



COMMISSIONERS MEETING

Wednesday, September 17, 2025

Minutes

This meeting will be conducted in person and via Zoom at
County Hall
12 Court Street
Keene NH, 03431

Zoom Call-in Number: +1 646 558 8656

Meeting ID: 409 748 8803

Pin #: 603123

Start Time 8:30 AM

Present: Commissioners Terry Clark, Claudia Stewart, and Skipper DiBernardo

Absent:

Staff: County Administrator Coates, Finance Director Trombly, HR Director May, CCEMS Chief Kreamer, County Treasurer Wozmak, Director of Executive Services/Communications Bernstein, and Superintendent Phillips

Guests: Keene Mayor Kahn, Keene Fire Chief Martin, Keene Fire Deputy Chief Seymour, Mutual Aid Chair March, Mutual Aid Vice Chair Tirrell, Mutual Aid Chief Sangermano, Strafford County Administrator Bower, and Don Bliss of Municipal Resources Inc.

Public Comments

Upon recognition from the Chair, a Public Comment on topics of interest may be made.

I. Elected Officials & Department Head Updates

To receive, as informational, departmental updates requiring Commissioner review, participation, approval, and impactful departmental and operational issues.

1: HR Director May requested a non-FMLA leave of absence for an EMS employee for two weeks.

Commissioner Clark made a motion to approve the non-FMLA leave of absence.

Commissioner Stewart seconded. Upon a roll call vote the motion passed unanimously.

2: HR Director May requested a non-FMLA leave of absence for another EMS employee for four weeks.

Commissioner Clark made a motion to approve the non-FMLA leave of absence.

Commissioner Stewart seconded. Upon a roll call vote the motion passed unanimously.

II. Scheduled Items

Master Agenda Item #1292: 250th Celebration Discussion – J. Kahn

Action Expected: The Commissioners will discuss partnering with the City of Keene on the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States.

1: Mayor Kahn said this celebration in Keene will take place on July 4, 2026. There will be activities including bands, commemorations, viewing of films, and more that is yet to be determined.

Kahn said if there is an ask of the County it is simply for the Commissioners to sign on to serving as a partner for this event, and potentially having a Commissioner serve on the event committee.

Kahn said the City will be contributing its police force and public spaces as well as organizational support.

County Administrator Coates said that in 1976 the parade included towns throughout the County who contributed a float built by their town.

Commissioner Stewart said she wants it to be clear what we are pledging our support to.

Mayor Kahn said for now it is verbal support and a willingness to work together.

Commissioner Stewart made a motion to appoint Commissioner Clark to the 250th Committee. Commissioner DiBernardo seconded. Upon a roll call vote the motion passed unanimously.

Master Agenda Item #1293: Southwest NH District Fire Mutual Aid Discussion – C. Coates
Action Expected: The Commissioners will discuss concerns surrounding mutual aid brought forward by the public report authored by Municipal Resources Inc.

1: County Administrator Coates announced the \$1,536,000 the County helped acquire for Southwest NH District Fire Mutual Aid (SWNHDFMA) through Congressionally Directed Spending Requests has passed through the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Coates said he pulled this group together after a recent Sentinel article highlighted ongoing problems with SWNHDFMA. In response to that report County Treasurer Wozmak sent a letter to the County Commissioners noted in the Cheshire County Commissioner's minutes of September 3, 2025.

That letter said "as the entity that secured these funds for Mutual Aid, the County has an obligation, legally and ethically to assure that any funds distributed to Mutual Aid for the infrastructure project are only distributed once the Mutual Aid Board and leadership have demonstrated that they have the capacity, systems and leadership to expend those funds according to federal guidelines and in compliance with normal financial accounting principles. They must show that they have the competence and the capacity to run the organization. The Sentinel article suggests that, currently, they do not."

Coates noted that there were representatives from Cheshire County, SWNHDFMA, and Keene Fire present in the room.

SWNHDFMA Board Chair Marsh started out by saying he did not fully agree with the Sentinel article. He said he was interviewed and spoke on the phone for roughly 45 minutes. He explained to the reporter everything they were doing and planned to do going forward. The short quotes published did not reflect the full conversation.

