Up Bucks - \$58.5k

- Unlimited SNAP matching/incentives ~\$30K
- Advertising, education & monitoring
- Pop-up farmers markets in food deserts
- Approximately 1,500 SNAP Households

#### Corner Stores - \$20k

- Refrigeration
- Marketing & communication
- Coupons for fresh produce

#### Edible Landscapes - \$25k

- Raised garden beds
- Community gardens and edible urban orchards in and near food deserts

#### Rivendell Farms - \$15k

- Food Security and COVID-19 response maps
- Technical platform
- Education campaign

Omar Jorge, Compare Foods, reviewed the history of Compare Foods. The first Compare Foods in Charlotte opened in 2005, with seven today. Three of the stores were in the lowest-income intersections in Charlotte: North Tryon Road and East Sugar Creek Road; West Arrowood Road and Nations Ford Road; and North Sharon Amity Road and Central Avenue. Mecklenburg County Commissioners targeted food deserts as a priority in the January budget retreat. The County Department of Health and County Commission have adequately identified the challenges: population density; transportation infrastructure; income limitations/poverty; linked with chronic diseases; linked with obesity due to only food access being dollar stores and convenience stores.

## Meeting Minutes January 12, 2021

Current Proposed Solutions were property tax rebates; construction subsidies; leasing county land to retailers which were all good solutions but were premature. The County had identified challenges and proposed solutions, but it had not studied the actual market potential. As for solutions, market-based solutions have to start with a market-based feasibility study. The County should retain a grocery-focused location analysis firm to study the total market potential of the areas they want to target. The more specific, the more accurate the study would be. Supermarket chains do broad regional analysis and then drill into specific intersections to get most accurate reports. Based on the results of the study, the County could start looking at viable solutions to satisfy the market needs.

Mr. Jorge recommended that the County retains a grocery-focused location analysis firm to study the total market potential of the areas they wanted to target. Different market potentials would result in different solutions. A full-service supermarket would have the potential of \$150,000 a week, which would be enough to maintain a viable 20,000 square feet, full-service supermarket. If the market will not support a full-service grocery store, the County could analyze solutions that could work, such as: mobile fresh produce vendors; temporary farmers' markets; online SNAP delivery options; refrigerated food locker solutions; expanded fresh produce and meat options for existing convenience stores; and subsidize ride-sharing programs (Uber/Lyft). For promoting minority and immigrant entrepreneurship in underserved communities, encourage local "Regional Business Alliance" and chamber of commerce to focus on local start-up advice for local entrepreneurs; promote and educate community on basic business skills (accounting, management, human resources) through CMS or CPCC; and provide permitting and licensing advise and consulting for prospective business owners; and attempt to eliminate bureaucracy and red-tape, which served as a barrier to entry for those thinking of starting a new business.

Andy Ellen, North Carolina Retail Merchants Association, provided historical perspective for North Carolina Retail Merchants Association, stating they were 100-years old and went throughout the entire state of North Carolina doing a lot of work with the grocery industry and all kinds of retail from home improvement to jewelry, and pharmacy. He said he worked with Harris Teeter, Food Lion, Ingles, Walmart, Publics, Aldi, Lidl, Compare Foods, Lowes Foods, and you name it across the grocery spectrum but that he was not a spokesperson for anyone one of the individual companies. He stated there really was no silver bullet to the food desert and food insecurity issue. He said it was not a partisan nor an urban issue, nor a rural issue. He said he had spent a tremendous amount of time with a former representative of [inaudible], a Democrat, who ran for Lieutenant Governor, and worked very closely with her, and former Representative, now Congressman, Dr. Greg Murphy, a Republican from Pitt County and working on food insecurity. He said that was sort of where the healthy, corner-store idea came up with the coolers and refrigeration system.

