

Coös County Delegation
Quarterly Meeting
May 18, 2026, at 10:00 a.m.
North Country Resource Center
629 Main Street Lancaster, NH

Present: Representatives Arnold Davis, Chair; Mike Ouellet, Vice Chair; Lori Korzen, Clerk; Seth King; Peter Morency; James Tierney and Marc Tremblay. Also Present: Commissioners Raymond Gorman, and Robert Théberge; County Administrator Mark Brady; Superintendent Ben Champagne; Director of Finance Carrie Klebe; Nursing Home Administrator Louise Belanger; Nursing Hospital Director of Nurses Ashley Hodge; Assistance Finance Director Christine Labelle; HR Coordinator Morgan DeBlois; Sheriff Keith Roberge; Captain Luc Perreault; Deputy Bert vonDohrmann; County Attorney John McCormick; Will Hastings & Ray Berthiaume, UNH Cooperative Extension; Bob Gargano, Town of Gorham; Administrative Assistant Linda Harris & members of the public.

Chairman Davis called the meeting to order at 10:03 a.m. and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

The roll was called by the Clerk, Representative Korzen. There were seven members present. Representatives Durkin and Murphy were excused.

Review & Approval of the Minutes of the March 23, 2026, budget meeting: A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Korzen to approve the minutes of the March 23, 2026, budget meeting. The motion was approved unanimously by voice vote.

Hearing of the Public:

Maura Chappelle, Colebrook, made the following comments to the Delegation:

- The public needs to be made aware of decisions being made in the county.
- No one responded to her query about the reason why the April meetings were cancelled.
- Anything to do with the original contract that was discussed in non-public now becomes public.
- Why are meetings not held in northern part of the county when discussing the nursing home.
- Why is the jail being moved
- CJEJ is no longer interested in leasing the barn and lands. Why aren't the Commissioners interested in pursuing another contract with Blue Moon Dairy.

Representative Ouellet replied that it is a county issue. Lancaster is in center of county and is also the county seat.

County Administrator Brady replied that the delegation meeting of April 27, 2026, and the informational meeting of April 22, 2026, were cancelled because the county could not reach an agreement with the Colebrook academy owner and therefore there was no need for the meetings. The purpose of the April 27th meeting was to provide approval of the Board of Commissioners to bond up to \$6 million for the project. Public notice of cancellation was provided on the county website and to the Colebrook Chronicle.

David Lewis, Stewartstown, stated that the nursing home does affect the residents of Stewartstown and inquired if anyone had thought about them.

Representative Ouellet replied that an informational meeting will be held when there is something to report and a decision has been made.

The County Administrator replied that the Commissioners authorized him and the Director of Finance, at the Commissioners meeting of May 13, 2026, to work on a new agreement with Blue Mountain Dairy to lease the lower fields.

He continued that the discussion on the closure of the jail came about because of the possible relocation of the nursing hospital due to the county being approved by the Executive Council for \$23 million of the Rural Healthcare Transformation funds. He said those funds were a result of the passage of the Big Beautiful Bill which contained \$50 billion for rural healthcare improvement across the United States. The Administrator said the county had no choice but to explore options for the jail under those circumstances. He also noted that there has been talk for some time about what to do with the jail since the inmate population has been low as compared to what it was before bail reform.

A member of the public inquired if anyone had asked the residents what their thoughts were on the possible move. Ashley Hodge, Director of Nursing at WSNH, replied that there have been discussions. She noted that residents are unable to go outside alone because it is unsafe due to the condition of the grounds at the facility.

Representative Ouellet noted that the nursing hospital is masonry on the outside but is a wood (stick) building making it difficult to retrofit.

Wayne Dorman, Pittsburg requested the following:

- Better communication relating to the meetings. He was unaware of today's meeting.
- Could towns be notified when there is a meeting
- Explain the criteria of the grant.
- Employee problems will not be solved by moving south
- Let's use the facility we have, it can be renovated
- Use the farm. Beef is at a high price. There are fields to be used for haying.

Representative King thanked everyone for attending. He continued that numerous meetings have been held where the nursing homes and the proposals that were submitted to the state were discussed. He said to be blunt, during his entire time as a state representative, meetings are not well attended by the public. The Delegation and Board of Commissioners' goal is to balance a budget while providing services and unfortunately, they cannot make everyone happy. He continued that if it were up to him both nursing homes would be closed since he does not believe the government should be in the nursing home business. Getting money from the government is a lose/lose situation. He said that he will listen to all sides before deciding. Let the towns show up and make an impassioned speech to have the nursing home in their community.

Chairman Davis noted that studies have been done and several areas for a proposed site have been discussed. This opportunity presents the chance of a \$23 million grant funding for a new nursing home.

Representative Tierney noted that CDFA (NH Community Development Finance Authority) has been changing the rules on Coös and still not finalized. He urged the public to read the newspapers. Information is available online as well.

The County Administrator noted that all minutes and information on this project are available online (https://www.cooscountynh.gov/government/boards/agendas_minutes.php and https://www.cooscountynh.gov/government/departments/nursing_homes/index.php). He then provided a timeline of events.

