



## THE BUDGET STUDY SESSION THAT WASN'T

June 14, 2022

It was only six months ago that the Republicans who control the county Board of Commissioners conducted a master class on how not to pass an annual budget. Without holding a single study session, the BOC's five Republicans approved a \$42 million budget last December after allowing Administrator Nate Alger to adorn it with some controversial last-minute Christmas ornaments, including a \$260,000 combat vehicle called a BearCat for Sheriff Tom Bensley and \$60,000 in full-time healthcare benefits for themselves even though they are only part-time employees.

That's why the hair on our necks stood up when Alger announced on June 6 that the BOC would be adopting the 2023 budget on an accelerated timeline so that county officials could migrate the budget data into Workday, the county's new Enterprise Resource Planning platform. Alger said commissioners would hold two study sessions this month, giving them more than enough time to noodle over the numbers and pass next year's budget by (gulp) July 1. However, when the first of those two sessions ended last Wednesday after one hour and forty-four minutes of discussion, not a single minute had been spent talking about the BOC's most important task – setting spending priorities and approving or disapproving funding requests from county department heads.

Instead, with the approval of BOC Chairman Rob Hentschel, Alger devoted most of the session to a discussion of the county's revenue sources – taxes, licenses and permits, federal and state grants, etc. Bobbing and weaving throughout the presentation, Alger parried every question the BOC's two Democrats, Betsy Coffia and Bryce Hundley, asked about expenditures, the portion of the budget over which commissioners exercise direct control.



Alger's failure to present commissioners with the budget requests from his section heads and propose priority areas for spending brought a blistering rebuke from GT Dems communications chief Harold Lassers, who attended the session. "Yes, the full budget should include the revenue side, but unless this body is ready to change revenue with new taxation, that should be a small part of the actual meeting," he said. "The BOC proposed two study sessions on the budget. This isn't one of them. So thanks for the ketchup and bun. Where's the beef?"

Making a similar point while trying to cut Alger a little slack, Hundley said he would have preferred to devote both sessions to a substantive discussion about expenditures.

“I would really rather have two meetings where we’re dealing with things that we can get into the weeds as far as what we want to x-out or whatever,” he said. “Under the current structure that’s not what it’s looking like. I would assume that today’s meeting will be about an hour and a half and the next meeting will be like four hours.”

Don’t bet on it. Alger said the second study session – scheduled for 8 a.m. on June 22 – would be devoted to discussing expenditures and commissioners’ spending priorities. This time, he promised, there will be no 11<sup>th</sup>-hour “flashy” budget shenanigans.

“What I have seen from the high-level overview from (Finance Director Dean Bott), there’s not another BearCat, there are no flashy expenditures,” Alger said. “There are requests for personnel, some classification changes, the sheriff has asked for three new hires. . . . The expenditure side, sure, that’s the flashy side. People want to talk about that because that’s what people see. You will have ample opportunity to do that.”



“It’s not just that it’s flashy,” Hundley responded. “It’s that this is what commissioners have control over.”

Perhaps even more alarming than Alger’s failure to provide commissioners with data that would allow them to begin debating spending priorities was the utter disengagement of Republicans on the board. Ron Clous and Penny Morris sat there like a couple of stumps, never even opening their mouths. Brad Jewett offered nothing of substance, muttering nonsensically that the BOC could legally hold a budget study session every day for the rest of the month if Democrats thought it was necessary. And Darryl Nelson, who has emerged as Alger’s No. 1 apologist, said he wasn’t bothered a bit that the board was not discussing expenditures.

“I just want to say to the administration I feel like you’re getting beat up by the board and I don’t want you to feel that way,” Nelson told Alger. “I appreciate the effort. This is an accelerated budget and I believe it’s been a kind of hair-pulling event for a lot of people . . . but we’re starting in the right spot.”

Hentschel also had little to say about the desultory beginning to these budget deliberations, reserving most of his comments for a discussion about millage renewals being sought by the Commission on Aging, the Senior Center Network, Veterans Affairs and Animal Control (for more on this topic, see “Hentschel and Alger Conspire to Shaft the VA” on page 3).

So what’s going on here? Are Republicans really so incurious that they have no questions about what Bott has projected as a \$43.1 million budget for 2023? Are they confident that, as long as they don’t spring another BearCat surprise, the budget process is so arcane that most voters don’t understand it and aren’t paying attention? Or has Hentschel already schemed out the Republicans’ spending priorities, meaning that these study sessions are merely window dressing?

Here’s our prediction: Coffia and Hundley will not have “ample opportunity” to discuss next year’s budget because Team Hentschel, with Alger’s acquiescence, has already determined the county’s priorities and Hentschel will cut off debate if it becomes clear that the Democrats disagree with them.

## **WEDNESDAY'S BOC AGENDA: WHAT TO WATCH FOR**

### **2023 BUDGET, DEPARTMENT REQUESTS –**

Although Alger told commissioners during the first of their two budget study sessions that he was not prepared to share with them the requests he's received from his department heads, tomorrow's agenda does include requests for full-time employees, reclassifications and equipment, vehicle and facility project requests (item 9d).

Among those requests, Bensley is asking for an additional detective, two school resource deputies and a marine sergeant. The District Court is requesting a new probation officer and a compliance officer. The Commission on Aging is asking for two homemaker aides and two universal aides.