Mr. Ellen said the grocery stores did a lot for the community as far as food insecurity and care a lot about it. He said the Association writes a \$50,000 check each year to feeding Carolina's food banks. He stated they were one of the largest contributors in the State for a non-profit organization and that the Association's staff volunteer at the food banks. He said they invest \$100,000 to scholarships each year which come out of the grocery industry which focus on people who have food insecurity issues with students. He stated that Food Lion did a 600,000,000 meals so far in feeding America that they were doing, and Harris Teeter gave \$3.5 million to the food banks. Publix did 4 million pounds of donations last year to the food banks, which did not include all the other retailers and people like Omar Jorge who were donating product all of the time to the food banks, because they realized it was an across-the-board issue. He said he went back and asked a couple of stores he knew that had not been mentioned in some of the conversations. He said in 2020, Food Lion built one new store across their entire footprint. He said they did spend \$250 million renovating an existing store in the Charlotte market, which were core stores that needed to be kept up, fresh, and clean but only one new school. He said that Harris Teeter built three new stores in 2020, but that went from Florida to Washington D.C. and out west to Tennessee. He stated they did renovate 15 stores which were previously Kroger but only built three from scratch, because they were expensive to build. A 50,000 square foot store would run between \$13 million and \$15 million to build, then you add on probably another \$7 million a year in lease money. He said you are generally

## Meeting Minutes January 12, 2021

doing that under a 30-year lease term. He said you would be making an investment in a piece of land to build a store based on a 30-year window, and as Mr. Jorge said with analytics, that was a really drilled down, financial analysis of would the space work and generate enough revenue; you would be covering 1% profit margin, because that would be basically what you were trying to deal with but over a 30-year period of time. He went over all that the analysis would look at. He said to do that 1% profit margin, you need to turn your shelves repeatedly, hopefully two times a week at least, because a hand basket would not make sure you make the profit you need to generate enough profit to operate the store and long term for the 30-year period of time. Mr. Ellen reviewed other time-consuming, intricate things that would need to be done when having a full-service grocery store. He long term he believed their best position was to look at what the grocer would be looking at and taking that to them or making it available to them. He said they could also potentially utilize a wholesale, and once you lock down with a grocer, help connect them in with one of those wholesalers that Omar uses.

Mr. Cox reviewed the following next steps:

- The Community Innovation Incubator study through UNCC has begun.
- Explore opportunities to partner with Farmstead and other innovative delivery models.
- County staff are evaluating proposals from Three Sisters Market.
- Expand food security initiatives

Mr. Cox answered Commissioners' questions and responded to comments.

Commissioner Leake spoke about this being the first comprehensive presentation on the matter and mentioned that she had been championing this issue for a long time.

Commissioner Jerrell asked if they were to use the big, box store approach, how many stores they would need to eliminate the problem. He asked for an overlay to show the Board where the food deserts were relative lack of broadband access.

Mr. Cox responded that they had not yet made those overlays. He said they may be able to work with the GIS department to see what it would look like. He said in terms of the number of stores that he could not tell him how many stores would needed just by looking at it, but by definition developed by the USDA, it would be a store within a mile or less, so in looking at the map you could see that several stores would be needed in order to cover every single one of those.

Commissioner Meier asked if the large, food chains already did these market studies already and that was why they had the food deserts.

Mr. Ellen responded that he had not asked about the locations and whether they have done the studies, but he thought it could be a situation that if they looked at it, it would not fit into the format they were looking at. He said maybe they needed to refocus what they were looking for to give you what could financially succeed in that area. He said maybe instead of a 50,000 square foot store that you talk about, maybe instead it would be a 20,000 or 15,000 that would have fresh produce, seafood, meat, and dairy, that would fit that spot and financial analysis, rather than the 50,000 square foot. He encouraged them to look at the traffic patterns once they found some spots.

