

WATAUGA COUNTY LIBRARY BOARD

Minutes

Thursday, November 6, 2025

4:00 p.m.

Present: Cheryl Angel, Martha Gray (ex-officio), Natalie Harkey, Margaret Love, Tom Shessler, Mary Stolberg, Patricia Swartzbaugh (chair)

Present for the library: Monica Caruso (Watauga County Librarian); Tammy Holston (Appalachian Regional Library Finance Director, Russell Taylor (ARL Director)

Absent: Wendy Jessen, Candice Trexler, Emily Greene

1. Call to Order & Welcome

Patti Swartzbaugh called the meeting to order at 4:06 p.m. She proposed adding 4(a), report for the Western Watauga Branch, to the agenda.

2. Approval of Minutes – September 16, 2025

Mary Stolberg moved to accept the minutes as presented; Natalie Harkey seconded. Minutes were approved.

3. Correspondence and Communication – None to report

4. Report of the Watauga County Public Library –Monica Caruso

- Monica presented the WCL report. The annual volunteer breakfast will be on November 21 at 9:30 a.m. She encouraged everyone to RSVP. County Commissioners and Town Council members have been invited as well.
- Staff learning day will be December 18. Topics may include fire safety and fire extinguisher practice and a virtual reality simulation for dementia. The library will open at 1:00 p.m. that day; the Friends of the Library will host a staff lunch afterwards.
- The three modular rooms will be installed by the end of January 2026, funded by the LSTA grant. This time frame will give 5-6 months to study their use and report.
- WCL is waiting for Watauga County Maintenance to approve the installation of a patio door with a larger window. Monica has an estimate from a company she feels comfortable with.
- Patty asked if there were any updates on the parking situation. Monica replied that Braxton Eggers suggested that WCL speak with businesses individually. Monica called a couple of local businesses and talked with a couple of staff members. Martha Gray also suggested placing flyers on cars. Patty volunteered to go in person to talk with the businesses.

4(a). Report of the Western Watauga Branch – Cheryl Angel

- Cheryl passed along from Jackie Cornette that the Western Watauga Branch is hosting a rescheduled outreach program in May 2026. They are networking with the Intermountain Children’s Council. The program will be held at Williams YMCA of Avery County, and lunch will be served for 150 Head Start children at the Avery County Cooperative Extension Center, provided by EFNEP (Expanded Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program). This will be the second outreach program held for Head Start reaching outside of Watauga County.
- A new Oral History Project in partnership with the Special Collections Department at Appalachian State University is collecting local Watauga stories through interviews and then recordings. Topics range from agriculture to Helene to the 1940 flood. Outreach book delivery program participants will be many of the participants.

- Cheryl mentioned that there was a history professor talk at the Blowing Rock Art & History Museum about weather patterns and extreme weather that would be a great speaker at the WCL.

6. Report of the Director – Russell Taylor

- *Administration Updates:* Open enrollment was completed at the end of October. As anything to do with budgets, the cost is only going up. Premiums have increased to \$742 per person per month – a \$67.42 increase. The plan included a \$50 per person increase so we will potentially need to adjust some of the budgets for the shortfall. The outcry from local governments was loud so changes to the health plan were suspended until 2026-27.
 - Dental insurance went up to \$46.08 per month per employee.
- *Policy Updates:* Circulation staff worked very hard on the revised circulation policy. The ARL board governance committee will review the revised policies and present to the larger board for approval. The collection development policy is being reviewed and may be ready in January or March to present to the boards.
- *Technology Updates:* Kilby says completed disaster recovery and server upgrades are complete with no kerfuffles. The newest Evergreen ILS upgrade took place on November 1st with no disruptions.
- *The E-Rate Form 470* was filed in early October. We have received a handful of bids for broadband and WAN service, and expect more in the coming weeks. The E-Rate is a significant discount versus retail costs.
- *Strategic Plan:* Four companies have been invited to submit proposals to the ARL. All the preliminary proposals are due by 11/15; selection will be in January 2026 in order to incorporate into the next LSTA proposal, which is due on March 1.
- Baker and Taylor book suppliers has declared bankruptcy and will cease operations on January 1, 2026. The ARL is researching other companies for book purchases. Pre-bought book lease reimbursement requests have been filed. Watauga and Wilkes already paid \$5,000 leases. The business is ending completely, not trying to recover. Monica mused that she should put a sign up in the new book area explaining delays in acquisitions as ARL switches distributors.
- Natalie asked a question about health insurance: how many regional employees fall under the health plan? Full-time or otherwise? Russell replied that about 30 employees are on the state health plan. Tammy said that 1) in the past, 2 plans were offered – a 70/30 and an 80/20 option, with \$25/\$50 copays. The state has suddenly now decided that both the retirement and the state plan were severely underfunded, so they changed their model so that employees will pay a premium based on salaries. Whether they had the state health plan or not, Tammy had to enter them. Then they raised the employer rate. Tammy had budgeted a \$50/month increase, but the increase is \$67/month/person.
 - Short staffing has also ironically provided some relief in budgeting. The bill that was signed on August 4 increasing the retirement plan by 2.4% didn't notify counties and local governments of the increase until 9/26, nor did the bill state that local governments were to be affected, which was one of the biggest conflicts.
 - Not every employee is on the state health plan, but to be in the retirement system, you only have to work 20 hours or more per week. This means a 2.4% increase on our total salary budget for anybody that was participating in the retirement system - \$40,000 for just WCL.
 - We can get out of the state health plan with a 60 day notice. Even though they have changed premiums to salary basis, the rates are still relatively reasonable, so it is wait-and-see. Natalie mentioned that the NC Chamber has just rolled out a group health plan based on criteria up to a certain amount of employees. Based on rates from 2018-19, for small businesses. Natalie will send Tammy information about it. You have to be a Chamber member to qualify.

