2023 County Budget Presentation!! Budget approved 4-1!! $126,587,508.00 to spend. Wastefully or Wisely-YOU Decide!! $140,000,000 for New Jail, $425,000 for ALWS, $162,500 for the Fair!!! $0 for new High Schools to replace aged ones-all four are aged-out!!! Review, analysis, conclusions and Report by Robert A

County Manager Brian Epley made his 93-page 2023 Budget Presentation to the Cleveland County Commissioners twice. Once at the May 17, 2022 Commissioners Meeting and again at the June 7th, 2022 Commissioners Meeting where it was approved by a 4-1 vote. Commissioner Deb Harding was the only Commissioner smart enough and brave enough to vote NO on this over-hyped and under-explained and especially overly-pressurized 2023 Budget.

What this 93-page 2023 County Budget Presentation lacked in good solid information or just good common sense, it was made up for in razzle-dazzle graphics and $10 dollar words. Pie

Charts, Graphs, flow charts and fluff. All flashed on the screen for just a few seconds before moving on to the next slide. Robert A could NOT take notes fast enough, so he had to wait for a Public Records Request of the Presentation to be provided before he could write this article. (And dodge a speeding car meant to run him over in the process.)

For instance, you have to wade through 22 pages of hype and speechifying to get to page 23, where the actual total Dollar amount of the 2023 Budget was actually noted. That $126,587,508 number. The other numbers noted in the Title of this article were not noted in the Power-Point Presentation at all. But came out in the very few questions that were asked by the Commissioners. The $162,500 for the Fair was not to be found in the budget presentation or the Q&A. But in another Agenda Item where the Commissioners have agreed to a "contract" with the Fair Stockholders to pay them $62,500 in operational expenses and $100,000 per year for "Capital Expenses" in exchange for the $1 per year rent on the County Owned property and a promise from the Fair "Stockholders" to actually "hold a Fair." Folks, Robert A ain't joking. This "hold a Fair" language is actually in the contract. So. Let's spend a few moments on this "Fair" Contract.

First of all, there is nothing FAIR to the Cleveland County taxpayers about this Fair Contract. Is there anybody in Cleveland County insane enough to even think it is Fair for the Commissioners to "invest" $162,500, per year. knowing that you will only get $1 per year in return??? Knowing you will get big traffic jams. Knowing that "somebody" (Taxpayers of course, NOT the Fair Shareholders) will be paying for the big Highway Patrol and other Law Enforcement presence.

Also, everybody knows that the Cleveland County Agricultural Fair has been around since 1924. Started by the Shelby Kiwanis Club. Everybody knows that the Fair is close to a 100% cash business. Almost impossible to audit. NO, I would say impossible to audit. Everybody knows that tons of cash money

have come straight out of Fair attendees' pockets straight into the hands of the Cleveland County Fair. Most everybody "knows" that the Fair folks don't report their finances to anybody and the Fair "Board Members" do not disclose anything to anybody. Everybody has "heard" that the Fair bank accounts are typically overflowing with tons of ready cash. Many, including myself, know that the Fair crowd has bought-up a number of properties surrounding the Fair for parking and as investments. Properties privately owned by the Fair Associates. Not the County. So, the "good will" between the County and the Fair only goes one-way. Their way.

But then there was the e coli outbreak at the Fair a few years back. One death, I believe, and a number of serious sicknesses. A Fair "manager" who was once involved in a bribery scandal regarding paying off the State Agriculture Director, Meg Scott Phipps-daughter of a NC Governor and a Granddaughter of an NC Governor who went to Federal Prison (serving time with Martha Stewart) over the bribery by the future Fair Manager and others.

And, then, a lawsuit over the e coli. And the Fair said they were broke. The Fair needed $150,000 in cash to make change to open the gates and a $250,000 loan from the County. At that time, I questioned why the Fair Association didn't just go to the banks for their loans like everybody else. That the Cleveland County Commissioners was NOT a bank and why should the County be making NO INTEREST loans in the first place.