Commissioner Rodriguez-McDowell asked if staff was doing meetings focused on this

Dena Diorio, County Manager, responded that they had not. She said that Omar, Commissioner Jerrell, and herself met before the pandemic, per Omar's suggestion. She said it was on the list of things to do, but staff wanted to make sure they understood the landscape, because they did not want to get driven into one area and not look at all the different aspects that were part of the problem. She said to Commissioner Meier's point that if there were opportunities for grocery retailers to go into some of these food deserts, they would already be there. She did not believe grocers would share that information.

Commissioner Cotham worried they were getting off the charts, as it seemed they needed to have people be able to get healthy food. She said they were talking about grocery

## Meeting Minutes January 12, 2021

stores and all of that information and agreed they probably would not share that information, but that people needed help now. She wished they would first work on the low-hanging fruit. She liked the idea that if people could get to the store, they could get them an Uber or a Lyft to take them home. She asked if they could have buses help in taking people to the stores. She said they did not talk anything about education, and she would have liked to have heard about how they would educate people.

Commissioner Altman recommended that they look into opportunities through the CDBG funds or United Way entities which had community development programs for them to help pull in more money for those subsidies. She said the land banking sounded interesting if they found the land, bought it, and located a grocer, how would they ensure it continue to be used for that purpose. She wanted to know more about the joint ownership of owning the land and renting it to someone that would run the program. She felt the mobile market was the best option as they needed to be helping people right now. She also liked the refrigeration pilot and ride sharing concept.

Commissioner Powell liked the idea of the corner stores and refrigeration pilot since it was something they could do now. She said she wanted to maybe explore further the mobile healthy food units and working with CATS to get seniors and others without cars to the grocery stores. He said that seemed to be a program that worked well in other counties. She believed they needed to explore more partnerships, since there were healthcare giants in North Carolina called non-profits. She said they needed to have partnerships with Blue Cross, Atrium, Novant, and Centene.

Chair Dunlap said to Omar and Andy that more than anything, he appreciated the fact that they would tell the Board they needed to start thinking differently, because they had been going around and around with the same issue and questions. He said they needed to consider some other things than just big box stores and believed they were the past anyway, but it was just moving away from that. He said they needed to start thinking both long and short term.

Commissioner Leake said her concern was not the large, corner-grocery store because of the expensiveness of the cost and the reason she had been so concerned about health living, economics, education, and longevity and they were currently in the midst of a virus, so she was hoping they could come to an agreement with a short-term solution while working toward a long-term solution. She said it did not have to be a building but could be a large truck/van or locker type setting that could move and mobilize in different communities, different parts of the month.

Commissioner Jerrell stated they needed to be thinking about this as a multi-prong approach for sure. He asked Omar to tell everyone about the Amazon lockers.

Mr. Jorge said there were Amazon lockers and you could order from Amazon and Amazon would leave it in the locker, give you the code, and you would go to the location, put the code in, and the locker would open up for you to get the items you ordered. He said this was a secure way for Amazon to ship to you with guarantee you would get the package. He stated that he was speaking to Commissioner Jerrell about a refrigerated version of that to maintain products at the proper temperature to ensure the products do not spoil. He said there was a company in Charlotte that was manufacturing those. He said the company was creating them to ship outside of Charlotte, and they could talk to the CEO to see how they could be implemented.

Commissioner Meier clarifies that her previous point was to say they had food deserts, because the large, grocery stores have done their studies and did not want to be there; she suggested moving on from them and to not waste time, because she too felt a sense of urgency. She liked the mobile idea.