Vice Chair Tirrell said that last fall, it was realized that there were problems, so Municipal Resources Inc. (MRI) was brought in to assist with radio upgrades and grants. During discussions at the board level, it was acknowledged that the depth of the problems was not fully known, and independent review was needed. The board connected with MRI to conduct a top-to-bottom study, which reviewed the organization, board functions, administration, dispatchers, and included interviews with chiefs across the system throughout SWNHDFMA's catchment area. The study was comprehensive, confirming issues that had been suspected. In response, the board increased its meetings from once to twice a month to address these problems. Since the study, progress had been made. Independent committees were created, including a Financial Committee, to strengthen oversight. An independent audit was commissioned, a financial consultant with government experience was hired, and financial software was updated. Work with financial institutions was also underway to streamline processes. While these improvements would take time, the board expressed commitment to making significant progress.

Commissioner Clark asked if mutual aid agreed with the 32 recommendations of MRI.

Tirrell said there were some items within the draft report from MRI they disagreed with, but the board reviewed them carefully, made requests for changes in the draft, and then voted to accept the final report in full. The recommendations were acknowledged as advisory, and the board prioritized five key items for immediate action. These included hiring an auditor, addressing dispatch center organization, and staffing replacements. The board recognized problems existed across administration, board governance, and the dispatch center, and sought to implement changes as quickly as possible.

Commissioner Stewart asked which recommendations they disagreed with.

Tirrell could not recall specific details without the report in front of him. He noted that he had served as vice chair since March and brought experience from serving on the Conservation Commission, the local school board, the Board of Selectmen, as well as serving as a fire chief for 12 years and dispatcher for 20 years. He emphasized his understanding of operations from these roles.

Stewart said she was very concerned that the officials from SWNHDFMA could not recall the specific details of the report. She highlighted her many roles on boards and noted that boards have a responsibility to represent their organization well, and ensure that the organization is running properly. She said that these issues have had to be present for many years and questioned how they went unaddressed for so long.

Don Bliss of MRI clarified that SWNHDFMA is not a non-profit but works as a governmental entity under state law.

Tirrell backtracked and addressed a recommendation they disagreed with stating, the MRI report stated "stacks of checks were left on desks," Tirrell said these were checks from day-to-

day operations, not a major backlog. Nonetheless, MRI's recommendations for stronger financial controls were acknowledged, and steps had already been taken, such as hiring staff to oversee deposits and payments and engaging an auditor.

Coates said that he has heard from people that the organization is on the verge of collapse and/or the Vermont towns covered by SWNHDFMA will be leaving to be covered by local organizations or police departments and wanted clarification.

Chair March said that there have been talks about the Vermont towns moving forward with moving dispatch services to police departments. March said though this could happen, it would not be for nearly 20 years. He also said that this has been a discussion for 25 years, someone always brings up that idea but it never goes anywhere.

Sangermano asked what the context was of the "collapse" comment.

Coates said this was heard from multiple sources as a rumor. He noted he simply wanted to relay all concerns and have all questions answered.

Commissioner DiBernardo asked whether a member of the County should be on the board.

Tirrell said it is not necessarily in the by-laws but former State Representative Dan Eaton served on the board for many years as a representative of the County.

Chief Sangermano said they have been operating successfully since 1958. The administration has continued with a consistent team of three. He said the budget has forced them to operate with less than what they need. He said they operated with a surplus in 2024.

He said they have operated with low increase in rates to towns. A 6% increase has been the maximum increase in recent years. He said this is in reaction to the towns they serve as the towns have made it clear that they cannot afford a major cost increase. He said they would love to hire more people.

Stewart suggested now would be a good time to author an annual report. She also said that presenting a document to towns similar to that of "Cheshire County at a Glance" could work well for them to show them how invaluable their services are.

County Treasurer Wozmak acknowledged he was taking a hardline approach to their organization. He noted there has not been a report in years.

Tirrell said it has not been since 2016.

Wozmak said he said if you do not have a board that takes this seriously, you need a new board.

March and Tirrell agreed with Wozmak, and noted they were both new in their roles as Chair and Vice-Chair respectively.

Tirrell said that budget cuts to the organization began when it used to be part of the County many years ago.