7. Financial Report – Tammy Holston

- Tammy included both local and State Aid budgets to present. We always plan for what we received last year. We have not received the State Aid budget approval. In the meantime, the audit is completed but we have had a significant contingency we were holding, so we decided to allocate \$15,000 for materials to each of the libraries, to mitigate some of the stress of the Baker and Taylor situation.

- Budget adjustments – several restricted donations were made for adult books and supplies - \$1,728 - plus \$100 in unrestricted donations, which went into miscellaneous expenses. Endowment funds were allocated for a total of \$4,944 on the LSTA grant match for the portable conference rooms. Monica requested that we move \$300 from contracted services to adult professional services.

Report of the Friends of the Library – Martha Gray

- Renovations project fundraising is at \$588,000 – 38% towards the goal of \$1.5 million. The next fundraiser is Wednesday, November 12 at 5:00 p.m., a potluck event for local women through G.A.P.S (“Giving at Potlucks”). Participants will hear from the architect, see renderings of the renovations, and participate in a raffle.
- The Chamber is collaborating on a ribbon cutting here in the library on January 13, 2026 from Noon to 1 p.m.
- The Friends are planning a “murder in the stacks” fundraiser event for Friday, January 23, working with the High Country Writers group.
- Fundraising have been more challenging because of Hurricane Helene, but there have been some successes. The Friends is also working hard on grants, having applied for 5 more grants.
- The Books & Crannies book store has had about \$2,500 worth of sales in September, which was very good. The increase in sales may be because the collection/displays are more attractive, as well as moving less desirable books out on the free books display.
- The Holiday Book Sale will be Dec. 4-6. Friends can shop on Thursday Dec. 4, and the sale will be open to the public on Friday and Saturday. Prices will drop to \$5 for everything you can stuff in a plastic bag on Saturday afternoon.
- Staff luncheon will be held on December 18, and the Friends will give gift cards to the staff as a thank you.
- Tammy asked over how many years is the \$100,000 pledge. Martha referred Tammy to Donna Brientein for clarification. Martha speculated that it may be 5 installments, with 1 installment a year, but she deferred to Donna for more information. The timing of funding expenditures needs to be clarified.

8. Friends of Western Watauga Branch – Tom Shessler

- The basket raffle fundraiser is under way. 1,000 tickets are out in circulation and have already banked \$1,000. This is especially impressive given the lack of the election traffic.
- Dementia Support continues and has no openings.
- Holiday drive-through event is on hiatus and discussion is ongoing on how to go forward. There is a baby shower that has taken over the day, and the Friends have been asked to take on the gift table/Santa at the baby shower. Wednesday, December 17 will also be the basket drawing.
- The FWWB held a late-summer dinner in September. It was so successful that the feasibility of holding another one is being considered. It would be a significant sum of money to raise. We did get additional donations from attendees who were impressed with the community offerings, including an ongoing monthly donation. Tom wishes the monthly donor a very long life. There is some money left (approximately \$7,000) from that grant because of the community garden project that didn’t happen. The FWWB is considering the possibility of joining with the people who are going to restore the Cove Creek Park to put in a multi-sensory literacy trail. Planning and discussion is in the early stages. The money is there to bulldoze the old park area and restore it, so they are in the process of bidding construction companies. It would be at least a year before ground-breaking.

9. Old Business – Patti Swartzbaugh

- Monica mentioned that we could use 2 people on the Endowment Board. Hint hint. Four members should be from local boards, two from Friends organizations, and five members at large. Their next meeting is on Thursday, February 26.
- Recruitment for local board members should happen in January 2026.
- Tammy inquired if Wendy Jesson is still on the board.

10. New Business – Patti Swartzbaugh

- Russell mentioned that, after the renovation committee meets, there will be a company looking at the conference room to price repainting. There will be another company to look at re-flooring later. WCL met with Watauga County manager Deron Geouque, who approved the bidding/etc. Tammy said that the County has pledged \$6,250 towards the Department of Commerce matching grant, plus the money they have already put towards renovation, so if it only costs \$1,000 to paint this room, the funds are certainly available. Monica said the paint was donated from New River Building Supply last time the room was painted, which would lower the cost further.

11. Adjournment – Patty Swartzbaugh adjourned the meeting at 5:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Margaret L. Love