*The presentation is on file with the Clerk to the Board.*

**Meeting Minutes**  
**January 12, 2021**

**21-6602: COVID-19 Response Update**

Gibbie Harris, Public Health Director, gave an update on school nurses, vaccines, and directives. She said in terms of school nurses, there had been many concerns about if there were enough. She said there was also concern around contact tracing and whether they were depending on the schools to do that for cases within the schools. She said there had been a lot of email traffic around it. She stated that as of the 11th, they have had 125 school nurse positions filled out of 170. She said that 73% of the positions were filled at this point in time. She said there were also 10, limited, part-time vacancies, with 48% of those positions filled as well. She said those fill in for the school nurses when there were vacancies and averaged working two to three days a week. She said the other challenge they had was that they had some staff on FMLA at this point, with six on continuous FMLA and 15 on intermittent FMLA. She said there were nine, known staff out for quarantine and would be out between the dates of the 12th through the 29th of the month, which was something the hospitals were dealing with and first responders were dealing with since there was virus in the community and individuals being exposed, as well as school nurses. She said they were working to develop a staffing plan for the 175 schools which had planned to reopen on the 19th. She said those plans were based on a couple of things, with the main thing being the acuity levels in those schools. She said due to the combination of vacancies and leaves they had; they would have schools which would have nurses fewer than five days-a-week. She said the acuity included looking at the health issues of the children in the school, those who were medically fragile; the increased medication or procedural needs in those particular schools; Title I or focus schools; increase ESL populations; high enrollment; and increased community resources that were in the schools at a given time. She said those things were considered when they started looking at how many days a week they could put a nurse in a school. She said they currently knew they would have 58 schools, which were 42 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, and six high schools, that would have a nurse assigned five days-a-week. She said the remaining 67 nurses and 11 part-time nurses would provide a level of coverage to the remaining schools based on the acuity mentioned. She said in the beginning they would focus on middle and high schools, because they were not open in the fall, and they did not have the experience in working with children coming back during a COVID-19 pandemic that the elementary schools had. She said that did not mean the elementary schools would be ignored. She said the neediest elementary schools would be focused on based on acuity and in-school population. She said she knew the Metro School would have a full-time nurse five days-a-week as 100% of the student population was medically fragile, so they wanted to make sure they had a school nurse and LPN in that school five days-a-week.

Ms. Harris said the elementary schools would have, at minimum, a school nurse twice a week. She said that would be one for A schedule and one for B schedule, so all of the children would have nurse access at least one day-a-week, which would allow them to be sure to have that level of coverage. She said staff would be focusing on medication and procedure-ordering processes, which was an intensive process of follow up with medical offices to ensure accuracy with orders and medication on hand. She said again they would need to focus on middle and high school, because that work had already been done for the elementary schools. She said they would be training appropriate staff for medication administration and procedures, which was a process that had been on going in the schools since the beginning. She said nurses were not responsible for all of the medication and procedures provided in the schools and never have been. She said they did not have sufficient nursing to do that. She said state statute required the schools to have the appropriate amount of staffing to provide that, so long as they are trained to do it. She said they would be validating the competency of that staff to ensure they are properly trained to perform those procedures. She said they would also be supporting COVID-19 education with the staff, working on isolation-room procedures, and were heavily involved with contact tracing in the schools, through the school nurses. She said she knew there was a lot of concern about the principals having to spend a lot of time doing contact tracing, but she guaranteed the school nurses would be very involved in that as they moved forward.

Ms. Harris said the other concern was around non-compliance with immunizations. She said they continued to have a number of schools, at all levels, with children who were not

## Meeting Minutes January 12, 2021

immunized. She said the State expanded the amount of time that parents had to get the children immunized through the end of December. She said they were continuing to work to make sure all of the children were properly immunized and once they go back, the nurses would provide non-compliance rosters to the principals. She said CMS was instructing CMS to exclude non-compliant students from in-person learning, and they were also being instructed not to disconnect students from the virtual-learning platform. She said they would continue to work with them to ensure there would not be barriers to them getting vaccinated. She said this was a process they went through every year and did not have the data from last year yet from CMS and the Department of Public Instruction to really be able to compare whether they had more children unvaccinated this year or not. She said they were working to get that information.