Coates said that the true cost of operation has to be put forward to the towns that use the systems, it is not the responsibility of mutual aid to keep costs so low that it hurts the organization as a whole.

Stewart asked whether SWNHDFMA has met with town selectmen or just fire chiefs.

Sangermano said it was just the Chiefs and other members of fire staff.

Stewart said they should begin meeting with selectmen as they are the ones to determine the final budget of a town.

Wozmak pressed the need for the organization to strengthen financial controls, modernize governance, and professionalize operations. He stressed that the agency had grown into a multi-million-dollar operation and could no longer operate like a small, informal group. The need for audits, proper staffing, and sustainable budgeting was emphasized, even if it required increased costs to towns.

Tirrell expressed the organization's commitment to change, cultural shifts, and transparency, while the Commissioners pledged support and partnership to strengthen the system, not to punish them.

Master Agenda Item #1294: 2025 Tax Apportionment – S. Trombly

Action Expected: The Commissioners will review the 2025 tax apportionment from the Department of Revenue Administration.

1: Finance Director Trombly stated that Cheshire County's tax rates are determined by the Department of Revenue Administration based on property valuations. The county's total property valuation increased from \$13 billion to \$14 billion in 2024, with some towns experiencing higher increases than others. She clarified that while the county sets the overall tax increase, individual town tax bills vary based on their percentage of the total property valuation, with some towns seeing decreases despite the overall county tax increase.

County Administrator

Weekly Operations Report - The County Administrator will update the Commissioners on activities that have taken place since the previous meeting.

1: County Administrator Coates and Superintendent Phillips reported on a successful visit to the U.S. Marshals office in Burlington, Vermont, where they negotiated a new arrangement to offset potential losses in federal inmate population by holding sentence inmates awaiting classification and shipment. They also discussed upcoming changes to bail reform laws in New Hampshire, which are expected to increase the county's inmate population.

The Commissioners discussed the possibility of expanding the Department of Corrections to accommodate ICE inmates, but Phillips explained that current infrastructure limitations make this unfeasible.

2: Coates addressed the recent Sentinel article which addressed challenges with billing

for treatment-only EMS calls, where approximately 10% of calls are currently not reimbursable due to practical difficulties in collecting insurance information at the scene.

Finance Director Trombly said Representative John Hunt raised concerns about this issue, leading to a discussion about potential solutions including post-incident insurance information collection and letters left at scenes to gather insurance details though it was acknowledged both plans are hard to implement.

3: Coates said that Keene Fire Department invited him and Chief Kreamer to participate in their 10-year strategic planning process.

III. Old Business

IV. New Business

1: County Administrator of Strafford County Ray Bower joined the meeting to speak on working with Immigration Customs Enforcement in the County Department of Corrections.

Bower said that the inspections that come with working with ICE are incredibly difficult to juggle, more intensive than survey at the nursing home.

Bower said ICE detainees have to be kept completely separate from the general population, this resulted in Strafford having to build a wall in one of their cell blocks.

Commissioner Stewart asked why the Strafford County Delegation voted to work with ICE.

Bower said it was due to the funding coming in from ICE.

He said there was not a significant change to staffing besides in the classifications department.

He said that the amount of paperwork was much higher than with typical inmates.

Commissioner Stewart asked if there were major drawbacks to working with ICE.

Bower said it was primarily the inspections that were problematic, and the cost to get the facility up to compliance with ICE.

V. Consent Agenda Items:

Vote to accept the Weekly Manifests and Minutes of September 10, 2025

Commissioner Clark made a motion to approve the manifests and minutes of September 10, and Commissioner DiBernardo seconded. Upon a roll call vote the motion passed unanimously.

VI. Calendar

Action Expected: To accept the calendar as informational and to make necessary changes/additions.

VII. General Discussion for Commissioners

VIII. Nonpublic Sessions:

IX. Adjournment

At 11:45AM Commissioner Clark made a motion to adjourn, and Commissioner DiBernardo seconded. Upon a roll call vote the motion passed unanimously.

Minutes Recorded by:

Davis Bernstein

Director of Executive Services & Communications

Minutes Reviewed by:

Commissioner DiBernardo