He said that the County had engaged Berry Dunn in 2024 and 2025 to analyze the county nursing home operations and footprint. Berry Dunn (BD) considered all options including maintaining the existing county footprint with a new facility in W. Stewartstown (on county property on Back Pond Road) and consolidating Berlin Nursing Home (CCNH) and W. Stewartstown (WSNH) to one facility in Groveton. The BerryDunn report found that demographically and financially Coös County can support two nursing homes. The cost of consolidation to Groveton would have been around \$60 million +/- for a 125-bed facility. The debt financing, however, was too costly and negated its viability. Instead, BD recommended an addition to the Berlin facility of \$5-6 million which would allow for the reconfiguration of 100 rooms to include ten private pay suites, which would help with the finances. Additionally, they analyzed constructing a new 75-bed facility on Back Pond Road at a cost of \$29-30 million with 60% (\$18 million) financed by debt. Financially it would be viable, and they stressed that that condition of the WSNH was negatively impacting the census and profitability. He said that the consensus is that the current WSNH cannot be renovated while the residents reside in the building. Additionally, there was no appetite by the Board of Commissioners to bond \$18 million for a new WSNH facility.

Then in August and September of 2025 the County learned of the Rural Healthcare Transformation funds. Councilors Kenney and Stephen held an informational roundtable in Berlin in August, and the Governor and her Administration held another in Littleton in September. It was from those meetings that the county decided to submit a proposal for CCNH based on an understanding of what the funds could be used for. Thus, the country submitted a proposal for \$7.8 million in September 2025. A few weeks later the New Hampshire Association of Counties contacted the Administrator and asked if the county would be interested in submitting a proposal for W. Stewartstown home if it could find a facility to renovate. But the proposal had to be submitted ASAP. The Colebrook Academy was identified, and the county submitted a proposal in October for \$23 million. The state decided to include the WSNH proposal in its submission to the federal government instead of Berlin. Subsequently, the executive council approved the project on March 16, 2026.

The Administrator then explained where the situation is. He said the County submitted an "Amendment Request" to the NH Community Development Finance Authority (CDFA) for the Colebrook Academy project requesting a location change. This will allow the County to put out an RFP for other potential sites for a 70-bed nursing home to replace the existing W. Stewartstown facility while not jeopardizing the funding. It would not preclude the Colebrook Academy owners from applying.

Technical assistance funds will be provided to the county to hire an architect and engineer to assist in drafting an RFP. He added that there is fluidity in this entire process as the state understands all of the rules and federal interpretation of the grant. He noted that construction costs have changed considerably since last year when the application was submitted and the revised process will allow for other possible sites in the county to be considered if a proposal is submitted. He thought it would be very difficult to get all of this done and have construction underway before the Spring of 2027. He reiterated that those funds are under a time constraint and have to be used or will be redeployed somewhere else.

Review & Approval of the Financial Statements of Coös County and of the Unincorporated Places for the period ended March 31, 2026.

Director of Finance Carrie Klebe began the review of the Coös County Financials. The total expenditures for the period ending March 31, 2026, was \$10,259,84 or 14% expended. Total revenues for the period ending March 31, 2026, were \$9,590,093 or 13% received. There were no questions. A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Tremblay to approve the first quarter Coös County Financials for the period ended March 31, 2026. The motion was approved by roll call 7-0.

The Director of Finance continued with the review of Unincorporated Places' first quarter financials. The total expenditures for the period ending March 31, 2026, was \$92,203 or 6% expended. Total revenues for the period ending March 31, 2026, were \$40,975 or 3% received. There were no questions.

Representative Ouellet noted that there was no wage increase (COLAs) for staff in the 2026 budget. The County Administrator replied in the affirmative, only the Department of Corrections union, which received a two percent COLA increase. Representative Ouellet inquired if giving a stipend in the amount of \$750 to non-union employees would be doable. The County Administrator replied that it is doable. He noted that budget wise, it is difficult when employees expect a COLA every year, and that the FY26 budget was developed with inflation seemingly somewhat under control. He said the driver of most government budgets are personnel costs and a stipend provides a way to give relief without permanently rolling it into the wage, where you are essentially paying for it year after year. It was estimated that the cost of the stipend would be about \$150,000, not including the union employees in Berlin with which the county is currently in mediation. A motion was made by Representative Ouellet, seconded by Representative Morency to provide a \$750 stipend to non-union employees, pro-rated on a 40-hour employee. The motion was approved by roll call 7-0.

A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Morency to approve the first quarter Unincorporated Places Financials for the period ended March 31, 2026. The motion was approved by roll call 7-0.

Old Business. There was no old business to discuss.