Ms. Harris said in terms of COVID-19 vaccination, they continued to provide vaccines in alignment with current federal and state recommendations, including Phase 1a, which were health care providers, who were at high-risk of exposure to COVID-19 positive individuals, EMT and paramedics, who were providing direct service; and long-term care facilities which were not participating in the federal pharmacy program. She said they were also vaccinating Phase 1b group 1, which was the 75 and older population. She said those vaccines were being provided currently at Bojangles Coliseum Monday through Saturday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. She said in addition to that, they had strike teams that were going out to the long-term care facilities to get both the residents and staff vaccinated. She stated the clinics were running extremely well and that they have had rave reviews from individuals coming through the clinics to get the vaccine. She said it was a very streamline process, and most folks were in and out in 10 to 15 minutes. She said the longest time they spend would be after the vaccine to ensure they were not having a reaction. She said they had received 4,875 vaccines and provided 4,506 vaccines. She said there were a little over 300 which were not provided as of yesterday and that they received an additional 1,950 vaccines today. She said that was what they had available until next Tuesday.

Ms. Harris stated they have heard concerns across the state and heard many issues with the State being behind in providing vaccines. She wanted to ensure everyone that county staff worked very hard to make sure the vaccine they had was getting into the arms of the appropriate individuals. She said they were emphasizing that the vaccine supplies continued to be low and they were continuing to advocate with the State for more vaccine. She said she was not sure when that would open up but hoped it would happen soon and wanted everyone to know they were getting vaccine out as quickly as they got it. She said they were now asking individuals to bring their insurance cards with them on arrival for their appointments. She said insurance would be billed for the administration fee only, as there would be no charge for a vaccination, regardless of whether they had insurance or not. She said billing for that fee would allow the County to receive additional funding from FEMA to support vaccination efforts in the community. She reemphasized there would be no cost for anyone to receive the vaccine or for it to be administered. She said they had multiple partnerships around vaccine distribution in Mecklenburg County and that the healthcare systems were both working with the County very closely in making sure they were getting vaccine out and being as efficient and effective across the board. She said they were receiving support from Emergency Management and had North Carolina National Guards, which were working with them since before the vaccine was in Mecklenburg County, and they would be available to work with the County through the end of March. She said the County has asked for more and understood there were six more coming; they currently had 10. She said they were very helpful with the logistics of the vaccine clinics, and in addition to that, MEDIC and the City of Charlotte Fire Department and other first responder organizations were working with the County. She said they were training their staff to give vaccines. She said MEDIC would start to give second doses to first responders who received the first dose. She said they were also working with StarMed, who had been a great partner in testing, and they would start vaccinating second doses on Monday. She said that would allow the County to stay focused on getting the first doses out as soon as they arrive. She said they would provide those doses Monday through Saturday from 8:30 p.m. to 4:00 p.m., and they would do that at Bojangles Coliseum as well. She said they would have two different entrances, one for first and one for second doses. She said they had a very easy to use appointment system, and people needed to go to the County's website to see how to register. She said

## Meeting Minutes January 12, 2021

the second dose was only available to the people who received Pfizer through the Health Department for their first dose.

Ms. Harris stated there had been a lot of interest from individuals who may be able to volunteer to provide vaccines, and they were able to accept volunteers. She said they were specifically interested in EMTs, paramedic, nurse, pharmacist, nurse practitioners, PA's, and MD's who could assist with preparation and administration. She said they continued with their communication campaigns which were running for the past five weeks. She said they would continue to focus on options for getting vaccinations to the high-risk communities.

Ms. Harris stated that there were 72,979 cases with 656 deaths and up to 61 outbreaks in long-term care facilities despite getting vaccine out to the facilities. She said they recently had an outbreak in one of the homeless shelters as well. She said since late September to mid-January they had seen a 791% increase in the average-daily cases. She said in that same time frame that they had seen a 543% increase in the patients with COVID-19 who were in the hospital. She said the positivity rate went from 5.7% to 16%. She said the exponential growth in numbers required an immediate action on the part of the community.