Robert A now says that perhaps he made a mistake questioning whether or not the county should be **"Loaning"** out taxpayer money for ZERO interest. They must have agreed with me. Now the **Commissioners are just GIVING taxpayer's money away to their friends. Families too, maybe.**

Another thing about this Fair give away vote that passed 4-0. A new law requires Commissioners to have to recuse themselves from voting on something involving a Board that they

themselves serve on. And Kevin Gordon, the Commissioner Board Chairman, is on the Fair Board. So, Commissioner Gordon recused himself and Vice-Chairman Deb Hardin presided over that (un) Fair vote and signed the Contract.

Robert A has always said that, if HE were a Commissioner, HE would never serve on another Board that accepts County money in any way. RIGHT again Robert A. That is always a conflict of interest. What took the General Assembly so long to pass that law. And, why did they have to pass such a law that was totally obvious to the most casual of an observer in the first place. That serving on the Commissioner's Board and any other board that accepted County Money was and IS totally illegal.

Back to the 2023 Budget Presentation:

The $425,000 giveaway to the **American Legion World Series, Baseball, Inc.**

The underlying issues with the County spending much more than $5,000,000 on the American Series World Series has its beginning way back in 2008. With lots of corruption ever since. The Cleveland County property tax valuation conducted in early 2008 caught the real estate "Bubble" at its peak. Property tax valuations were at record highs. Accordingly, property taxes collected were at record highs. Then, later in 2008, the real estate bubble burst. Many remember the terms sub-prime interest rates, TARP (Toxic Asset Recovery Program), etc. Property valuations dropped through the floor and many people lost their homes, their jobs and everything else that they had. County employee pay rates were frozen for much of those eight years. Except for the County Manager's pay. Several times the County Manager received $10,000 in Bonus pay.

But, what did Cleveland County do? The Commissioners kept the valuations where they were at the record highs until 2016. The entire eight years before the County, by law, had to do new

property valuations, the County charged property owners at the artificially high rates. It seems that the Commissioners have a long tradition of screwing over the citizens and taxpayers of Cleveland County.

Then, somewhere in 2010 or 2011 or so, Commissioner Eddie Holbrook and others came up with this scheme of bringing the American Legion World Series to Shelby, NC. But the County didn't have the money to fund that program. So, somebody came up with the idea of **secretly** selling the Cleveland County Healthcare System to the Carolina's Medical Services (CMS) for **$100 Million dollars**. Which included the hospitals in Shelby, Kings Mountain and Boiling Springs, as well as Cleveland Pines and the Cleveland County Health Department Building (and perhaps other properties).

This secret deal was consummated as follows: CMS would pay $23 million to the County to build a new Health Department and pay $3 Million a year on the remaining $77 Million debt AT NO INTEREST, until the debt was paid in full over the remaining 25.66 years. Meaning that there is still around $43 Million still owed to the County which will be paid over the nest 14 or 14 years.

This secret deal also had super-duper secret parts to it. This is the word that I received. About a side deal that where CMS paid $1,000,000 directly to Commissioner Eddie Holbrook.

Such a deal, if true, would certainly amount to a bribe to Eddie Holbrook with the possibility of JAIL TIME. Lots of jail time.

More of this story was that when Eddie Holbrook received that $1,000,000 from CMS, Eddie deposited that million dollars in his personal accounts. Then became worried about that jail time if he was caught. So, Eddie Holbrook then wrote a $1 million to Cleveland County and then Cleveland County then immediately wrote a $1,000,000 check made out to the American

Legion world Series, Baseball, Inc. A ”front” company run by Eddie Holbrook that is not in any way a direct legally associated part of the American Legion.

When Robert A heard about this $1,000,000 County check to ALWS Baseball, Inc. he immediately began asking for Public Records related to that check. And, after two or three years of ignoring Robert A’s request and calling Robert A a liar, the County finally presented a copy of that million-dollar check that Robert A immediately published, saying to everybody, Ha! Ha! Ha! I told you so.