New Business:

- a. Ratification of Planning Board Members Reappointments: Arnold Davis & Mike Ouellet (3-year terms) and Appointments of Alternates: Mike Cote (3-year term) and Bert vonDohrmann (2-year term). A motion was made by Representative Morency, seconded by Representative Tierney to approve the Reappointments: Arnold Davis & Mike Ouellet (3-year terms) and Appointments of

Alternates: Mike Cote (3-year term) and Bert vonDohrmann (2-year term). The motion was approved in the affirmative by voice vote. Representatives Davis and Ouellet abstained.

b. Approval of the National Forest Reserve Funds Distribution per Board of Commissioners' Recommendation.

The NH Department of Education announced that Coös County will receive two sets of moneys, to be allocated separately, in National Forest Reserve Funds. For FY25 the amount is \$110,678.35 and for FY24 Adj the amount is \$42,305.67 which totals \$152,984.02

The tuition costs for four students from Millsfield and one student from Wentworth Location totaled \$130,819.44. After the tuition payments, the remaining balance of \$22,164.59 will be distributed equally to the Coös County School Districts.

A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Tremblay to approve the distribution of \$110,678.35 to offset tuition for students attending schools in the Berlin, Colebrook and Errol School Districts. The motion was approved by roll call 7-0.

A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Tremblay to approve the distribution of \$42,305.67 to offset tuition for students attending schools in the Berlin, Colebrook and Errol School Districts, and the remaining balance of \$22,164.59 to be distributed equally to the Coös County School Districts. The motion was approved by roll call 7-0.

c. Discussion/Action 2027-2029 elected officials' salaries.

Representative Morency stated that Coös County has good, elected officials and increases should be considered.

Representative Ouellet inquired if elected officials could also obtain the stipend with the funding coming out of the unincorporated places. The unincorporated places are a lot of work. Representative Tierney asked why the funding would come only from the unincorporated places. All residents should pay. Representative King also noted that some of the elected officials are only part-time.

County Attorney McCormick asked that a 10% increase be considered. COLAs are presented in the counties each year. Salaries must remain competitive in order for qualified people to fill the positions. The elected officials do not receive COLAs. The salaries are set by the Delegation every two years. Representative Tierney agreed and noted that the salaries do not take effect until January 2027 but must be set prior to June 1 before the filing period.

There were questions as to when the new law regarding four-year terms for certain elected officials became law.

Representative Korzen stated she could not support any type of increase.

Representative Ouellet stated that Coös needs to attract candidates for these positions.

Representative King stated that it is difficult to get people to run and he doesn't want to lose the good people currently holding office.

Representative Tremblay stated that Coös is the poorest county in the state and was apprehensive on whether the county could afford the cost. He continued that he would vote against.

Representative Tierney stated that the increase to the taxpayer would approximately be \$1.00 per person.

Commissioner Théberge stated that Coös should not be compared to other counties and asked that the Commissioners be considered separately.

A motion was made by Representative Tierney, seconded by Representative Morency to increase and set the elected officials by ten percent (10%) for the years 2027-2029. The motion was approved by roll call 5-2. *(Representatives Korzen & Tremblay)*

Subcommittee Reports.

Representative King reported that he has been unable to attend the UNH Extension meetings as they're held on Monday evenings and he leaves for Concord early Tuesday mornings. He plans on meeting with the Register of Deeds.

Representative Morency reported that the SUMMIT Program which is run through the Department of Corrections has been very successful in the North Country.

Any other business.

Representative Ouellet asked the County Administrator for an update relating to the visit of Coos Department of Corrections (DOC) by Commissioner William Hart of the NH Department of Corrections.

The County Administrator and Superintendent reported on May 12, 2026, meeting with Commissioner Hart, Warden Valerino and staff members. It was a productive meeting, and informational for the state to see the county jail and to understand more clearly the nature of Coös County correctional officers' duties and responsibilities. There were lots of questions relating to the different tasks and processes that the county correctional officers do compared to state correctional officers. Coos staff had several questions on what would be required of them to become certified by the state.

The Administrator said that the Board of Commissioners wants to keep those jobs in Coös County. He reminded everyone that this situation was caused by the approval of the state to fund a nursing home with rural healthcare transformation grant funds.

The Superintendent stated that the State has several vacancies in personnel and are very interested in the DOC staff. It will ultimately be the state's decision to make and will be difficult for all involved.

The County Administrator added that the DOC officers can also be state certified. The State wants the DOC officers and is also working on the feasibility of moving the entire facility. The State has not discussed a price for housing the inmates.

Representative Tremblay asked if it is the same academy for county officers and state officers. Superintendent Champagne replied there are two different academies, but the state is working on a pathways program where county correctional officers are certified to simultaneously work in state facilities.

Chairman Davis asked if the State only takes the correctional officers at the Berlin facility and no inmates what would be the next steps? What would be the cost per inmate in Grafton? The County Administrator replied that the cost per female is \$70 +/- but had no cost for males.

Dates of upcoming meetings:

- Monday, July 20, 2026 @ 10:00 a.m. in Lancaster
- Monday, October 19, 2026 @ 10:00 a.m. in Lancaster

A motion was made by Representative Ouellet, seconded by Representative Durkin to adjourn the meeting at 12:21 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Representative Lori Korzen, Clerk