Ms. Harris said today she was issuing a Public Health Director's Directive for Mecklenburg County. This directive was similar to the one issued by the Secretary of State, and it would provide specific recommendations to the community on things they needed to pay close attention to. She said she was asking that they leave their home only for essential activities and remain at home between the hours of 10:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m., as well as utilize full-virtual options for work, school, and any other activity, when in person activity is not required. She said individuals, especially over 65 and at high risk for developing serious illness do not leave their homes right now. She asked that everyone avoid any non-essential travel, gathering with people they did not live with, and continued hand washing, wearing a mask, waiting six-feet apart, and avoiding contact. She said for people who have been exposed to COVID-19, been involved in gatherings, or had symptoms needed to be quarantined and get tested. She reminded people to answer the call-in order to participate in contact tracing to protect others. She wanted people to continue thinking about getting a flu shot and the COVID-19 vaccine when available to them. She requested that everyone took this extremely seriously for the next three weeks, stating that she believed it would help to get the numbers back under control if everyone could stick to the recommendations for the next three weeks.

Commissioner Leake asked what they were saying to the churches about meetings and services that they continued to have on Sundays and during the week. She stated she received her vaccine with no aftermaths of illness at all. She requested seniors within the confines of District 2 to get the vaccines so they could remain well and healthy within the confines of the community.

Ms. Harris responded that they would ask churches to comply with the same measures as they would ask every other entity in the community. She would recommend online services.

Commissioner Leake asked what would be said about grave-side services and the amount of people who could be in the churches.

Ms. Harris responded she did not have the ability to tell them they could not do that based on their amendment rights, but they were imploring them to stick to the same guidelines that everyone else was being asked to stick to based on what they were seeing in the community with the spread and number of deaths and number of people in the hospital.

Commissioner Jerrell said he was able to go by Bojangles Coliseum to check out the process, and it was very smooth. He gave kudos to Ms. Harris, Dr. Washington, Dr. Sullivan, and gave a shout out to the National Guard partners who were out there, stating a lot of them were not from Mecklenburg County but that they were here and working. He asked if she had heard about a directive released from DHHS about recommending giving one dose of the Pfizer.

## Meeting Minutes January 12, 2021

Ms. Harris responded that she had not heard that. She knew there had been a lot of discussion around it and would explore it as it would make a difference in the number of people they could vaccinate if they have indeed done that.

Commissioner Meier asked what the particulars were surrounding the communication with neighborhoods which had the tendency to not trust the government and were hard to reach.

Ms. Harris responded what they had been doing up to this point was looking for the different avenues for communication that reach them number one, especially with the 75 and older. She said they were also working with community leaders who were willing to carry the message. She said they understood the lack of trust and issues of the past and had to continue to work to try to make them comfortable. She said the County would look for opportunities to get the vaccine out to them as well as they moved forward.

Ms. Diorio responded that they were working with Ray Ward to continue and expand the Count on Me CLT campaign to focus now on vaccine; before it was focused on compliance, and now they were focused on vaccine. She said it would be targeted to certain communities. She said they would also be working with AC&M, which was the culturally-competent, public-relations firm to help get messaging out to the various communities that needed special messaging.

Commissioner Rodriguez-McDowell implored people to tell the truth on this subject and the other subject. She stated they were battling a misinformation campaign on so many fronts, and she hoped that it could be kept on the truth and speaking with facts. He implored all community leaders to speak the truth.

Commissioner Cotham thanked Ms. Harris and all of the staff, stating they were knocking it out of the ballpark. She said it was so appreciated. She gave a shoutout to Commissioner Rodriguez-McDowell for making that comment about the truth, as it was important, and she believed everyone needed to remember that as they went through it.

Commissioner Altman hoped Gibbie's staff were listening and knew they had to be exhausted and sometimes felt assailed from various directions. She said there was a crisis and not enough vaccine, and that was not Mecklenburg County Public Health Department's fault, and they were doing such a great job under very difficult circumstances. She wanted to know if an inquiry she received was true; it was about the recommendation for vaccines changing for those over 65 and anyone with a pre-existing condition at any age to be able to receive vaccination, with the change coming from the CDC. She asked that if it were true if the prioritization schedule would be changing.