Equipment requests include the following: \$300,000 to Parks & Rec for vault toilets at Maple Bay and Keystone, \$177,200 to Parks & Rec for restroom improvements and new picnic tables at Medalie Park, \$200,000 to the Department of Public Works for a generator for the East Bay water system, and \$34,932 for a narcotics analyzer for the Sheriff's Department.

### **WHAT ABOUT NORTHERN LAKES? –**

Noticeably absent from tomorrow's light agenda is further discussion of the BOC's momentous announcement on May 4 that Grand Traverse County intends to withdraw from the six-county Northern Lakes Community Mental Health Authority, a decision that will have reverberations throughout the next year.

The county has not formally notified state officials of its intention to leave the CMH, which will trigger a one-year window for all six counties to form a stand-alone CMH or join an existing CMH before Northern Lakes can be dissolved. But the public announcement of the county's intention to leave has far-reaching implications for Northern Lakes employees, some of whom are certainly already looking for new jobs.

As we've noted over and over, adequate mental health services is a huge unmet need in this county, both at the jail and in the community at large. Alger and the BOC have fired the opening salvo in this high-stakes conflict; they now need to show that they've thought this through and have plans to replace Northern Lakes with a CMH that offers better services than Northern Lakes provides.

## **HIGH (AND LOW) LIGHTS FROM THE LAST MEETING**

### **HENTSCHEL AND ALGER CONSPIRE TO**

**SHAFT THE VA** – As polling consistently shows, veterans are a Republican constituency, with 60% of the vets who voted in 2016 supporting Donald Trump. So it was undoubtedly with that in mind that Hentschel recently dispatched Alger to inform county Veterans Affairs Director Michael Roof that he would like the VA board to ask the BOC to reduce the VA's millage from .12 to .08 mills.

That way, it wouldn't look like the board majority was taking money away from veterans.

For pure political skullduggery, you can't beat the team of Hentschel and Alger. In an interview with the Beacon, Roof said Alger told him that commissioners would not support renewing the millage at the level that voters approved in 2016, and he asked Roof to coax his board into agreeing to "renew" it at .08 mills. Of course, Alger wasn't speaking for the entire commission when he delivered this ultimatum; he was speaking for Hentschel.

As Coffia reported during last Wednesday's budget session – she is a non-voting member of the VA board – Roof's board pushed back, voting unanimously to urge the BOC to renew the millage at the original rate, .12 mills. "They don't feel that it's appropriate for us to reduce their millage that the voters overwhelmingly approved," she said.

Roof noted that the VA agreed to temporarily lower the rate to .08 mills in 2018 because the agency had

a healthy fund balance of about \$700,000 (the current fund balance, he said, is \$711,494). But agreeing to do so again – for the six years that the BOC is requesting – could hurt the agency if it falls on hard times in the coming years, he said.

“The original language said ‘up to’ .12 mills,” Roof said. “If it’s approved at .08, it can’t go up at all. We wanted to approve it at .12 and then temporarily lower it. That’s what we’re trying to fight against.”

Hentschel, who has few peers as an anti-government and anti-tax ideologue, trashed the VA during last week’s study session, claiming that former Commissioner Gordie LaPointe “was adamant that some of the reasons for passing the veterans millage . . . were an outright lie” because Roof’s predecessor “kind of shifted the numbers to make it look like things were dire so that they would pass a veterans millage.”

He went on to criticize millages in general, saying that in years past, “We didn’t have the veterans millage, animal control millage, conservation district millage and we got by, even in tough times. . . . Personally, I don’t like extra taxes and if we don’t need it to keep our house in order . . . I would rather look at that than just keep renewing them in perpetuity because that’s what we did last year.”

Hentschel also took aim at the modest millage being proposed for Animal Control – .037 mills for six years. Animal Control has been underfunded and subjected to the political whims of commissioners for years. “I think the question to be asked is if 68 dogs are found in an abusive situation and there was no animal control millage, would that still be handled?” he asked. “And I think the answer is yes.”

So let’s get this straight: You want to take money away from both vets and animal lovers? Go for it. We can’t wait to see how that dog hunts.

And that’s a wrap. Stay safe, stay engaged and please pay attention to the BOC’s budget negotiations. They’re not always flashy, but they’re certainly important. Thanks for reading.

## HELPFUL LINKS & INFO

BOC meetings are usually held at 8 a.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. The next meeting is June 15.

You can find a link to the agenda and minutes at:

<https://grandtraversecounty.civicweb.net/Portal/MeetingInformation.aspx?Org=Cal&Id=337>

You can watch a livestream of the meetings and view replays of previous meetings online at:

<http://www.co.grand-traverse.mi.us/184/Board-of-Commissioners>

You will have to attend the in-person meeting in order to make a public comment. The BOC permits public comment for three minutes at the beginning and end of each meeting.

The BOC has seven commissioners – five Republicans and two Democrats – each of whom represents a district. You can find your commissioner at this link:

<https://www.grandtraversedems.com/boc>

You can find contact info for the BOC members here:

<http://grandtraverse.org/184/Board-of-Commissioners>

You can email all the commissioners at this address:

[commissioners@gtcountymi.gov](mailto:commissioners@gtcountymi.gov)