But there was more. Robert A had also requested any other checks that the County had issued to the ALWS Baseball, Inc. Many County checks amounting to many more millions of dollars were paid to the Holbrook company to pay for the original trips to Indianapolis by two busloads of people and their expenses, checks to ESPN (Basically the County was paying ESPN hundreds of thousands of dollars to come to Shelby and Broadcast ALWS games. Which had ZERO benefit to Cleveland County taxpayers or economic development,

And, for that County Million Dollar check, one document stated that it was for Field improvements while another notation stated it was for a Million-dollar CMS “Grant.” The County never provided to Robert A any documentation on how that Million dollars was transferred to Cleveland County in the first place that the County used to fund that Million Dollar check to the ALWS Baseball, Inc. (i.e. Right back to Eddie Holbrook.)

One more thing. The secret sale of the County Healthcare properties to CMS. And especially a comparison with other such sales by other North Carolina counties.

Not long after The Cleveland County Commissioners conducted their SECRET sale to CMS, New Hanover County decided to sell their Hospital to a private Healthcare Provider. But New

Hanover County was NOT stupid like Cleveland County. They advertised their property for sale like any sane person or every governmental entity is required by law to do. CMS, now Atrium Health, also made an offer to New Hanover County. A Multi-BILLION dollar offer that was rejected. The winning offer was around FIVE BILLION DOLLARS for comparable properties.

That is $4,900,000,000 more than Cleveland County received for their comparable properties in that stupid SECRET sale to CMS. That means that $1,000,000 bribe, if true, was worth $4,899,000,000 to CMS. Right after Cleveland County made this stupid deal with CMS, an article appeared in the Charlotte Observer stating that the top 10 executives at Charlotte based CMS had earned over a Million Dollars a piece in Bonus money for their contributions to the CMS bottom line.

Folks, Robert A ain’t even through yet.

At the June 7, 2022 Commissioner’s meeting where this County Manager’s Recommended Budget Presentation was made, Commissioner Deb Hardin asked County Manager Brian Epley some questions about this county funding to the ALWS. The County Manager admitted that the County had also been making $150,000 payments directly to the American Legion for them allowing the games to be played in Shelby. Robert A. sitting there listening, immediately recognized that not only had the County been paying millions of dollars directly to Eddie Holbrook’s company ALWS, Baseball, Inc., they had been deceivingly silent on these indirect payments that were not made out to the ALWS, Baseball, Inc., but to the American Legion. And, who knows what else the County is paying for. One thing is the $150,000 the County paid to somebody on this latest “Laser Grading” of the Shelby High School baseball field that Eddie wanted to do. And did.

So, folks, this is why Robert A recommended to the Commissioners that they VOTE NO on the proposed 2023 Cleveland

County Budget. There is way too much corruption swirling around the ALWS, Baseball, Inc. to suit Robert A. And Commissioner Deb Hardin was the only Commissioner brave enough and smart enough to begin to see the light. The final Commissioner's Vote was 4-1 to approve the 2023 Budget as submitted. Deb Hardin voted NO. While Commissioners Doug Bridges, Johnny Hutchins, Ronnie Whetstine and Kevin Gordon voted to approve. And to continue the foolishness. Is this "Stuck on Stupid" or what?

Folks, YOU Decide!! The 2024 Commissioners elections are coming and Robert A is thinking about it. Thinking about it hard. Especially after the Commissioners Meeting while walking on the sidewalk in Fallston.

Editor's Note: This newly approved 2023 Budget presentation also has many other kernels of understanding about the workings of the Cleveland County Government that demand to be told. Some of them are good, although camouflaged by the "weeds" of 93 pages of fluff. Stay tuned. Robert A has more to say on this that YOU will find interesting!! Very interesting. I promise.