Ms. Harris responded they were hearing they may see some changes in the prioritization levels but had not received it from the State yet. She said she did know they were looking at that since the CDC and many other states had gone to 65 and up. She said it would change things for Mecklenburg County a little bit, because that would be a whole other population that was not currently being vaccinated and could push groups two and three off a little bit if they did have to open up for that. She stated she would let the Board know as soon as they had something from the State.

Commissioner Altman clarified that it was the States' call.

Ms. Harris responded for the most part, stating that the State typically followed CDC guidance, so if the CDC strongly came out with that, she would not be surprised if the State did as well. She said it trickles down to the County basically.

Commissioner Powell told Gibbie her new nickname was Atlas, because in Greek mythology, it was the titan who had to hold the sky up, and it felt as though she had been holding the sky up for quite some time. She thanked Ms. Harris for her presentation on school nurses. She said while people understood the challenges, they wanted to know what they were going to do to solve the problem. She stated 73% of staffing was not acceptable and that they had to do better. She told her to let her know how she could

**Meeting Minutes**  
**January 12, 2021**

help, because no one would have any comfort until there were nurses in the schools every day or at least qualified medical personnel to deal with the students. She said they could not go forward with 100% staffing. She asked if it was implied in the directive that schools should remain closed.

Ms. Harris responded yes. She said it was not really implied as she has had conversations with the school system and that her recommendation at this point, from a public health perspective, was that it did not make sense to bring kids back into the schools at this point.

Commissioner Powell thanked her since she had not had the time to read the full directive to understand what their guidance was on that, especially at 16% positivity rate. She told her she had been phenomenal through this.

Chair Dunlap thanked Gibbie and her staff for the tremendous amount of work he was doing. He said when it first started he heard complaints about the long lines and how it was unorganized and why should people make appointments. He said he thought about that when he started to watch the news and look at real, long lines that were tying up traffic, then people began to appreciate that they had done. He thanked her for that. He asked if they had ever staffed 100% of the nurses for CMS. He clarified that CMS was also required to have trained people who could assist with that. He asked if vaccines could be mixed, getting one vaccine for the first and a different for the second.

Ms. Harris responded that as far as she knew, they had never been fully staffed for school nurses, as there was always turn over, which was one of the reasons they created the limited, part-time pool to fill in for the vacancies they always had. She said since she had been there, she would guess the rate was probably around 15% to 20%. She said the school systems had a level of responsibility if their children had significant medical needs on a daily basis in the schools, the family and the school system were responsible for providing staff to manage that. She said for other children who needed medication or had some type of procedure they may need which did not require a medical professional, the schools had to make available school staff they would train and monitor and ensure they were comfortable providing those procedures. She said that was an ongoing process in the schools and had been since the beginning. She said no, you cannot combine the vaccines and expect them to be effective in the same way. She said if you had Pfizer, you need to get a second Pfizer, and if you got Moderna, you need to get a second Moderna.

Ms. Diorio said for the school nurse issue that they exacerbated that problem when they decided they would have a policy to have a school nurse in every school. She said in her first budget year that they actually added 33 positions, so when you have a high vacancy rate and add more positions, you just continue to have a higher vacancy rate. She said they had never really been able to get in front of that and continued to try to find ways to do that.

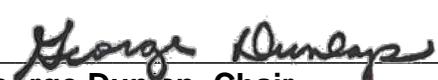
Commissioner Powell said school nurses have always been important and critical, and they were now more important than ever. She thanked them for understanding how important it was and exploring how they could do better.

**ADJOURNMENT**

A motion was made by Commissioner Altman, seconded by Commissioner Scarborough, and carried unanimously to adjourn the meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:00 p.m.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Emily A. Kunze, Clerk

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
George Dunlap, Chair